

THE COOP TURNS 50: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT

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ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

By Juliet Kleber

Half a century ago, in February of 1973, the Park Slope Food Coop opened its doors for the first time. In the decades since, much has changed. Park Slope has gone from

a low-income, heavily immigrant neighborhood to one of the most expensive in Brooklyn. The Coop has gone from a group of about ten founders operating out of the second floor of a leftist community center (with no elevator) to a two-story, nearly 15,000-member institution. The *Linewaiters' Gazette* has gone from a two-page newsletter to a print newspaper with a full masthead to its current digital iteration (whose early print archives, if you're interested, are available at the Center for Brooklyn History). And the Coop itself has been an agent of change—it is both a landmark of the neighborhood and a model for other food coops around the country.

The moment in time in which the Coop was founded was a very particular one in the history of political movements, of food movements, and of New York City. The Mon-goose Community Center, from which the Coop was born, was active in the anti-Vietnam War movement. A few months after the Coop's opening, a riot erupted at 5th Avenue and Union Street, the product of tensions between the Italian and Puerto Rican communities in the neighborhood. The 1960s and 1970s were a transformational moment in the politics of food. And as the historian Lana Dee Povitz noted in a 2020 journal article on the politics of the early Coop, that first decade of the Coop saw boycotts of grapes and lettuce (in support of the United Farm Workers), Florida orange juice (in protest of their anti-gay spokesperson), Nestlé products, and produce from apartheid South Africa and Pinochet's Chile.

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While the particular ethos and culture of the Coop was of course a product of its time, it exists as part of a long, rich, and diverse lineage of food cooperatives in America. That history begins in the 1830s, driven by labor organizations in Philadelphia and New England. Much like our founders, the member-owners of these institutions were working people frustrated with the cost of food who sought a better way to provide

for themselves and their families. Traditional grocery stores were limited and expensive, so communities pooled their resources to purchase food in bulk, thus obtaining better prices and a wider variety of goods. Coops really proliferated, however, with the formation of the Working Men's Protective Union in 1845. By 1847, there were 21 divisions selling wholesale groceries to members at a much-reduced cost as reported in a *Boston Liberator* article from that year, which described the WMPU as an institution intended to "combine individuals for the purpose of purchasing merchandize [sic] of all sorts required in a family and to render mutual aid."

Anne Meis Knupfer's history, *Food Co-ops in America*, describes the rapid growth of WMPU's coop system: in 1852, there were already 167 union stores, and in 1857 the number had ballooned to over 800 in thirteen states. Unfortunately, many of these did not survive the Civil War. The next wave began in the 1930s as the Great Depression left many Americans in dire need of affordable food options and, while many did not last, the cooperative model continued to be popular in the face of World War II rationing and food shortages. At least one—Vermont's Putney Food Co-op, which was founded in 1941—still exists to this day. Black Americans in particular invested in the cooperative food movement of this era—there were Black-run food coops in Chicago; Miami; Gary, Indiana; Tuskegee; and at least two in Harlem. By the 1950s, there were approximately 20,000 cooperative food stores or buyers clubs.

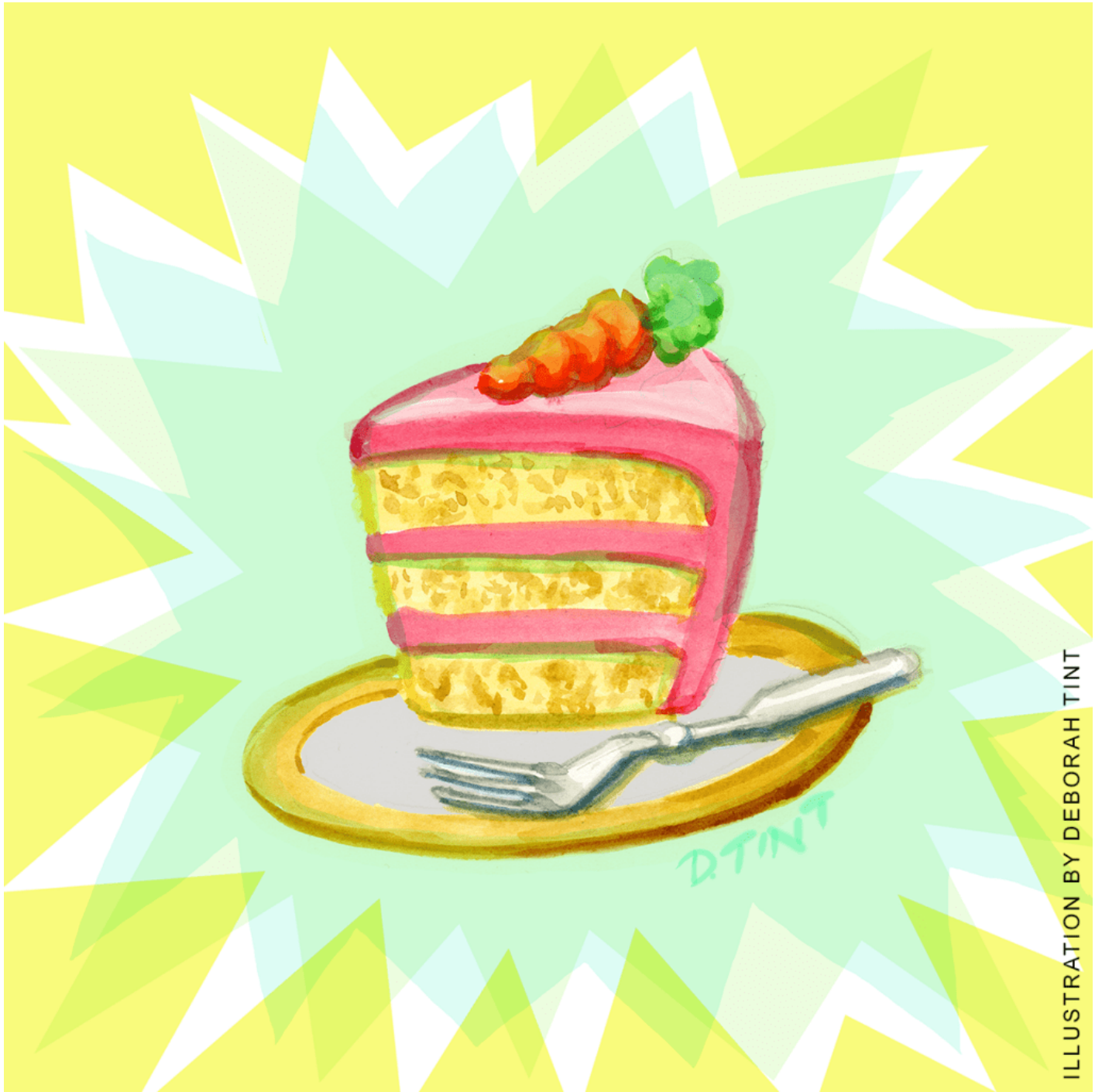


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PSFC began in the next wave of the cooperative food movement during the 1960s and 1970s. Knupfer's book estimates that approximately 3,000 food coops started during this period. That broader movement's aims were much the same as our Coop's: the desire for good quality, affordable food; a frustration with the corporate grocery model; and a general concern for the ethics of food, and its sourcing, distribution, and consumption. The cooperative food movement was closely tied to the new environmental movement, the antiwar movement, and a new interest in "natural food-

s.” Vegetarianism was becoming more mainstream, and meat at the Coop was not a foregone conclusion.

Though the original Coop was new, small, and much looser in structure, some of those principles still guide it today. Today’s members may not be buying bulk tofu or carrying produce up the stairs (two anecdotes shared in the *Gazette*’s 40th anniversary coverage), but we are still concerned with the safety of our food and the safety of the people producing it; the impact our habits have on our environment; and the ethical practices of our providers. For many members, the opportunity to buy their groceries outside of a corporate structure remains very meaningful. And of course, the price of cheese is unbeatable.

It is difficult find an exact number of food coops in existence in the United States today. Many that opened in the wave of the 1960s and 1970s closed in the 1980s, and far fewer new ones were started. National Co+op Grocers represents 220 stores across the country at present (including ours), but many others—including the 4th Street, Greene Hill, and Windsor Terrace Coops—exist independently. The most recent data published by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives estimates that there are between 300 and 350 food coops in the U.S., but this figure is now over ten years old. And most of these are not working-member coops, but open to all shoppers, with multiple tiers of membership. (Though the Greene Hill and Paris Coops follow a model similar, if not identical, to ours, most coops do not.)

While some coops continue to thrive in New York City, others have not fared so well. In addition to the 4th Street Food Coop (which took over what was once the Good Food Coop in 1996), the Greene Hill Coop (2011), and the Windsor Terrace Coop (2012), the Flatbush Coop (started as the 10th Street Coop in 1976) continues to operate. The Bushwick Food Coop, however, lost its store front in a fire in 2019, though it continues to maintain a grocery share, and the Lefferts Community Food Coop also closed that year (after five years in operation) when, after struggling with membership numbers, its building went up for sale. The Bay Ridge Coop, which had hoped to find a storefront, has also closed. And while a Central Brooklyn Food Coop announced

its intention to open a storefront in September 2022, it has not done so (or issued an update) at the time of this writing.

This seems to be a hard time for new initiatives in New York City that promise to survive the long term. Rents hit record highs in the summer of 2022, with real estate prices close behind. Wages fail to meet a rising cost of living, and some of the early-COVID grassroots movements that seemed to have revolutionary potential have fallen apart, lost steam, or been appropriated and diluted. In Brooklyn in 2023, it is often a struggle to incorporate truly substantive, ethical practices into our daily lives. But year after year, new people find the Coop. Young working people—dog-walkers, para-professionals, artists, service-workers, labor organizers, graduate students—and activists, idealists, and ethical pragmatists of all stripes join a peculiar, beloved institution that has managed to thrive for fifty years.

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