

## THE PREPARED FOOD SECTION IS EXPANDING (COULD ROTISSERIE CHICKEN BE NEXT?)

October 7, 2025



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*By Zach Schiffman*

One of the most beloved cases at the Coop is growing: a second refrigerated section will join the current array of Court Street Grocers sandwiches, sushi, salads, and, most recently, King David Tacos. One of the Coop's coordinators, Yuri Weber, is the mastermind behind the expansion, and its maintenance is a constant negotiation of supply, price and demand.



*Coordinator Yuri Weber.*

Court Street Grocers was the first outside vendor to say yes to the Coop about a decade ago. “I reached out to so many people about making food for us, and literally Court Street was the first place to do that,” Weber said. “I reached out to caterers, I reached out to a lot of the restaurants, and no one seemed to have the capability to keep up. They were the first ones that said, “Yeah, we can do that.”

Court Street makes slightly smaller sandwiches for the Coop than what it sells at their stores. “I don’t think they’re also as fully loaded as they are in their stores,” Weber said. “Just to kind of keep their price point at a place where they’re making money and we’re selling them at a reasonable price,” he said with air quotes. The prices of the sandwiches have been relatively stable, only going up once last March.



*Sandwiches in the case.*

Other prepared items have rotated in and out. “We had the onigiri for a while from different places, and those were popular, but they couldn’t keep up. It wasn’t financially viable for them to keep doing it for us,” Weber said. The sushi also has been a mainstay for nearly a decade. “The sushi is also very reasonably priced, but you kind of also get what you pay for. It’s not bad sushi, but it’s not *great*.”

King David tacos were added more recently. “Someone that works in the membership office, Jason Weiner, mentioned them a year ago,” Weber said. “We didn’t really have room to make that happen.”



*Tacos in the case.*

But when the onigiri went away, an opportunity arose. Current space constraints have been an issue, however.

“The tacos really need the salsa. There was just no room. We tried so hard to jam them in there, and it was messy. That’s top of my list to try to figure out,” said Weber, referring to his priorities after the new fridge is installed.

Chez Chrystelle’s salads joined the case a year and a half ago. “She just brought us samples, and we loved the salads,” he said. “We thought they were dynamite. The quality and the quantity were both there right off the bat.”

Although, Weber does miss the Court Street salads. “Those were so good. The ones with the soft-boiled eggs and the avocado were delicious.” He says he is working with Court Street to bring some packaged salads—more along the lines of potato salad—back to the case.



*A working member passes a sandwich to a shopping member.*

Asked about his philosophy, Weber said it comes down to two things: “A, can the suppliers meet our demand and B, meet a certain price point and value. You know, like, maybe they’re a little pricey, but it’s got a value to it.”

The grab-and-go case was designed to be low-maintenance.

“One of the requirements that we had was that we really can’t have overstock in the basement,” Weber said. “It was one of those things where it’s, like, someone needs to come in, put the things in there, and then we just, like, forget about it. Totally.”

Sandwiches and sushi have been successful in that model, but tacos and salads have required some adjustments. “There’s just not enough room to put the whole order on the shelf at once,” he said. “So now we’re storing the back stock in the basement, and it’s not being stocked as frequently.”



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

*Members shop the case.*

Managing expectations is part of the process. Most members expect that if they come to the Coop in the evening, the grab-and-go case will be mostly empty.

“I feel like I’ve got it pretty close and nothing’s running out too early, but those things aren’t great the next day,” Weber said.

Sushi leftovers are picked up and credited, but Court Street sandwiches require constant calibration. “I’m constantly in the process of figuring out, like, ‘When did the Vegetalians sell out this week? Oh, they all sold out at 5 p.m., maybe I should get more vegetarian.’ It’s a balance of making sure there aren’t too many leftover sandwiches the next day.”

Weber distinguishes between the grab-and-go case and the prepared-foods fridge that includes the pastas and falafel across from the cheese. “Everything in grab-and-go you can eat on your way out of the Coop,” he said. “That was our philosophy. This really is the grab-and-go, and then the other one is the prepared foods. These are ready-to-eat, and those are more like things you need to heat up.”

The new fridge will go in the produce aisle, near where the onions and potatoes are.

“We’re going to extend the refrigeration there, and then the onions and potatoes will probably end up in the middle of the aisle somewhere,” Weber said. “Then, we’ll have room for more stuff, and I’ve been talking with a lot of people about bringing in more meals.”



*Sandwiches and salads in the case.*

He is in conversation with restaurants, caterers and corporate-style meal providers offering nutrient-specific dishes. “Right now a lot of it is about the packaging,” said Weber. “I really like the way the Chrystelle salads are packaged. It has the compostable bottom and minimal plastic for what it is. If we could do something like that for the prepared meals, I would be happy.”

Rotisserie chicken has long been a dream item at the Coop, but the logistics are trickier than expected.

“Someone has to roast this off-site, and then they have to cool it, and they have to put it in a bag or someplace that we can then sell it from.”

Even so, Weber sounded optimistic about what’s next. “The next round of samples are probably going to come next week, and I’m super excited about this French chef that’s going to bring the rotisserie chicken and the sides. I think those are going to be dynamite.”

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