

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE CHEESE CASE

April 9, 2024



Illustration by Valeria Trucchia

By Dan Bergsagel

OK, so tell me: Why did you really join the Coop? Was it because you believed in member-owned businesses? Was it because you wanted to feel truly part of your community? Did you want to support the cooperative movement? Or was it the cheese?

If it's the latter: You're not alone. We *all* love the cheese. While the cheese itself is important, a *Gazette* article providing news of imminent repairs to the refrigerated cheese storage case in the basement would probably seem less noteworthy. However, today's story of the humble cheese case is the perfect foil for many wider aspects of the Coop: prioritizing quality, long-term investment, a focus on sustainability, utilizing unique member skills and—of course—providing a healthy serving of controversy.

CHEESE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE COOP'S OFFERING. IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THE COOP, IT WAS ONE OF THE KEY ITEMS THAT MEMBERS COULD EXPERIENCE SIGNIFICANT SAVINGS ON.

According to Coop General Manager Joe Holtz, cheese has always been an important part of the Coop's offering. In the first years of the Coop, it was one of the key items—along with better cooking oil and soy sauce—that members could experience significant savings on. Then, as now, cheese was an item that conventional stores felt they could make extra profit on, and an item which the Coop's standard markup policy made comparatively affordable.

Holtz purports that the Coop is “operating on a much higher cheese plane” today than it was at the Coop's founding. This may be reflected in the cheese varieties available, but not in its level of service. Did you know that the Coop used to have a cheese counter? Most Coop members don't.



The cheese case in its former location on the ground floor, next to the storied cheese counter. From the PSFC Archive.

In 1980 the Coop purchased its first building—the middle of the three adjacent buildings that make up the Coop today, which ranges from the freezer aisle to the bulk aisle. In 1979, a year before the Coop bought the building, the shopping floor moved from the second level to the first. In this new store configuration, the cheese counter became the first stop that members would make on arrival.

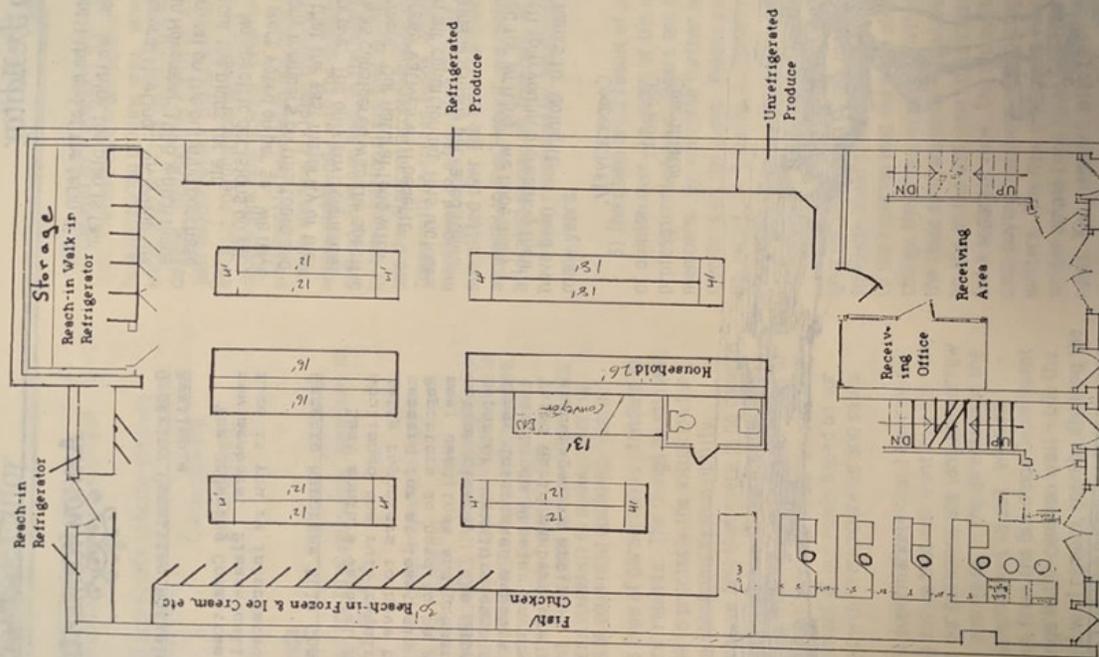
Members would pause on entry, discuss the cheeses available with the cheese workers, place their cheese order, and then begin the rest of their shopping. While the member shopped, the cheese workers would diligently prepare their custom cheese order. Finally, the member would pick up their cheese parcel on their way to the checkout.

AS PART OF A 1991 LAYOUT, THE STAFF REALIZED THAT TO BEST UTILIZE THE SPACE ON THE SHOPPING FLOOR, THE LARGE CASE HOLDING BIG BLOCKS OF CHEESE SHOULD BE MOVED TO THE BASEMENT, AND THE CHEESE COUNTER ABOLISHED.

So, what happened? In 1991, over a decade after the Coop expanded from the second floor to the entire first building, it also took over the adjacent building to its west. This expansion doubled the shopping area and changed the way the Coop viewed itself. Holtz described it as “part of becoming a one-stop shopping experience. We needed to cover as many lines as possible, and needed to provide as much food as possible.”

As part of this 1991 layout (see image below), the staff realized that to best utilize the space on the shopping floor, the large case holding big blocks of cheese should be moved to the basement, and the cheese counter abolished—to be replaced instead by an unstaffed display case for pre-cut cheese.

Tentative Store Layout



The proposed expanded store layout (from the Linewaiters' Gazette Archive, Volume K, No 1 - January 11, 1990). From the PSFC Archive.

The archives revealed many heated topics at the time: boycotts of food from Nicaragua and Chile, and a discussion on whether the new, larger Coop should enjoy air conditioning. However, in examining the archives, concerns over the depth of the cheese counter controversy grew—rather than narrowed—based on a suspicious gap in the archive for the year in question of the cheese counter's removal: 1991. There was only one *Gazette* edition available between December 27, 1990 and November 28, 1991. In the preceding and following years, nearly every edition of the bi-weekly *Gazette* was available for review. Suspicious, no?

CHANGE IS NEVER EASY, AND MEMBERS FELT THE LOSS OF THE CHEESE COUN-

TER KEENLY AT THE TIME. COOP GENERAL MANAGER JOE HOLTZ REPORTED THAT MEMBERS AND STAFF TALKED ABOUT THE CHEESE COUNTER FOR YEARS.

Change is never easy, and members felt the loss of the cheese counter keenly at the time. Holtz reported that members and staff talked about the cheese counter for years, and he recommended reviewing old editions of the *Gazette* to illustrate the strong feelings the membership held on the matter. The Center for Brooklyn History (which requires an appointment) holds the *Linewaiters' Gazette's* archive. This archive includes the equivalent of cheese counter requiems during that period, in the form of articles by *Gazette* reporters and letters to the editor.

While this potential cheese censorship was extensive, it wasn't perfect. The available *Gazette* records give us two insights into the status of the cheese counter at the time: The first is a letter submitted to a regular column, "Minnie O. La Tangelo Tells All," in the March 8, 1990, edition, nearly a year before the relocation of the cheese case to the basement. An anonymous member writes: "Dear Minnie, Maybe you could explain to me (or all of us at the Coop) why there are so many people with an attitude problem working in the cheese area?" Does this letter hint at ulterior motives for the removal of the cheese counter? The plot thickens.

CONTRARY TO SOME MEMBER CONSPIRACY THEORIES, THE COOP PROBABLY REMOVED THE CHEESE COUNTER TO BETTER MAXIMIZE ITS USE OF SPACE, AND THE MISSING ARCHIVE EDITIONS OF THE *GAZETTE* ARE LIKELY RELATED TO DISTURBANCES AT THE COOP DURING THE BIG MOVE.

The second relevant piece from the archives is an article from May 30, 1991, the sole edition available within that lost year in the archives. Titled "The Cheese Counter Crusade," it's written by Arlene Krebs—who identifies as both a cheese worker and cheese shopper. The article complains that the relocation of the cheese counter and

cheese case happened without consultation, and that it reduced contact between Coop members. Some excerpts from Krebs' piece: "Do you want your cheese cut in the basement among the boxes?", "We need to be able to talk to the people who are cutting our cheese." "How foolish. Just goes to show that many are unaware of what the cheese workers do."

More than 30 years later, the cheese counter controversy has blown over. Contrary to some member conspiracy theories, the Coop probably removed the cheese counter to better maximize its use of space, and the missing archive editions of the *Gazette* are likely related to disturbances at the Coop during the big move.

However, amazingly, that same cheese case lives on. Lowered through a temporary hole in the floor during building works in 1991, the trusty 45-year-old cheese case continues to hum away, entombed in the basement next to the cheese- and meat-processing area.



The cheese case cooling coils. Photography by Michael Berman.

THE COOP LOOKS AFTER ALL ITS FRIDGES WELL: THE BUILT-IN MILK REFRIGERATOR WAS ORIGINALLY INSTALLED 33 YEARS AGO, AND THE CHEESE DISPLAY CABINET ON THE SHOPPING FLOOR IS 23 YEARS OLD.

To keep the Coop's cheeses cool and moist, the case uses old-fashioned cooling coils located at the top of the fridge, instead of the blowers that circulate cool air in conventional refrigerators. The fast movement of blown air in conventional refrigerators can dry out products, whereas the air cooled by the coils gently falls to the bottom of the case, maintaining humidity while lowering the temperature.

The age of the case is notable, if not entirely out of character for the Coop. The Coop looks after all its fridges well: The built-in milk refrigerator was originally installed 33 years ago, and the cheese display cabinet on the shopping floor is 23 years old. This longevity can be attributed to long-term thinking that values purchasing long-lasting, high-quality equipment over low-quality, stop-gap equipment. This approach limits the environmental impact of disposing of unwanted equipment, and it avoids the environmental impact of procuring new equipment.



Cheese workers on the cheese shift in the basement. Photography by Michael Ber-
man.

However, even high-quality equipment degrades, and over decades of use, the sliding glass doors of the cheese case have required particular attention. In the past, the glass panels themselves have been repaired, but now the plastic slider components that sit in the tracks that the doors slide in have broken.

Fortunately, as ever, the Coop can call on its multitalented members to help. Enter sculptor and furniture designer Michal Cihlar. Cihlar will make a negative mold of the broken components and will use this mold to cast a polyurethane machining resin replacement. Crystal Goldenstein, the Coop staff member who oversees repairs and maintenance and keeps the building ticking, has requested that the restoration stay as true to the original design as possible, so even the use of a color-matching resin is planned to keep the 1970s appearance.



A cheese worker preparing cheese. Photography by Michael Berman.

The cheese case persists today in large part due to the careful attention of members like Michal Cihlar. The current case repair work is in the planning stage, and the Coop expects it to be done later this year. While this repair may be just the latest stage in the Coop's love affair with cheese, for our repair hero, Michal Cihlar, it is a different story: Until recently, he didn't even eat dairy. He notes that, unlike the Coop, his "journey with cheese has only just begun."

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.