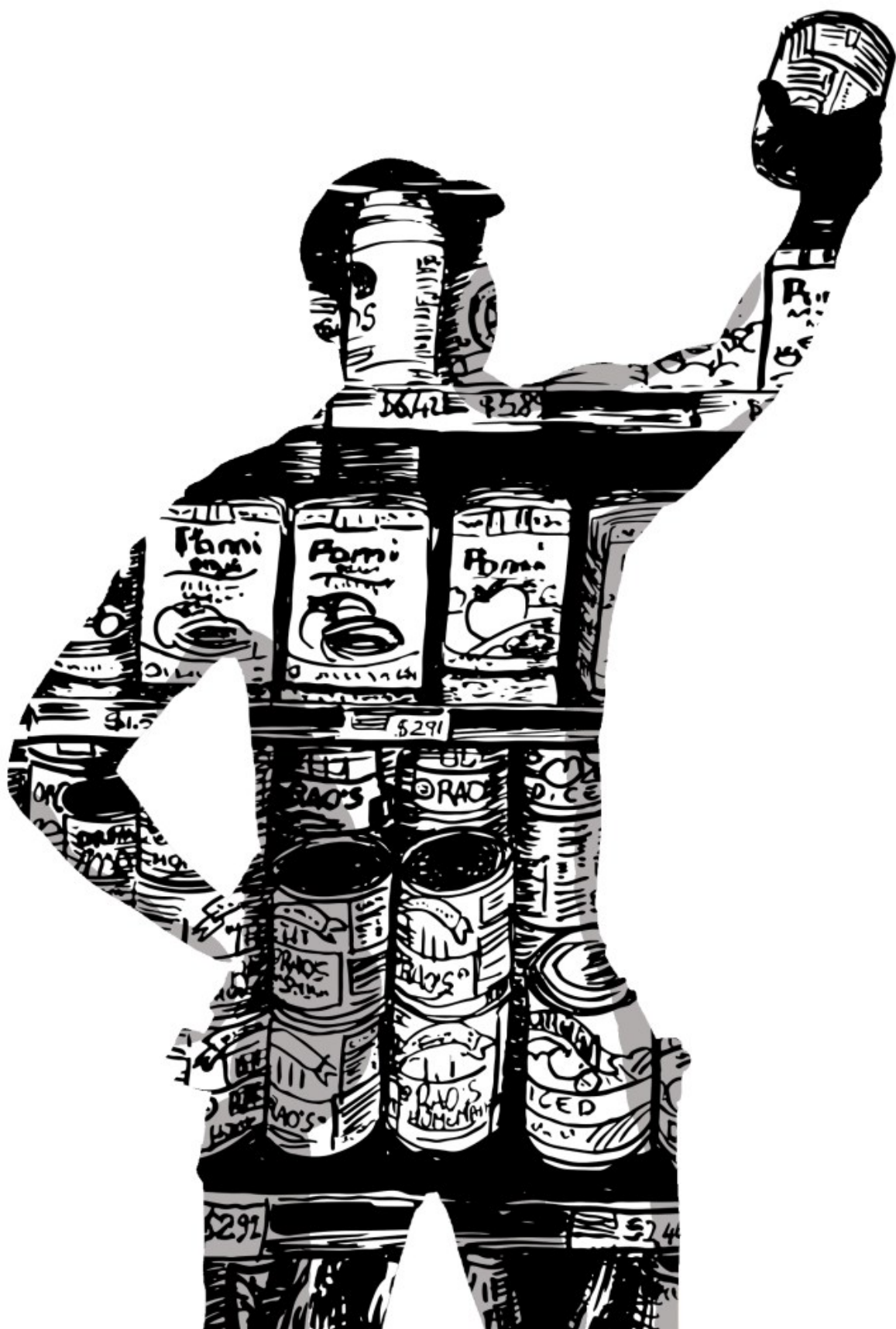


STOCKING THE COOP SHELVES PANDEMIC STYLE

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From extended entrance lines and plexiglass checkout stations, to paid staff temporarily replacing member work shifts, the Coop has seen its share of pandemic-induced changes. But one change that flies under the radar for some members is the herculean effort it takes to keep the shelves adequately stocked during these unprecedented times.

Back in March, when the coronavirus's impact first hit, stores around the country battled mobs of panicked shoppers, in an effort to keep toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant wipes in stock. The stores typically lost. And in April and May, as social distancing boredom led to a baking frenzy, flour and yeast were routinely difficult to source. But in addition to dealing with momentary rushes on some specific items, keeping well-stocked shelves at the Coop is not the same routine task it once was.

"The Coop these days seems much like it used to after a bustling weekend—a little picked over but still quite full," said member Esther Gottesman. "Last week I grabbed the very last vanilla extract, and felt like I had won a prize!"

Member Lorin Sklamberg added, "Paper goods have been a crap shoot...the pasta section is still a little hit-or-miss. I got what appeared to be the last couple of bags of papardelle, which I haven't seen there in months."

Part of the challenge has to do with changing shopper habits. Sklamberg, who lives in Park Slope and stopped by the Coop regularly before the pandemic, said he now limits his visits to once every ten days. He is not alone. In an effort to social distance (and avoid the waiting in line to enter), members are typically shopping less frequently. The limit of 35 shoppers allowed in the store at one time means fewer members are shopping overall. When they do go, they are typically buying more during that trip, and stocking up on their favorite items.

The rush on flour, yeast, and baking powder has waned in recent weeks. ("It is probab-

ly dying down because it is getting so hot outside,” said the Coop’s bulk buyer, Cody Dodo.) But shoppers are reaching for an entire box of their favorite Cliff Bar; a full 25-pound bag of lentils or bulgur; or a dozen cans of oil-packed tuna, instead of the two or three they would buy when they were shopping more frequently. “I would never buy two boxes of veggie sausages in one trip,” said member Sarah Chandler of her previous shopping patterns.

Staffing poses another challenge. Shifting from a member labor model to part-time paid labor means there are fewer hands available for receiving and stocking. “In some ways it is more efficient, because the staff are there to do a paid job, so there is less socializing than when members were doing their shifts. The rhythm is different,” said Dodo. Still, he said, “The U-boats are waiting longer than usual to be tended to.”

As the Coop settles into this new normal, the staff is finding ways to adjust. In pre-pandemic times, turnover in the Coop’s produce section was incredibly swift. These days it is more modest. “I would say we are buying 30–35 percent less produce than before,” said produce buyer, John Horsman. “Before the virus, you didn’t have to fine tune orders as much because everything just went. Now we do.” As a result of this fine tuning and constant adjustment of orders, Horsman said they are able to avoid excess food waste while keeping the produce bins consistently stocked.

In the bulk section, members have probably noticed that staples like rice and beans are now available pre-bagged. This shift avoids the cross-contamination that happens when multiple hands touch the scoops, and makes shopping for bulk items faster. The Coop purchased a stainless steel bagging machine to help keep up with demand for things like lentils and basmati rice on the shopping floor. “We took over the childcare room and made it the bagging room,” said Dodo. “Now two dedicated staff people bag all day long.”

Slowly, as the rest of New York City enters into phases of reopening, shoppers seem to be cautiously returning to more typical habits. “For me, broccoli sales are one of those bellwethers that tell you what is going on,” said Horsman. “There is no way we

will get to the sales levels we were at before the pandemic soon, but they are ticking up each week.”

And while the shelves can sometimes look a little patchy, members have noticed that the Coop remains a solid place to find specialty items. “There are new types of almond milk and coconut yogurt,” said Chandler. “I even got a box of stinging nettles!”

It is impossible to predict what the future will hold for the country, New York City, or the Park Slope Food Coop. But as we collectively navigate through these unprecedented times, the Coop staff is working behind the scenes to keep members well-fed. ■