

PREPARING FOR THE THANKSGIVING SHOPPING SURGE: A CONVERSATION WITH A COOP BUYER

November 16, 2022



By Leila Darabi

While Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is one of the biggest shopping days of the year for most retailers across the country, for Coop staff, it's the week before that requires intense planning.

“The big picture is we shift from very diversified purchasing, where members are making a variety of meals throughout their week—breakfast, lunch, dinner—to everybody basically making the same meal,” General Coordinator Joe Szladek explained. “That’s basically what happens. Everybody has different ways that they’re used to shopping and cooking, whether it’s pasta or tacos. But then, with Thanksgiving, everyone switches together to the same meal, and that requires a big shift in our workflow in

the run-up to the holiday.”

To avoid long lines and cranky shoppers, Coop staff must kick into gear to account for the rigor of a single demanding week followed by a distinct lull.

“What happens on Thanksgiving is that the six- or seven-day run-up to the holiday is very busy. The Friday and Saturday directly after are very slow, as most are recovering from a food coma, but then sales pick up again quickly the following week,” Szladek said. “We all kind of brace ourselves and plan as much as we can.”



PANDEMIC IMPACT

Since 2020, ordering for Thanksgiving has required more trial, error and speculation. Pre-pandemic, the Coop routinely sold more than 1,000 turkeys each Thanksgiving season. Prior to 2020, membership topped out at more than 17,000 members. During

the height of COVID-19 lockdowns, that number dipped to around 11,750 members.

“[THANKSGIVING SHOPPING] STARTED TO SHIFT LAST YEAR. THINGS WERE GETTING MORE NORMAL... PEOPLE WERE CELEBRATING IN LARGER GROUPS, AND I THINK THIS YEAR WE ARE WELL ON OUR WAY TO BACK TO HOW PEOPLE USED TO CELEBRATE. WE’RE SEEING PRE-PANDEMIC PATTERNS START TO RETURN.”

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK

“The past couple of years were harder to order for than usual,” Szladek recounted. “Last year, 2021, was a little easier. But 2020 was especially difficult. It was the first Thanksgiving of the COVID era, and though many members certainly wanted turkeys, there were less gatherings because of social distancing. And if there were gatherings, they were smaller and members wanted smaller turkeys, which aren’t always easy to get.”

Today, membership has inched back up to around 14,400, and buyers must approximate purchasing to allow anyone who wants to host a holiday meal to be able to source key ingredients at the Coop.

“That started to shift last year. Things were getting more normal in terms of shopping,” Szladek said. “People were celebrating in larger groups, and I think this year we are well on our way to back to how people used to celebrate. We’re seeing pre-pandemic patterns start to return.”

While food costs have risen broadly, Szladek noted that increased prices have not yet impacted Thanksgiving buying. Rising costs have “become a reality of life across the board,” he explained, adding that if members stopped buying specific items, the buyers would listen to the numbers and stop stocking them.



Surveying the pumpkin puree

WHERE TO PUT THE BIRDS

Turkeys present the first operational challenge staff must address. This year, Coop buyers will procure around 900 turkeys, including nearly 800 whole birds plus additional turkey parts.

“Turkeys take up a lot of room, so there’s a challenging operational component to that,” Szladek said. “We have to stagger their arrival times so we can fit them all in our coolers.”

The extra birds begin to arrive about ten days before Thanksgiving, with the majority of sales taking place from the Thursday before Thanksgiving through the following week.

“Ideally our last turkey is sold the morning of Thanksgiving Day,” Szladek said. “We do try to err on the side of having slightly more than we think we’ll need, so that rather than members coming the Wednesday before Thanksgiving to find we’re out of turkeys, we still have options for them. Sometimes that translates into 30-50 extra turkeys left after the holiday, which we’ll often then put on sale.”



Uboats at the ready

SEASONAL STOCKING

Major coordination also goes into stocking for once-per-year surges in demand for Thanksgiving-specific ingredients. In addition to stocking turkeys, sourcing pie, pie shells and the ingredients for homemade pies constitutes a major operation. In reviewing the Coop’s pie deliveries from Wednesday, November 17 to Saturday, November 27, 2021, the store received 1,157 pies. That included 25 varieties from seven vendors, ranging from Four & Twenty Blackbirds to Steve’s Authentic Key Lime Pie.

Flavors included four kinds of pecan (gluten free, brown butter, classic and bourbon) as well as pumpkin, butternut squash and sweet potato pies.

Szladek pointed out, not surprisingly, that canned pumpkin sales spike each year over this period, as do sales of canned cranberry sauce. In the produce aisle, the buyers plan ahead to make sure bins of brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes and fresh cranberries remain full.



Getting ready for stuffing

STAFFING TO AVOID CHAOS

To prevent long lines, prolonged shopping time and cranky customers, Coop staff also devote significant planning into member-labor staffing for the Thanksgiving rush.

Thanks to the new online Member Services feature on the Coop website, Szladek not-

ed, allocating member labor for high-volume shopping days has become much easier. Staff add stocking and receiving workslots, as well as additional walker shifts, in anticipation of the rush.

“THESE ARE FOLKS WHO STAND IN FRONT OF THE MEAT CASE AND TALK TO MEMBERS ABOUT TURKEYS.” SZLADEK ELABORATED, “A MEMBER MIGHT SAY, HEY, I NEED A 12-POUND, NOT AN 18-POUND, OF THIS KIND OF BIRD, AND THE TURKEY RUNNER WILL GET IT FROM THE BASEMENT IF WE HAVE IT. THEY ARE TOTALLY KEY TO MAKING SURE WE MOVE AS MANY TURKEYS AS POSSIBLE. SOMETIMES THEY WEAR TURKEY HATS!”

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK

“We’re always analyzing what our needs are. And we can be more nimble now because of the new system. If we feel like, hey, today we were really understaffed for the Thanksgiving rush, we can go ahead and quickly add shifts for the next day and, more often than not, they’ll get filled on short notice. There’s greater flexibility than we’ve ever had with the new Member Services system. It’s very efficient and useful.”

Each year the Coop implements a special seasonal shift: turkey runners.

“These are folks who stand in front of the meat case and talk to members about turkeys.” Szladek elaborated, “A member might say, hey, I need a 12-pound, not an 18-pound, of this kind of bird, and the turkey runner will get it from the basement if we have it. They are totally key to making sure we move as many turkeys as possible. Sometimes they wear turkey hats!”

This limited-time run includes one member in particular who fulfills nearly all of his annual required work shifts during the week leading up to Thanksgiving.

PSA TO MEMBERS: DON'T WAIT TO SHOP

Asked what advice he has to navigate the Thanksgiving rush, Szladek urged members to “Shop early! If it’s November 5, and you know you’re making pumpkin pie or a dessert that needs condensed milk or stuffing, buy the ingredients you need then. If you see it, buy it.”

He clarifies, “It helps smooth out the process for everyone. The more you buy earlier, the less time you and other members will spend shopping during the Coop’s busiest days of the Thanksgiving rush—the Friday through Wednesday before Thanksgiving Day.”

Leila Darabi often posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram; she also cohosts Cringewatchers, a podcast about representations of sexuality on popular TV.