

Meet Em Chan, new food reporter for the Statesman Journal

Don Currie

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK



Statesman Journal food and drink reporter Em Chan. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

If you have tips, story ideas or invitations for coffee for Em, send them to echan@statesmanjournal.com Follow her Twitter @catchuptoemily and see what Em's eating and up to on Instagram @sikfanmei.ah

The Statesman Journal has a new food reporter. Em Chan joined the paper a few weeks ago and has started sampling the Salem food scene.

Em is a graduate of the University of Oregon, where she earned a bachelor's degree in public relations and created an Instagram called "Sik Fan Mei, Ah?" which is Cantonese for "have you eaten yet?" Yes, she is conversationally fluent in Cantonese and business fluent in Mandarin.

Em says she's excited to "eat my way through Salem, sharing hole in the walls and informing folks about foods they may have not explored before just as I learn along with them in my reporting."

She's interested in bringing new perspective to the Salem community.

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Don Currie is an editor at the Statesman Journal. You may reach him at dcurrie@statesmanjournal.com

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Suggested monthly rates:
Monday-Sunday: \$22, \$20 with EZ Pay
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Letters: 4 p.m. Thursday
Obituaries: 11 a.m. Friday
Display Advertising: 4 p.m. Wednesday
Legals: 3 p.m. Wednesday
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He initially answered questions via email on his way out of town the night of the announcement. But when transaction minutiae brought him back to Salem the next day, he discussed what he could in a more than hour-long phone interview.

Roth couldn't — or wouldn't — say who approached who first, describing it as mutual interest. The Food Partners, an investment banking firm in the food industry, served as a strategic and financial advisor to Roth's during negotiations.

In other words, The Food Partners acted as matchmaker.

An instant connection

The courtship was in full swing by August, when Pattison came to town for two days to visit each Roth's store and the company's headquarters.

Michael Roth wanted to be sure each of his market directors — Roth's title for

store managers — could meet the legend in the grocery industry, whether or not the deal ever happened. To maintain confidentiality of the real reason for the visit, he introduced Pattison and his group as a "share group," or a group of non-competing industry partners who meet regularly to problem solve and share ideas.

The first stop on the tour was West Salem, which Orville Roth called his dream store when it opened in 1989. Next up were the other four Salem stores, followed by Silverton, Stayton, McMinnville and Monmouth.

Roth could tell Pattison was impressed with what he saw.

"He walked around our stores and you could just see a big smile on his face. He just loves businesses that work," Roth said. "We'd have to go track him down, and he'd be looking at the milk display or talking to people."

'A perfect match'

Once Roth realized a business relationship might happen, he was compelled to do some reconnaissance of his own. He'd heard good things about Pat-

tison stores, but needed to see for himself.

"I wanted to make sure that I was handing the keys to somebody that has the same quality standards that we have," he said.

He and his wife, Leslie, drove their 2010 Ford Explorer to British Columbia in late August. They spent two days visiting eight grocery stores Pattison Food Group owns in Vancouver and surrounding communities.

On the itinerary was a brand new Save-On-Foods that had just opened, five other Save-On-Foods, an Urban Fare store and a Nesters Market. Roth said Nesters is a chain that operates as a completely independent grocery company, similar to how Roth's will.

They shopped at each store, purchasing a variety of items at the check stands, taking note of how friendly and well-trained the checkers were. They ate at each store, sampling muffins in the bakery and vegan burritos at the grill.

And then they went back again, multiple times to some locations.

They couldn't help but notice the stores had a familiar feel.

"What we saw and experienced with their people and fresh foods, we knew this was a perfect match of cultures and store expectations," Roth said.

He's counting on Roth's to incorporate some of what Pattison stores do well, such as pre-made, shelf-stable gift baskets. While Roth's provides fresh food gift baskets during the holidays, he said it's struggled to offer pre-made baskets the rest of the year.

"I challenged them to teach us how they do that program," Roth said. "They're going to come down and I would say within no time, you'll be able to walk into your local Roth's, see a nice selection of shelf-stable gift baskets that you can take to the hospital, or a birthday or retirement party."

On the flip side, he said Pattison representatives were enamored with the ordering system Roth's uses at its grills and are likely to incorporate them into its Canadian stores.

Status quo for beloved employees

Leadership from the Pattison Food Group met with about 35 members of Roth's leadership team and assured them that employee pay rates, accrued vacation, health benefits and holiday pay would remain the same.

"Honestly, by the time they were done, the Roth's people were so enthusiastic, I almost feel like half of them wanted me to retire that afternoon," Roth said.

Market directors took letters back to their stores to distribute to team members, hoping to assure everyone that the transition would be transparent and business as usual.

Roth said he and his father have been fortunate to have many long-term team members who have worked for the company for 20, 30 or 40 years.

\$1 million local donation, and more

The company's generous support of local charities also is expected to continue.

"Giving back to the community has always been a priority for the Roth family," Roth said. "Like Roth's, every company in the Pattison Food Group shares a culture that values philanthropy and being an active member of every community served — which was something that was very important to me."

That culture starts at the top with Jim Pattison. Many of his recent charitable donations have been directed to medical care, including \$50 million to a children's hospital in Saskatchewan and \$75 million for the construction of a new hospital in Vancouver.

Michael Roth vows to continue to be a community partner in retirement, although he and Leslie do plan to give the snowbird lifestyle a try. They'll spend winters in Mesa, Arizona, and summers in a small cabin in the woods in the Salem area.

"It's important to my wife and I that we stay connected to Salem and the Mid-Willemette Valley," he said.

One way they'll do that is through his charitable fund. He announced that he will donate \$1 million to be allocated between three local organizations: Salem Foundation, Silverton Area Community Aid and Oregon Garden.

Salem Foundation manages numerous charitable sub-funds through Pioneer Trust Bank, including one in his name and one in his father's. His fund recently gave \$220,000 to Elsinore Theatre for the installation of a new air conditioner. His father's recently contributed \$50,000 to the Gerry Frank Salem Rotary Amphitheater project.

Silverton Area Community Aid and Oregon Garden were chosen as beneficiaries in honor of the city where the first Roth's store opened. One provides food, financial assistance and other services to about 1,000 people in need each month, and the other provides a youth education program that Orville Roth long supported.

Capi Lynn is a 33-year veteran reporter and columnist at the Statesman Journal. She can be reached at 503-399-6710 or clynn@StatesmanJournal.com, or follow her on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.

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