

WHERE THE HECK DO WE PUT THIS STUFF? STORAGE IS AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

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Photography by Michael Berman

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Making the most of the limited storage space at the Park Slope Food Coop is a science, an art and—these days—a complete obsession.

As most members know, the Coop prides itself on unusually fast turnover of inventory—many times higher than traditional grocery stores. It's a good thing inventory moves fast, because there is limited space to store all the produce and other goods that the Coop sells. Coop coordinators are experts at ordering just the right amount of stuff to store in the basement for just the right amount of time before storage space becomes nonexistent.

But it's a delicate art. There are times when holiday products, bumper crops from favorite suppliers or close-out deals just too good to pass up turn into extra palettes and U-boats full of stuff waiting to be sold. On top of that, staffers are grappling with life after the height of the pandemic and shutdowns.

THERE'S A REASON WHY STORAGE IS A UNIQUE PROBLEM FOR THE COOP: THE SELLING SPACE IS SMALL—ONLY 6,000 SQUARE FEET. HOWEVER, ANNUAL SALES ARE \$9,000 PER SQUARE FOOT, WELL ABOVE MOST GROCERY STORES.

Storage was already very tight before the pandemic, explained General Coordinator Joe Szladek, "but now with all the changes we've made, there's a lot more to deal with as we try to get back to normal."

A DIFFERENT KIND OF STORE—AND STORAGE

There's a reason why storage is a unique problem for the Coop: The selling space is small—only 6,000 square feet, Szladek explained. However, annual sales are \$9,000 per square foot, well above most grocery stores.

Many traditional grocery stores, with more square footage and shelf space than the Coop, stock most of their goods directly from the truck onto the shelves, eliminating the need for paid staff to move the goods from a storage space onto the shelves. This is especially true with non-perishables.

"[The Coop's] member labor means we can take advantage of the storage space we do have, so we can keep our smaller store stocked fast enough to meet shoppers' needs," explained Szladek.

DURING THE PANDEMIC, THE COOP BOUGHT A LARGE MACHINE CALLED A HOP-

PER THAT BAGS BULK ITEMS SUCH AS RICE, BEANS, AND GRAINS—PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING THAT SHOPPERS USED TO FIND IN THE SCOOP BINS ON THE FLOOR OF THE BULK AISLE.

Therein lies the puzzle: how to make the most of the storage space we do have in an organized efficient manner?

A NEW SPACE HOG: THE HOPPER

The biggest storage challenge the Coop has been facing in the past few months basically boils down to rice and beans.

During the pandemic, the Coop bought a large machine called a hopper that bags bulk items such as rice, beans and grains—pretty much everything that shoppers used to find in the scoop bins on the floor of the bulk aisle.

This change to some prepackaged bulk definitely cuts down on crowding in the bulk aisle—a huge priority during the pandemic. As a result, shoppers now simply grab a prepacked bag of these items out of the boxes along the floor and keep moving.

The bins with pour spouts holding granola, nuts and other bulk items above the pre-packed items are still self-serve.

Today, as shopping returns to normal at the Coop, many members appreciate the convenience of not having to scoop and bag the prepackaged items themselves. (Although that hasn't stopped some members from complaining that the pre-filled bags aren't the right size for their needs.)

Until the beginning of this year, the very large, tall and heavy hopper was housed and operated in the former childcare room. That made sense, since childcare had been suspended during the pandemic. It was a relatively spacious place for staffers to work

on the machine and there was enough room to stack the giant bags of rice, beans and other items, as well as the boxes of plastic bags and twist ties used to package bulk goods.

Now, post-pandemic, members and staffers are looking to reclaim the former child-care space.

COORDINATORS ANNOUNCED AT THE FEBRUARY GENERAL MEETING THAT CHILD-CARE WILL NOT RETURN. IT PROVED IMPOSSIBLE TO GET LIABILITY INSURANCE BECAUSE THE COOP WOULD HAVE HAD TO SECURE A LICENSE TO OPERATE A CHILD-CARE FACILITY.

So the coordinators decided to move the hopper to the basement. Staffers needed to find an area large and well-ventilated enough to safely operate the hopper, with enough room for the supplies and bagged bulk items. The answer was a relatively roomy corner near the freezer that already had an air vent.

But the move wasn't simple, said General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky. It entailed adding power, threading the hopper air hose through the current venting system to the air compressor outside the Coop, improving the lighting, installing new water pipes and redoing the floors so they are easy to clean and mop.

So far, members and staffers are operating the hopper just fine, Astrinsky reported. She did add that shift workers are moving a bit more slowly, though, as they get used to the new digs, and many miss the windows and high ceilings of the former childcare room.

The move freed up the childcare room, but—disappointing for many members—coordinators announced at the February General Meeting (GM) that childcare will not return. It proved impossible to get liability insurance because the Coop would have had to se-

cure a license to operate a childcare facility, explained General Coordinator Ann Herpel.

EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY

Coop staffers are great at taking advantage of any nook, cranny or corner in the Coop to store everything from pallets of Passover matzo, to dish towels, to endless cartons of craft beer.

In late January, housewares were dominating the upstairs meeting room, including glassware, kitchen gadgets, dishtowels and candles. Those items have since been moved to the former childcare room. “Now we can have staff and member meetings upstairs again,” said Szladek.

STAFFERS ARE CONSTANTLY ADAPTING AND INSTALLING CUSTOM-DESIGNED SHELVES, MOVING BOXES AND CARTONS OF MERCHANDISE FROM ONE AISLE TO ANOTHER, AND MONITORING THE SURPLUS ITEMS STACKED ON U-BOATS.

Elsewhere upstairs you might find a few U-boats stacked with surplus non-perishables or seasonal items. Boxes of supplies and other items are stacked on every shelf above and below people’s desks, including on the ceiling beams. In General Coordinator Joe Holtz’s office, some very old financial files have given way to storage for bulk bags, and, in the kitchen, staffers have donated cooking supplies to make room for pallets of merchandise that needed a home.

Back in the basement, staffers are constantly adapting and installing custom-designed and precisely measured shelves, moving boxes and cartons of merchandise from one aisle to another and monitoring the surplus items stacked on U-boats towards the end of the week when inventory swells to accommodate weekend crowds.

HALF PRICE BUT TWICE THE SPACE

Shoppers love the end cap across from the yogurt that houses half-price items, ranging from peach juice for bellinis to cranberry crackers. Staffers call these “dusty box deals.” Trusted vendors call Coop buyers asking if they’d like to take on some almost-expired, need-to-move-quickly inventory at really good prices.

“THERE’S NOT ENOUGH STORAGE AND THERE WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH STORAGE,” SAID RECEIVING COORDINATOR BRITT HENRIKSSON.

Those vendors know how fast our turnover is, and that our members love a deal. While the shelf on the shopping floor takes very little space, storing these dusty boxes, thanks to mondo shipments all at once, does not. The aisles that store these items are constantly being rejiggered to fit the latest shipments.

AN EVOLVING TASK

These are just a few of the storage highlights going on at the Coop. Think for a minute about the daily, sometimes hourly, trucks full of produce (another story for another time), the giant bags of coffee, dried fruits, nuts, wheels of cheese, loads of vitamins, boxes of personal care items and countless other Coop goodies that need their space.

Figuring out storage for all of that is a constantly evolving Coop Rubik’s Cube. And sometimes it seems insurmountable—even for staffers.

“We are not calibrated yet for sales, [at a] pre-pandemic [level],” Receiving Coordinator Yuri Weber said matter-of-factly.

“There’s not enough storage and there will never be enough storage,” exclaimed Receiving Coordinator Britt Henriksson.

Dire as these pronouncements sound, it's likely that staffers and members will work out all the storage issues—like we do all Coop challenges.

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