

# Hiking to Happiness

Wild by Cheryl Strayed, Alfred A. Knopf, 2012



## On Books

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What a difference an author makes. As I read Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, I couldn't help thinking about Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*. Bryson's book, published in 1998, is about the author's attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail, a 2,000-mile-plus path that stretches from Georgia to Maine. It's funny and deeply informative, providing insights into the history of environmentalism in America and into the mind-set of long-distance hikers. Strayed's book is markedly different, despite its foundation on a nearly identical setting — although a different trail — and premise. Strayed is funny but not comedic, smart but not didactic. Her book is much more about introspection than it is about hiking, about looking inside even when you're surrounded by the great big world.

Strayed's book isn't a memoir of the summer of 1995 when she hiked the Pacific Crest Trail through much of California and all of Oregon, as much as it is an explanation of the events that led her to the trail in the first place. She was in her 20s then; she'd grown up in the woods of northern Minnesota, living in an improvised cabin with her siblings, her stepfather and her hippie mother. Four years before Strayed ended up on the PCT, her mother had died from cancer and her siblings and stepfather had grown distant as the family dissolved in the absence of her mother's stabilizing presence. Strayed's marriage had also dissolved when her husband, whom she had married when she was 20, discovered her frequent infidelities.

Strayed fell into a depression after the death of her mother and her divorce. She moved to Portland, Oregon, hooked up with a heroin addict and began to flirt with addiction herself. She was adrift, and when her ex-husband intervened, she was hit with a revelation: she needed to do something to get her life back on track, and she decided that what she needed to do was to hike the PCT.

She hits the trail uninformed and unprepared, and her memoir

traces her transformation from a hopelessly naïve novice to a seasoned, competent hiker. In that way, her book is just like Bryson's, but Strayed's real story is in the flashbacks to her history, scenes from her past (the quick decline of her mother, the death of a beloved horse) that are wrenching and that tell us who Strayed really is. Beyond those stories, the book is just another story of the trail, a meditation on how beautiful the wilderness is, how hiking hundreds of miles teaches you how big the world

is by emphasizing the length of a single mile.

But this is really a story about a woman's personal transformation (that's why it was chosen to be part of Oprah's Book Club) and in that area, it delivers. It's not always easy to see exactly what Strayed's transformation entails, however. She tells us that before she went on the hike she used meaningless sex to escape her problems, and she congratulates herself for not sleeping with every man she meets on the trail; she does, however, think about sleeping with nearly every man she meets on the trail, and she does hook up with one random guy near the end of her trip. She tells us that she comes to terms with her mother's death and her relationships with her surviving loved ones, although it's not entirely clear how she does so, beyond simply deciding that she has. We largely have to take her word for it when she tells us that she's a different person at the end of the hike than she was at the beginning.

The beauty of the book, though, is in the words rather than the conclusions. Strayed is an excellent storyteller, and she has several stories to tell: a thriller about a messed-up young woman on the verge of self-destruction, a drama about the intense relationship between a mother and a daughter, an adventure story about a human meeting the challenges of the wilderness. She tells all the stories gracefully, with humor, poetic turns of phrase and disarming honesty.

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# The Food's the Real Draw

Review • Dash-In

Dash-In has graced the top of my downtown restaurants list for several years. However, when I moved to Fort Wayne over a decade ago, it was known mostly as a coffeehouse with limited hours, and it never hit my radar. I am happy to report that over the years it has changed owners a few times and expanded its menu and hours, making it one of the headliners of downtown nightlife.

For beer lovers, Dash-In is a popular spot. Although I don't fall into this category, I have many friends who do, and the Dash rockets to the top of their list. It boasts 23 rotating taps of craft beer, enough to satisfy even the snobbiest of my beer loving friends. The bartenders are more than happy to provide samples of the beer to help you make a decision, and they know a ton about them. Recently, I stopped by with a friend after work and tried two or three of their selections before choosing Founder's Rubaeus, a raspberry ale, which quickly became a must-have in my book. Because the taps rotate, you never know what you might find when you visit, and that's part of the fun. Of course, they announce their beers on the website and Facebook for those who don't like to be surprised.

The main reason I visit Dash-In is for the food. My husband and I often pop in on Saturday morning for brunch when they serve a variety of breakfast sandwiches, eggs Benedict and omelets. My favorite menu item is the Smoked Salmon Benedict served with red onions, capers and poached eggs with a side of potatoes and fruit. It hits the spot, especially if enjoyed with some hot tea (Dash-In carries the Tazo line) or coffee from locally owned Old Crown Coffee Roasters. The Dash serves breakfast on weekdays too, but I find the menu to be boring and limited. Service is slow at this time of day, too, so if you are pressed for time, this is not the place for you.

Now that I work downtown, I find myself at The Dash often for lunch. It's a great place to catch up with friends or meet with someone for business. The lunch menu offers a nice selection of salads. My favorite is the Black 'n' Blue Salad (\$8.50) made with mixed greens and topped with blackened chicken breast, bleu cheese crumbles, tomato, sliced mushrooms, red onion and cucumber. The Cobb Salad (\$8.50) is also a winner; it's made with mixed greens and topped with charbroiled chicken, bacon, hard boiled egg, bleu cheese crumbles, roasted red peppers, red onion, tomato, cucumber and artichoke hearts. Sadly, the Crab Cake Salad (\$9.75) leaves something to be desired. While the crab cakes are tasty, the salad is skimpy and left me hungry on several occasions. For the price, go with one of the salads I mentioned; the portions are just right.

Perhaps the most popular items on the menu — or at least the ones everyone raves about — are the grilled cheeses. There are four from which to choose, all served on grilled sourdough: Gourmet Grilled Cheese (\$7) with cheddar, Swiss, provolone, pepper-jack, Par-



## Dining Out

AMBER RECKER

mesan, herb cream cheese and tomatoes; Euro Grilled Cheese (\$7) with smoked Gouda, Havarti and Muenster cheese with roasted red peppers; Pesto Grilled Cheese (\$7.50) with cheddar, Swiss, provolone, Muenster cheeses, tomatoes, artichoke hearts, and pesto sauce; and Baja Grilled Cheese (\$7.50) with pepper-jack, cheddar, Swiss, and provolone, guacamole, and



Black and Blue Chicken Salad; Pesto Grilled Cheese

black bean corn relish. While all of them are delightful, my favorite is the Pesto Grilled Cheese. The flavors and textures are superb, though they could ramp up the pesto.

Another item that gets rave reviews is the Vegetable Pesto Soup, and while I like it, I wouldn't rave about it. I find it to be a tad bland, but it pairs well with the grilled cheeses. Personally, I prefer the tomato bisque, a rich and creamy tomato base with a touch of white wine and onion. It's the perfect complement for the grilled cheeses — I mean, come on, who doesn't love a grilled cheese with tomato soup?

I tend to focus on the healthy choices when I visit, but for burger lovers Dash-In has several top-notch choices, all made from fresh 100 percent Angus beef, including the Pub Burger (\$9) with bacon, cheddar cheese, lettuce, tomato, red onion, and 1,000 island dressing; and the Black 'n' Blue (\$9) with bacon, lettuce, tomato and bleu cheese dressing. Vegetarians can substitute garden burger or falafel for any of the burger choices for an additional 50 cents. The menu also includes paninis, sandwiches, wraps and quesadillas, and there is always a daily special or two, as well.

For dinner, Dash-In adds appetizers, gluten-free flatbreads, and desserts. My favorite appetizer is the Loaded Hummus Trio (\$9) with three types of house-made hummus: cilantro, red pepper and olive, accompanied by grilled zucchini, kalamata olives, roasted red peppers, cucumber, roma tomatoes, red onion, goat cheese and warm pita wedges. It's a great dish for sharing. I haven't ventured into the flatbreads or desserts yet, but they all look amazing.

I love visiting The Dash on summer weekends and grabbing a table outside on the sidewalk. That block of Calhoun Street is one of my favorites, and inevitably someone you know will walk by or even join you. On most Friday and Saturday evenings throughout the year, it hosts live music. You can check the calendar on the website to find out what's coming up, and then make plans to take a group of friends downtown to spend some time at the Dash-In. It's a great place to hang out and the food is pretty darn good too.