

## THE COOP MEMBERS TRAVELING HOURS TO SHOP HERE

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## WHY SOME MEMBERS TREK FROM FAR OUTSIDE THE CITY TO BUY ORGANIC CUCUMBERS

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*By Kayla Levy*

During each shift cycle, Kendal Bayer and her husband drive four hours round-trip, with their son in tow, to work and shop at the Coop. It's been like this since 2016, when the couple first moved to Long Island from Brooklyn.

"The Coop always factored into discussions about our move," Bayer said. "I didn't want to move somewhere it wasn't viable to stay members."

For a grocery store where some members balk at returning carts even a block beyond the half-mile return zone, it's hard to imagine many traveling here from outside the

five boroughs.

The Membership Office doesn't keep a list of members who reside outside the city, but long-haul commuting happens often enough to be the stuff of anecdote. One member told me that someone on her cheese-processing shift came in for the day from Cold Spring, N.Y., about 60 miles to the north. Another said he worked checkout with a member who lives in New Rochelle, which borders the Bronx. Several mentioned rumors of members who live as far away as Vermont.

So we went and found some to learn why they continue to make the sometimes grueling trips to 782 Union Street.

These far-flung members didn't always live outside New York City. Everyone I spoke to joined while a city resident—most residing within walking distance in Brooklyn. Some moved a bit farther afield over the years, to South Brooklyn or Queens, but they were still close enough to keep up with weekly shops and consistent shifts without much trouble.

"When I lived in Bensonhurst, I biked to work in TriBeCa, so I'd just stop at the Coop on my way home," said Tracy Balzano, who became a member in 2001 while living in South Slope and has since moved to the Catskills.

Moving farther out certainly changes things. Members who live far away understandably tend to visit less regularly than they once did. Whereas the average American makes around six grocery trips per month, long-distance Coop members typically stop by only once a month.

Fela Cortes, who's lived in Westchester since 2021, tries to make the 45-minute drive every three weeks. "I do have to supplement some purchases in between, but the majority of our items come from the Coop," Cortes said.



Trips are even less frequent for Nepreil Foster, who until recently commuted nearly two hours from Norwalk, Conn. She just moved to Greenwich, about an hour's drive away, and now tries to make it in once per shift cycle. "When we looked for a new place, it had to be closer to the Coop to keep this up," she said.

Many long-haul members also have ongoing commitments in New York City that make regular visits—and continued membership—a little more practical.

Balzano, for example, still commutes from the Catskills to Manhattan Tuesday through Thursday for work, which allows her to shop or cover shifts in the evenings. Jessica Robinson, a former General Coordinator, moved to Western Massachusetts in 2021, but after decades in Brooklyn, she maintains strong ties to both the Coop and the borough. "I come down pretty regularly to see friends or family, and when I know I have a trip planned, I just go on the virtual office calendar and book a shift," she said.

These members say they continue to shop at the Coop for the same reasons many shoppers turn away from big supermarket chains: quality and price.

For Bayer, it comes down to organic cucumbers. Her son, Julian, eats one per day, but turnover in their Long Island store is so slow that cucumbers are often rotten and \$3.50 apiece. (They regularly go for \$1 at the Coop.) For Balzano, it's the Fresno chilies, which she goes through in droves and can get for \$2 a bag at the Coop—three times less than the 8-oz. container at her local store in the Catskills. The list goes on.

Even in areas where produce can sometimes be bountiful, the Coop maintains an edge. Robinson said the Coop's produce, bulk goods and items packaged onsite are all fresher and less expensive than what she can get at her local coop in Western Massachusetts (which follows a more typical retail model).

"Once you have to regularly shop elsewhere, you quickly realize how much fresher the food is at the Coop," she said. While there are plenty of supermarkets near Greenwich, Conn., Foster says she struggles to find produce that isn't wrapped in plastic.

Then there is the matter of time. While most Americans shop at two grocery stores per week to cover their needs, the Coop is a one-stop shop for many. Cortes said that the cost of tolls and gas required to get to Brooklyn from Westchester is worth the trade-off of only shopping at one store. "I know I won't have to go from place to place looking for products. The Coop will have everything, and the prices will be better," she said.

To be sure, there are undeniable impracticalities to driving hours for bulk beans or hauling pounds of chilis on a three-hour train ride home. But for many long-distance members, as for those who live closer, the Coop is more than a pragmatic choice.

"The things I buy at the Coop are politically important to me," said Balzano, who is shopping there less frequently these days but remains intentional about supporting ethical businesses.

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There’s also the feeling of being at the Coop, which is not replicated in other markets—especially for lifelong members. “In my family we call the Coop ‘Mother Coop,’ because going there is almost like going to see a family member,” said Foster, whose own mother was among the early Coop members. “Everybody there is friendly, and we feel a sense of trust.”

For Bayer’s family, the trek from Long Island has become something of a ritual. They always drive in early for lunch at Numero 28 Pizzeria, and Julian picks up a new book from Community Bookstore to read while his parents organize and scan invoices in the Membership Office.

After Bayer shops, the family grabs Mexican food for dinner before the two-hour drive home. “It’s a long day, but my husband is on board because he knows it’s something I enjoy so much,” Bayer said. “He complains, but I think he secretly enjoys it too.”