BROOKLYN’S FOOD LANDSCAPE IS CHANGING

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LIDL
WHOLE FOODS MARKET
Foodtown
PARK SLOPE
FOOD COOP
EST 1973
NYC
GROCERIES
PRICE

Illustration by Olexa Hewryk

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By Emmett Lindner

In the 1970s, Park Slope was a much different neighborhood. The area was not lined with luxury real estate or trendy cafes—it was transitioning out of a stretched economy. The streets were marked by urban blight, and residents struggled with a limited number of convenience options, including fresh, quality groceries.

The Coop set out to change that. From its beginnings in 1973 in a space leased by the Mongoose Community at 782 Union St., it aimed to provide good food through collective action.

TO MEET DEMAND, AN INFLUX OF GROCERY STORES FOCUSED ON CHEAPER GOODS HAVE CROPPED UP IN BROOKLYN AND OTHER BOROUGHS AND PROPOSED GOVERNMENT POLICIES HOPE TO BROADEN FOOD ACCESS.

Over the decades, the Coop has grown into the largest cooperative with member labor in the country, with more than 17,000 members. But a need for affordable food persists throughout the city. About 40 percent of families with children in New York City need more money to meet their food needs, according to a survey published in November by The Poverty Tracker Report (PDF) released by Robin Hood and researchers at Columbia University,

To meet demand, an influx of grocery stores focused on cheaper goods have cropped up in Brooklyn and other boroughs and proposed government policies hope to broaden food access. While on the campaign trail, the newly elected mayor of the City of New York, Zohran Mamdani, said the city could open its own grocery stores to combat inflation and rising costs.

“The job of city government is not to tinker around the edges while one in four children across our city go hungry,” Mr. Mamdani said last year.

> LAST MONTH, LIDL, THE GERMAN DISCOUNT SUPERMARKET CHAIN, OPENED ON 5TH AVENUE IN PARK SLOPE TO MUCH FANFARE.

But the plan for city-run grocery stores could become mired in bureaucracy and has its share of detractors. A report in *The Atlantic* called Mr. Mamdani’s affordability plans detached from the reality of budgets, with his campaign showing a quality of “magic realism.” Local business owners have voiced concern about the ability of city-owned grocery stores to remain above corruption; others wonder how the math would work given many cooperative stores, like the Coop, already have competitive pricing.

While that proposal awaits its fate, and other affordable measures including free buses are put forward, some businesses have already come to town to meet the needs of city residents.

Last month, Lidl, the German discount supermarket chain, opened on 5th Avenue in Park Slope, to much fanfare. Many people lined up in the early morning light to be the first inside, walking beneath the friendly blue, yellow, and red signage to take advantage of relatively cheap groceries and home goods.

In November, Aldi, another German discount chain, opened in downtown Brooklyn to a similar reception. Bloomberg News reported on the “cult of Aldi,” interviewing devotees, some of whom even wore custom Aldi shirts as they waited to be one of the first 100 shoppers inside the store.

People have long been fanatical about discounts and couponing, but recent economic turmoil spurred by tariffs and inflation have greatly increased demand. Throughout

last year, more people were turning to value brands and even going into debt to afford necessities.

The combination of financial strife and seemingly unquenchable food deserts throughout New York and the country have prompted many grocers to reflect on their impact.

A recent price comparison survey by *Linewaiters' Gazette* indicated that Coop members save between 20 and 40 percent on weekly groceries. And the Coop carries a wide variety of products—more than 8,000 items—"to serve a diverse population with a variety of needs," according to its website.

Though the Coop is only available to members, some in the cooperative have said it's more accessible than other discount stores, like Costco. But retailers in Park Slope, members said, tend to price their goods for the neighborhood's economic profile. Even so, they said, the Coop does what it can.

> NOT EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO A CAR OR CAN MANAGE A GROCERY HAUL THROUGH BROOKLYN'S LABYRINTHINE PUBLIC TRANSIT SYSTEM.

"Within the model we have, it seems to me, the Coop tries to be conscious of people who have financial needs," said Ellen Winner, a member since 2017. She said that as a cart walker, she has guided people with their groceries to a bus stop, which they took to the subway station to get back home.

That amount of effort, she said, isn't feasible for everyone in the city. Not everyone has access to a car or can manage a grocery haul through Brooklyn's labyrinthine public transit system.

"The only thing I could think of is having more cheaper-line products," Ms. Winner

said. “For the quality of food that you get, the Coop is unbeatable, but not everyone can afford to eat at that quality level, even at the Coop’s prices.”

Ms. Winner added that some members might be unsure about more discount items, but that they would help to democratize the shelves.

“If we had more space I’d advocate for that,” she said.

Susan Y, who has been a member for 10 years, said that the Coop provides what she needs to shop for herself, and the prices beat other grocery stores in the neighborhood, like Union Market. The atmosphere, too, she said, is hard to find elsewhere.

SINCE THE COOP’S INCEPTION, ITS ETHOS HAS TRIED TO BE DEFINED, IN PART, BY COMMUNITY.

“It’s almost like my social life—everyone is so helpful and warm,” Ms. Y said. “I just find it lovely.”

Although the big discount chains like Lidl and Aldi have commanded a loyal group of devotees, some Coop members wondered if the appeal of a tight-knit community is not lost within the corporations.

Since the Coop’s inception, its ethos has tried to be defined, in part, by community. By 1981, there were movie nights and “June Moon” dances—some events featured the tagline, “The Coop—It ain’t just food.”

In 2026, there appear to be fewer events, and the politics of the cooperative’s monthly meetings have become increasingly divisive, capturing more headlines than the food. But many longtime members still enjoy the connections fostered within the Union Street walls. Ms. Winner said that although the aisles are narrow, it often gives

her the opportunity to bump into familiar faces.

“It is a priority of mine (and the Coop’s) to provide affordable versions (at everyday low prices) of as many products as possible throughout the store,” Gillian Chi, one of the Coop’s buyers, said in an email.

> “OUR SHELF PRICE IS DIRECTLY TIED TO WHAT WE PAY FOR A PRODUCT,” SAYS BUYER GILLIAN CHI . “IF A DISTRIBUTOR OR VENDOR SELLS A PRODUCT AT A DISCOUNT, OUR SHELF PRICE IMMEDIATELY GOES DOWN ACCORDINGLY.”

The Coop stocks Field Day, a popular value brand known for shelf-stable items, including beans, pasta, and olives. The Coop has only added a handful of new items by their label recently. Field Day products sell as well as other Coop items and have gone on sale before. National Co+op Grocers (NCG)—which describes itself on its website as “a business services cooperative for retail food co-ops located throughout the United States”—negotiates sale contracts with Field Day and that trickles down to the pricing members see on Coop shelves.

Last year, a November sale of Field Day products coincided with the disruption of SNAP benefits during the national government shutdown, but it was coincidental. Overall, prices of all items the Coop sells go up or down in accordance with the cost the Coop pays at wholesale.

“Our shelf price is directly tied to what we pay for a product,” Chi added. “If a distributor or vendor sells a product at a discount, our shelf price immediately goes down accordingly.”

Some members agreed that the Coop offers a wide range of items, many at an affordable price. But the consensus is that there might be more the Coop can do to aid Park Slope shoppers whose current alternative is Key Food instead of Union Market.

Michael Rieser has been a member of the Coop since 1979, the same year he moved to Brooklyn. He was drawn to the cooperative after having been a member of a coop in Madison, Wisconsin, and found meaning in the community that surrounded the organization. He has shopped at Aldi and appreciates that there are more cost-effective stores in the area for those who need them.

“People do need lower-cost options for shopping other than the Coop or Key Food, and the competition, I think, is good,” Mr. Reiser said. He added that it’s great that the Coop has supported the creation of other cooperatives.

PEOPLE WERE SKEPTICAL OF THE IDEA OF SHOPPING AT THE COOP, SAYING MEMBERSHIP WAS NOT FEASIBLE BECAUSE OF TRAVEL AND COST CONCERNS FOR MANY OUTSIDE OF PARK SLOPE.

Mr. Reiser was recently working with a community group in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and at one point, the Coop slipped into the conversation. People at the site were skeptical of the idea of shopping there, saying membership was not feasible because of travel and cost concerns for many outside of Park Slope, Mr. Reiser said.

“I don’t know if that’s going to be a challenge” for more interest in the Coop, he said. “I think it would be great if the Coop took on providing food [for those in need],” he added.

That idea is central to Mayor Mamdani’s proposals for city-run grocery stores. But, like the Coop, which also aims to provide for people of different income levels, there are practical hurdles. Mr. Mamdani has said the initiative would cost $60 million, and he banks on the city paying for rent, using new revenue from higher corporate and income taxes. His campaign website said that the city would work with neighborhoods on local product sourcing.

The new mayor is adamant that he can provide food for any resident in need.

“Everywhere I go, I hear New Yorkers talking about the outrageous prices of groceries,” Mr. Mamdani told *The New York Times*, then said of his city-run grocery proposal, “This is a bold and workable plan.”

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