

VALENTINES TO THE COOP

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Photographs by Caroline Mardok

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By Leila Darabi

On a snowy day not long before Valentine's Day, the Park Slope Food Coop felt especially intimate, with shoppers' winter coats crowding the aisles and the familiar rhythm of work and shopping carrying on. Shopping at the Coop has always meant taking part in something larger than a simple errand. The Coop asks something of people who walk through its doors. It asks for time, labor, patience, and participation. Working shifts, navigating crowds, and learning the rules require commitment and staying with the Coop over years or decades requires real affection for the place in all its idiosyncratic charm.

That commitment turns everyday shopping into something closer to a relationship. Through shared work and shared responsibility, the Coop becomes a collective love

letter to community, written and rewritten by the people who show up. The *Gazette* spoke with members and staff across ages and experiences about how they found the Coop, how their relationships with it have changed, and what keeps them coming back. What follows is a collection of member Valentines:

THE THRILL OF TRYING SOMETHING NEW

Maura Hallisey has been a member for almost two years and works stocking produce. She joined after hearing about the Coop from friends.

“I had a lot of friends that were members, and they always talked it up,” she said.



Maura Hallisey

What keeps her excited is the constant possibility of discovery. “I love just finding new things to try. I was reading the makrut limes [label],” she said, pointing to the produce shelf. “I’d never heard of that, and I was like, oh, that sounds fun to try.”

Makrut limes are also sometimes called kaffir or Thai limes.

Hallisey values both the range of ingredients and the people she works alongside. “Everybody’s very friendly and nice,” she said. “The shift coordinators have always been lovely to work with.”

RELIABILITY AND SMALL RITUALS

Erica Heinz joined the Coop about 15 years ago, after moving closer to the store.

“I finally moved down to Prospect Heights, and I was like, oh my God, I can join,” she said.

What she values most is consistency. “It’s very reliable,” she said. “It’s the one place you feel like you can get whatever you want.”



Erica Heinz

She also trusts the sourcing: “It’s all researched and good, good for you,” she said.

She also enjoys the social rituals that emerge around shopping. “My favorite is splitting watermelons in the summer,” she said. “Calling down and finding a watermelon partner.”

She recently discovered a favorite treat. “They’re these ginger biscuits, and they have black pepper in them,” she said. “They’re really buttery and really gingery.”

MISSING THE OLD MAGIC, STILL SHOWING UP

Mark worked his Coop shift for 45 years before earning his retirement. His relationship with the Coop reflects decades of memory and routine.

“In the last couple of years, I’m a little bit disappointed,” he said. “It’s gotten very commercial.”

Even with that complaint, Mark’s loyalty remains. “It’s a neighborhood place,” he said. “I like neighborhood hopping. I don’t like big places.”

He shops several times a week, deciding what to cook based on the day. “Today I woke up and I want to do a stir fry,” he said. “So, I’m buying for stir fry.”

FALLING IN LOVE THROUGH SOMEONE ELSE

Katie Deray joined the Coop through her partner and has been a member for under a year.

“Through love,” she said. “It was my partner who had been a part of it, and he wanted me to have better life habits.”



Katie Deray

She works flex shifts and enjoys the pace and energy of the work. “I love the mentality,” she said. “That fast-paced customer service level.”

She gravitates toward condiments and specialty items. “Banana ketchup is something that I can’t find other places, but I can find here,” she said.

She appreciates being able to take chances. “You have to be able to discover or take a chance on something,” she said. “Here, you can take a little bit more of a gamble.”

A LIFE SHAPED IN THE AISLES

Ulisse Narici-Porter is 21 and has been coming to the Coop since childhood. His par-

ents began shopping here in 2004, and he has had his own membership card for about five years. Although members under 22 are not required to work shifts, he chose to take on his own membership and responsibilities.

“I have a bunch of memories of coming in as a little baby and sitting on the chair here,” he said, indicating the seat of his shopping cart. “Watching my mom and dad go around shopping, asking for cookies.”



Ulisse Narici-Porter

Some tastes have stayed the same. “I really like the apples,” he said. “When I went off to college and got apples from regular supermarkets, they just weren’t as good.”

He also feels attached to the space itself. “We’re a huge Coop,” he said. “But we’re so tightly packed into this little place. It doesn’t look like a store where that many people shop. It’s very near and dear to my heart.”

On the day of the conversation, he was shopping for a surprise party for his father, who had just become a citizen after 35 years in the country. He mentioned picking up beer, crackers, and cheese to mark the occasion.

ACTS OF SERVICE AS A LOVE LANGUAGE

Marlen Tapia Jimenez is a receiving coordinator who became a Coop member before joining the staff.

“I came with a big pride of becoming a member,” she said. “It took me about two months to get the orientation.”



Marlen Tapia Jimenez

That pride grew once she joined the staff. “It just expanded that feeling,” she said.

She described the work as something done for everyone. “When we stock something,

it's for you," she said. "Five minutes later, you find what you need."

For Marlen, the Coop feels personal. "It's doing this thing for ourselves," she said. "It's like being in your own kitchen."

SEEING THE STORE FROM THE CHECKOUT LINE

Barbara Lee joined the Coop in 2015, after being diagnosed with cancer and encouraged by friends to change how she ate.

"My friends said, you got to start eating better," she said. "They said, join the Coop."



Barbara Lee

She works office shifts and sometimes checkout. “I thought I was going to be scared to death to do checkout,” Barbara said. “But I love it.”

Checkout gives her a view of the store’s variety. “I get fixed on certain things,” she said. “Then somebody comes up with all this different stuff, and it’s like, oh, I didn’t know that was there. I gotta try that.”

That day, she was buying soap, body butter, and snacks. “Who’s going to treat you better than yourself?” she said.

LAUGHING AT OURSELVES

Sue Ragheb learned about the Coop through an article before moving to the neighborhood.

“It was that *New Yorker* article kind of mocking the culture of the Coop,” she said, referring to a piece by Coop member Alexandra Schwartz. “I thought it was really funny.”



Suzi Ragheb

Ragheb has been a member for about three-and-a-half years and appreciates the humor built into the place. “I think the PA system being open to everyone is hilarious,” she said.

One announcement stood out. “Someone got on there once being concerned about a chihuahua that seemed stressed out,” she said.

She also enjoys the *Gazette*. “The letters to the editor are very entertaining,” she said.

THE CHAOS OF THE BULK AISLE

Mike Zappitello joined the Coop in 2019 and is drawn to its “kookiness and weird

vibe.”

“The crowdedness of the bulk aisle,” he said. “That aisle always cracks me up.”



Mike Zappitello

He works early morning produce loading shifts. “You find out what the nice new produce is every day,” he said.

He recently had a memorable moment. “I had a blackberry a week ago that was really, really good,” he said.

A SHIFT THAT LIVES ON IN MEMORY

Colin Hooker-Haring joined the Coop through a coworker and was drawn in by his love of cooking.

Before the pandemic, he worked a cleaning shift that no longer exists. “It was one of the most fun jobs ever,” he said. “We would go through every corner of the building.”



Colin Hooker-Haring

He valued the continuity. “It was the same people four times a year,” he said. “You’d be like, how you doing this season? I haven’t seen you in so long.”

Now, he works stocking shifts. “I just schedule it whenever I can,” he said.

WHY THE LOVE ENDURES

Taken together, these conversations show many ways of loving the Park Slope Food Coop. That love manifests in habit and memory, in labor and care, and in the willing-

ness to keep showing up for a place that asks for something in return—a beautiful equilibrium of give and take.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients on Instagram (@persian_ish).