

COOKING THE ETHNIC AISLE

February 6, 2024



By Rahima Nasa

When I was a kid in the nineties, grocery shopping always meant going to two stores. The first was our local supermarket chain, such as Pathmark or C-Town, for American staples like Kix cereal, boxed cake mix and Oreos, while the second was for ingredi-

ents like curry leaves, mustard oil and other essentials needed for a proper South Asian meal.

My family immigrated to the U.S. in the 1990s with a wave of Bangladeshi immigrants. We settled in Queens and eventually moved to the Bronx, where a Bengali enclave was already thriving in Parkchester. This meant that there was already a proper South Asian grocery store with aisles brimming with spices, sacks of basmati rice and jars of ghee. At the time these stores were the only places my family could find the ingredients they needed so easily and cheaply. But as a kid, I couldn't care less. I was more interested in the Capri-Suns and string cheese sticks that I saw my friends eating in school.

As I moved farther away from my community, I stopped taking my Bengali grocery store for granted. When I was in college I was homesick one day so I decided to cook one of my favorite childhood staples: chana masala. I got most of what I needed at my local Wegmans and then as I was searching for garam masala I encountered an aisle where all items seemed to be from other places: masa flour, soba noodles, pre-packaged curries, and fish sauce. The food was categorized by place instead of the type of ingredient it was. Usually this type of aisle is labeled as "international foods" or simply "ethnic food." It didn't make a lot of sense to me, but I loved it.



Since my discovery as a college student, the ethnic food aisle quickly became my favorite part of my shopping trip. Not only because it was the only place to find ingredients that reminded me of home, but also because it was a place to discover new ingredients from other places. Kewpie mayo from Japan was an immediate hit.

The ethnic aisle started to appear in American grocery stores after World War II. Soldiers returning from countries like Italy, Germany and Japan wanted the foods they

had experienced while stationed abroad. Pasta eventually transitioned out of the aisle to dominate its own corner of the grocery store; now it seems that foods from mostly non-European countries dominate the ethnic aisle, and consumers have come to understand that. This is why brands like Brooklyn Delhi, which sells sauces inspired by Indian flavors, feel like they would have more success placing their products in this section of the store.

As I started to cook more of the foods I grew up with, the ethnic aisle started to feel more constraining. Why wasn't the grocery store organized like the one my family went to, where similar items were grouped together? Why weren't the cans of coconut milk next to the other canned items? Over the years critics like David Chang, owner of the Momofuku restaurant group, have pushed back on the ethnic aisle. Chang argues, it's the "last bastion of racism you can see in full daylight in retail America." I can see his point. Isolating products based on which country they're eaten in feels like another reminder of the fact that I'm different or not American enough because of what I eat.

When I became a member of the Coop in 2022, I was prepared to spend a lot of time in the ethnic aisle but was pleasantly surprised to find that there wasn't one. I don't have to go to two grocery stores to get what I need for dinner either. I can find curry leaves, bushels of rambutan, and lychee in the produce section. All the noodles (pasta and noodle-adjacent) are grouped together. I can find chutneys with the rest of the sauces.

The Coop doesn't treat the food I grew up with any differently than the boxed mac and cheese that lines its shelves. I'm just like every other shopper, and the Coop is unlike any other store.

Rahima Nasa enjoys writing for the Gazette because of all the members she's gotten to meet and because it allows her to learn about how the Coop works. When she's not writing for the Gazette, Rahima likes to experiment with new ingredients and is on a never-ending quest to make the perfect pie crust.