COOP REFLECTIONS ON 2021 HOLIDAY FOOD SALES TRENDS

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

By Marisa Bowe



Joe Szladek expected that Coop members would return to being festive over the holidays.

As General Coordinator Joe Szladek was comparing pandemic holiday season sales, like so many of us, he lost track of COVID time. “How many years into this are we?” he asked, pausing a moment to think. “It’ll be two in March,” he remembered. “So this was the second holiday season.”

“Last year [2020] was really hard,” he continued, “because we had no idea what people were going to do; if they were going to get together or not. We didn’t have the vaccine yet. Should we get a lot of small turkeys because everyone’s going to be doing individual things? Or are people even going to buy turkeys?”

“People were kind of bunkered down,” said produce buyer John Horsman.

“This year, we expected more people to celebrate in groups that were beyond their immediate pod. We felt like people were really in the mood to be festive with other

people," Szladek said.

"We figured it would be significantly busier than last year," said groceries buyer Gillian Chi. "I figured whatever last year was may be increased by 10%, so that's how we ordered. And for Thanksgiving, that was pretty spot-on."

"It's pretty consistent, Thanksgiving, if you've been doing it for a while," said Chi. "It's the same items over and over again. You know how much stuff people are going to buy, how much stuffing and how much cranberry sauce, so that was pretty straightforward."

But, Chi said, "When it came to the Christmas and the Hanukkah holidays, we sold far more than expected."

"You pre-order a lot of these holiday products in June or July. And in June and July we had no idea what it was going to look like, so we probably were pretty conservative with our orders. And then December came and things were flying off the shelves," said Chi.

"Things were selling at double the rate we expected," she said. "We kept running out of whatever we ordered. Basically, whatever we put on the shelves, people bought, so we just kept having to find new items to order. The things that were available, we grabbed," Chi added.



Gillian Chi noted that in June and July we had no idea what the holidays were going to look like.

TURKEYS

Szladek said that turkey sales were high as well this year, but specific types were more popular than others, “What didn’t sell as well as expected were the more basic birds, the typical antibiotic-free. The pastured ones, the organic ones—you know, the ones that they read a book to at the end of the night—all sold very well. We could have ordered more, and that’s on our list for next year.”

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK SAID THAT TURKEY SALES WERE HIGH AS WELL THIS YEAR, BUT SPECIFIC TYPES WERE MORE POPULAR THAN OTHERS.

Before the holidays, “We were nervous,” he said, “because the prices have gone up on so many things, including turkeys. When price increases occur, grocery stores try to avoid increasing the price of their turkeys because they want to signal to people that they have low prices throughout the store, even though they are increasing the prices on other things. Turkeys are used as a loss leader—they lose money on them or just break even. Whereas we just mark everything in the store up 21%, now temporarily 25%, including turkeys.”

“So as a result,” he explained, “the gap between our turkey prices and other stores was a bit bigger this year. But a lot of the higher priced specialty birds, whether pastured or fed non-GMO or organic feed, they all sold really well.” Szladek agreed that it’s possible these birds are less expensive at the Coop than at other stores.

CHEESE AND GIFTS

Another unexpected change: “People bought expensive things this year as compared to previous years,” noted cheese, bulk and specialty buyer Yuri Weber. “I felt like people maybe just had extra money, or what, I’m not sure.” Some economists are pointing to the stimulus checks.

“Usually we sell maybe double the amount of cheap panettone to expensive panettone,” he said. “This year it was the other way around, like three to one expensive panettone to cheap panettone.”

In general, Weber said, the top-selling items were “more on the gifty side than on the party side.”

“All of the gift tins of stuff, I bumped that pretty hard, and we sold out really quickly. And we sold a lot of gift sets. I couldn’t even keep them on the shelf. I got in those little hot sauce gift packs and some other gift pack things and they just flew out of here. I literally could not keep them in stock, like sometimes I’d put them on the shelf and they’d be gone the same day,” he said.

> “PEOPLE BOUGHT EXPENSIVE THINGS THIS YEAR AS COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEARS.”
>
> *BULK AND SPECIALTY BUYER, YURI WEBER*

Weber added, “We sold a lot more of what I consider super-expensive cookies, like a 10-ounce thing of cookies for 10 bucks. We sold tons of those types of things. They were in a cute little tin. I don’t think people were taking home and opening and eating all of them. They were a gift item.”

On the other hand, he said, “We definitely sold a lot less expensive cheese than we have. We sold a lot more expensive cheese over Thanksgiving than we did New Year’s, which is really unusual. New Year’s is one of those times when I can’t keep triple cream cheese on the shelf to save my life. I could stand there all day refilling Mount Tam and whatever other triple cream cheeses we have, and I couldn’t keep up. But this year, we sold some, but not nearly like we normally do.”

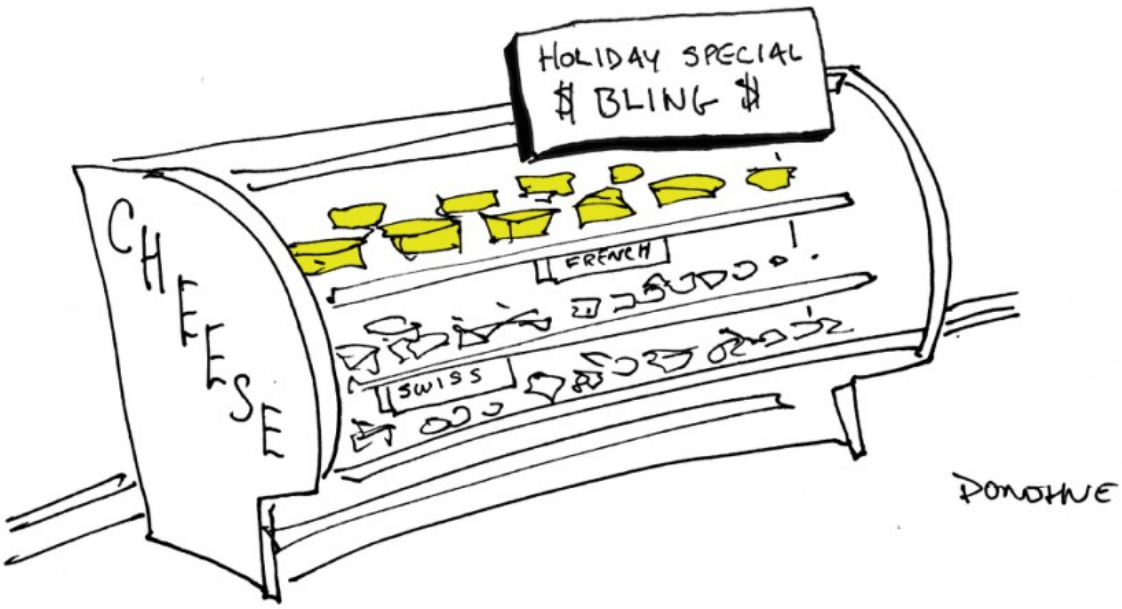


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PARTIES

In that way, Weber said it was “similar to last year. We didn’t sell a lot of super-expensive party cheese like we did in 2019. Christmas and New Year’s, it just didn’t move.”

“I kind of thought that that might not be the case this year. I thought maybe things would be returned more to normal, but we did not sell a lot of the things you would bring to a party or have at a party,” he added.

“I don’t think there were very many dinner parties at all,” said Weber. “There were definitely many fewer cheese plates this year. I feel like people maybe compensated [for not having been able to gather the year before] and then maybe retreated [because of Omicron].”

Using himself as an example, Weber said, “We had people over for Thanksgiving and

then that was it. That was our thing we did at home. There weren't any other people coming over to our house after that. Everything seemed to kind of shut down after that."



Yuri Weber recalled that the Coop sold tons of expensive cookies in cute tins as gift items.

Marisa Bowe is a Williamsburg-based writer who wishes she lived closer to the Coop.