

What are Salem residents called? Governor, do you know?



Salemite, Salemander, Saleman or Salewoman? What are residents of Salem officially called? ANNA REED / Statesman Journal



Tom Mayhall Rastrelli, Statesman Journal 4:12 p.m. PDT June 12, 2015



(Photo: ANNA REED / Statesman Journal)

Do you cringe when people say Salem lacks the culture of Portland, or do you secretly agree? I've heard local kids moaning that they can't wait to escape. I've heard adults whining that they can't afford to live in Portland. When I've introduced myself as the Statesman Journal's arts and culture reporter, even locals have guffawed and said, "That must be boring. Salem doesn't have culture."

Let's face it. Many people think Salem is Portland's lame younger sibling.

Enough is enough. It's time for an attitude adjustment.

In my first year reporting on the Mid-Valley's arts and culture community, I have been overwhelmed by an abundance of creativity. After a year on the beat, I continue to learn about at least one new arts and culture organization each week. This week it was Paint and Pinot, and as I write this, it's only Tuesday.

Most Mid-Valley residents have heard of the Salem Art Association, Pentacle Theatre, the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Salem Chamber Orchestra and many other local organizations. Many have experienced Salem's music scene at Christo's, Brown's Towne, Level B Theater Pub and other venues.



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But did you know that Salem has a hula hoop community? We have a calligrapher's guild and Oregon's top male and female barbershop choruses. We have a B-grade horror filmmaking community, drag shows and a group of adults who gather for live-action role-playing in Bush's Pasture Park. Have you seen the cadre of dog walkers who dress in tutus that match those of their canines? Even the male owners wear them.

Forget big sister Portlandia and Portlanders' claim on weird. It's time for little brother to rebel and claim a place at the table. Salem has culture. Salem is just as weird. Salem is weirder!

"Keep Salem Weirder" will explore the unique culture of Salem and the Mid-Valley. If you know of a quirky group or little-known subculture, let me know. It's time to celebrate our community's idiosyncrasies.

My first quest

One peculiarity that I've noticed since moving to Salem is that we don't have a demonym. No, that has nothing to do with poltergeist rumors, Salem Ghost Tours or theater-ghost legends. Salem has plenty of those. A demonym is the name given to residents of a specific place.



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I grew up in Clinton, Iowa, where I was a Clintonian. When I lived in Baltimore and Los Angeles, I was a Baltimorean and an Angeleno. After about three years in Salem, I realized that I didn't know how to self identify. I began to wonder. If we don't have a word to claim our identity, how can we claim our culture?

There was no consensus in the newsroom, so I took to the streets of downtown and asked my fellow residents, "If someone from Portland is a Portlander, what do you call someone from Salem?"

Half didn't know. Half answered "Salemite." Many of those said they didn't really identify with Salemite, which to me sounds like a brand of luggage, the anatomy of a cave or an Old Testament slur.

Luke Hess, owner of Hattawear, was born and raised in Keizer. He thought Salemite sounded like a termite and that Salemander was too weird. "I don't think there is a name," he answered. "If people ask, I just say, 'I'm from Salem, man. Salem-Keizer.'"

Perhaps being from a dual city is part of the problem. Would Salem-Keizerite suffice? No. That sounds like an overpriced imitation-gemstone on QVC.

Lifelong Salemite Heather Evans works for the Army National Guard. She thought the answer might be Salemer or Saleman.

But Saleman sounds gender exclusive. Would the plural be Salemen or Salewomen? Spell check insists those words are missing an S and should be corrected to salesmen and saleswomen.

"I have no idea. I've actually never thought about it," Evans conceded. "I'm upset that I haven't (thought about it) now. I'm going to come up with something really cool."

I hope she does because I'm struggling. I'm fond of Salemander. After all, Oregonians are outdoors oriented, but most of the people I questioned dismissed Salemander as ridiculous. We aren't amphibian.

Equally silly is Salemanian. Just as Portlandians aren't from Portlandia — no matter how much they love the television show — we are not from Salemania, which sounds like a personality disorder. Salemania: the condition of being unable to stop talking obsessively about how much one loves Salem.

Salemene — pronounced Salem-mean — is not very Salem-nice. Salemi sounds edible. Salemish? Now that has potential. It captures the ambivalence that some residents have about Salem. I'm from here, but I don't really want to claim it ... I'm Salem-ish.

Graham Morris, executive director of the Salem Multicultural Institute, gave a Salemish answer when I asked him about Salem's culture. "Salem has a unique culture because it tries to distinguish itself from Portland and Eugene by appealing to the unique sensibility of Salemites, but what does that mean? I don't know. Expressing individuality? ... That's such a hard question."

Maybe we're too close to the question to see the obvious. A demonym used by a group to describe itself is an endonym. Perhaps we need an outsider's perspective and description, an exonym.

I called Gov. Kate Brown, who recently moved into Mahonia Hall. As for what to call Salem residents, she said, "These days, I just call them neighbors." She praised Salem's hospitality, beautiful parks and neighborhoods, small-town vibe and bustling downtown that integrates Capitol Mall, Willamette University and the historic district. As for a demonym, she said, "I don't feel strongly about this. Salemites? Capitalistas? I suppose, with Willamette University's strong presence, Bearcats might even be an option."



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Lifelong Salem resident Mike Witenberger waits for a customer to enter OK Barbershop. He owns the business that has been in his family for 107 years. He calls Salem residents Salemites. (Photo: Tom Mayhall Rastrelli / Statesman Journal)

Bearcat Danielle Stafford, who moved to Salem from San Diego to study at Willamette University, said "Being at Willamette, where everyone is from out of town or out of state, whenever we would refer to someone off campus that was a local, the first term that came to mind among everyone on campus was Salemite."

The Bearcats call us Salemites, but I was not satisfied. I needed an official answer.

I called City Hall. Surely our elected officials or the city's founding documents could give me peace.

Courtney Busch, strategic initiatives manager in the city manager's office, joined my quest and employed the assistance of the city recorder. The result: "We cannot locate any record or formal policy that gives our residents a specific name. In practice, Council refers to people who live here as residents," Busch said.

And we're back at the start. We are simply residents of Salem.

What do you think? Vote for your favorite demonym below.

I'm undecided, but one choice has grown on me: "none of the above." Let's keep them guessing. That's something that keeps Salem weirder.

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What do you call someone who lives in Salem?

- Salemers
- Salemanders
- Salemites
- Salem-Keizerites
- Salemish
- Salemans (Salewomans)
- Salemanians
- Salemene/Salemine
- Salemi
- Capitalistas
- None of the above
- Other:

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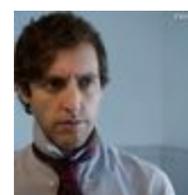


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