

HOW NEW PRODUCTS FIND A SHELF AT THE COOP

April 30, 2024



By Rahima Nasa

The best place to discover what's new at the Coop is the endcap across from the eggs-and-tofu case. Even when the endcap doesn't boast new products, it usually has seasonal items for holidays—but any day of the year, it's possible to find your next go-to pantry staples. Maybe you find that an item all over your Instagram (such as a certain tinned fish brand) has finally arrived at the Coop. Or perhaps it's something you hadn't even thought about buying but that looks interesting enough, so you plop it in your basket. I've done the latter so many times, I've amassed a treasure trove of these items in my pantry.



Seasonal items, such as different brands of matzos, can also be found on the endcap shelf near the bread section.

I wanted to know more about how the Coop decides what to introduce to our shelves, so I got in touch with one of the Coop's 18 buyers. Gillian Chi has been a buyer at the Coop for nearly 15 years. Responsible for the shelf-stable items, she considers every product suggestion and forwards them to the appropriate buyer. I first encountered Chi through my own misguided product suggestion for a protein bar that had additives that are not allowed for Coop products. (You can find the list of these additives [here](#), which I would urge you to check before making a suggestion.)



The tinned fish items are a delightful display of art in themselves. They can be found on the endcap shelf near the meat section.

Chi notes that there isn't a rigid formula for how buyers approach what to purchase, but affordability, product uniqueness, trade shows, samples and suggestions from members—made via the Member Services page—certainly influence their decisions. “We take risks as buyers... in deciding how much of something to order, even for [one] week because our basement is not that big. We can fit much less than a week's worth of food in our basement,” Chi explained.

Because of the Coop's limited space, buyers treat each shelf like precious real estate and are careful to choose items that members will likely buy. New products are usually purchased in small quantities until buyers can determine how the product does before ordering more.

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Though members often submit granola and tomato-sauce suggestions, Chi is reluctant to purchase more of these products since there are already so many options on the shelves. But she is eager to stock unusual products, like the Fila Manilla Ube coconut spread that was recently introduced, and immediately bought up. Chi recalls thinking, “Yes, we’re definitely going to try that. There is nothing else like that in the store.”

My ears perked up because I knew exactly what she was talking about. I picked it up at the Coop a few weeks ago and made coconut ube bread with it. The only other place I would have come across something like this is in a Filipino grocery store in Queens. Fortunately for me, I may be able to make more ube desserts on a whim, because the product did really well, according to Chi, and is likely to return. Products made by smaller brands, however, are trickier to keep stocked because their distributors may underestimate how popular a product will be and then run out, leaving a long gap between when the order is made and the shipment arrives. “They have to create another purchase order. It takes time for that to be shipped to the warehouse, the distributor warehouse, and then to us. So it could be another month before that product comes back,” Chi explained.

When a new product does find a permanent space on the shelves, as my precious ube spread may, it means that something else may have to go to make space. In many cases, it makes the most sense for buyers to discontinue products that are not selling well. But it’s not always that simple because buyers strive to stock products that meet the diverse tastes of all members.

“What I would do is look at a broad category like salsa. We carry a lot of different brands of salsa. And say, okay, which one of those is the slowest seller? I can get rid of that. Or which granola is the slowest seller? Or which cookie?” said Chi.



The many salsas and hot sauces the Coop offers on the endcap shelf near the meat section.

On the other hand, the Coop's buyers sometimes keep products like tamarind paste—one of the slowest sellers in the sauce, salsa and condiments category—on the shelves because it's unique and may be difficult to find in other stores in the neighborhood. Affordability is another big factor in determining what stays on the shelves. Each type of product is usually available at different price points. For example, if there's a brand of pasta that is the lowest seller but it's cheapest, Chi will still keep it on the shelves in order to maintain affordability across the Coop. "Even if we don't sell a ton of it, there are people who are going to come and buy it every time they shop because they know this is the best deal for a pound of pasta." Typically, however, according to Chi, "the affordable items actually sell the most, which is great."

The intentionality with which the Coop's buyers do their job is manifest throughout the store. Chi recalled a shopper paging out a few weeks ago looking for a suggestion for an Asian grocery store nearby. The shopper had a recipe that called for some ingredients they didn't expect to find at the Coop. Another buyer met the shopper in aisle six and found almost every product on the shopper's list with the exception of gochugaru, which was out of stock.



The yummy banana bread found on the endcap shelves in the produce section.

"We don't want people to have to go to other stores to complete their shopping, you know?" Chi added.

Given how carefully the Coop's buyers select our products, the likelihood of finding what we need, and new products to try for the first time, is high.

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.