

THE COOP MAKING IT THROUGH COVID

October 5, 2021



By Travis Hartman

In the spring of 2020, after the city-wide shutdown, Coop members stood patiently, six feet apart, snaking around the block, waiting for their turn to enter the Coop. Members would often wait for over an hour, with short lines only occurring during poor

weather or sheer luck.

Some members dealt with it well, while others did not.

LONG LINES

Paul Schickler, a member for 17 years, said, “I remember once the line was all the way down the street, around the corner and halfway down President Street.” It did not deter him from waiting, though, and he carried a chair with him to sit in.

There were also members like Janet Gottlieb who, estimating the length of the line and the amount of time to wait, sometimes concluded it was not worth the wait. “If I saw that the line was down to the corner of President, I wouldn’t wait,” she said.

Many shoppers stayed away altogether due to concerns about long lines or fear of infection. Shopping hours were drastically reduced, and for a short period, around a half day was set aside for senior citizens, to comply with COVID-19 safety protocols. The reduced availability of hours for members increased safety for members and workers alike, and allowed workers to properly maintain the Coop, in a world of ever-evolving information about how to combat the virus.

HUGE DROP IN SALES

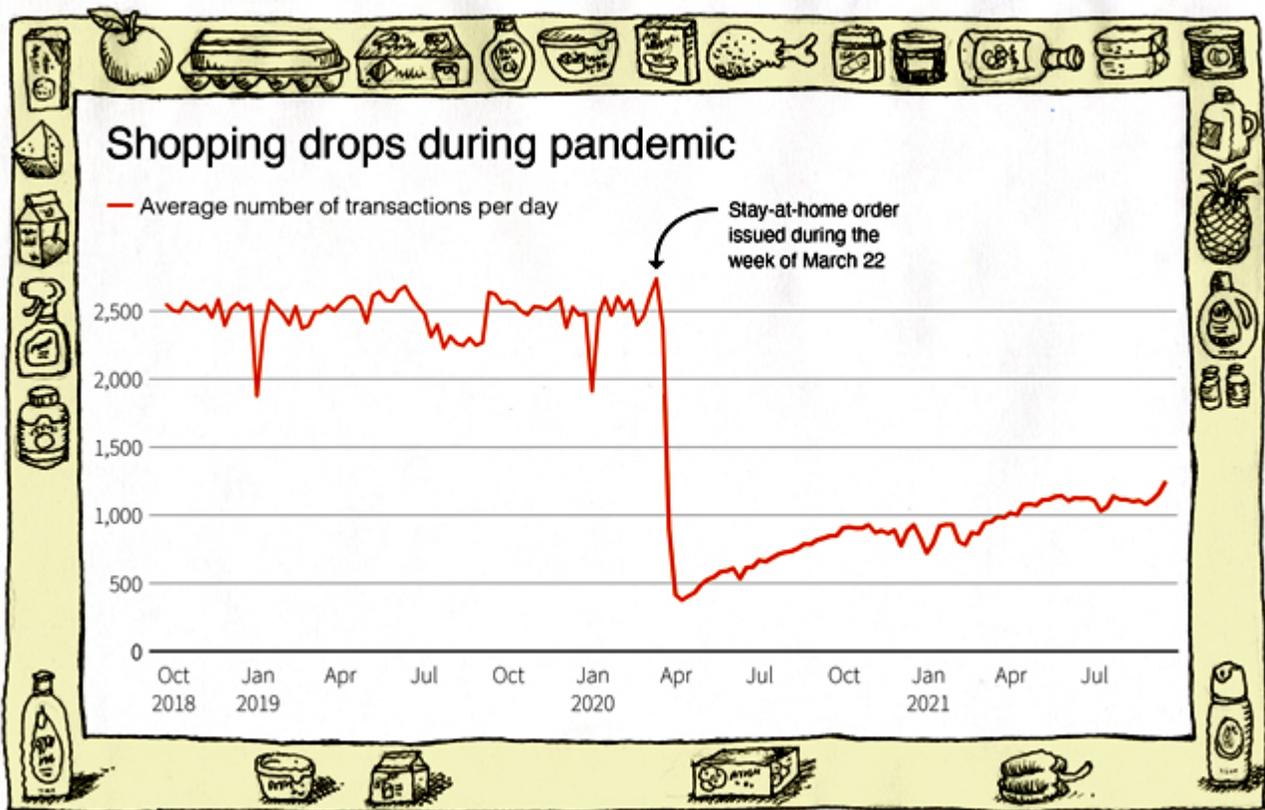


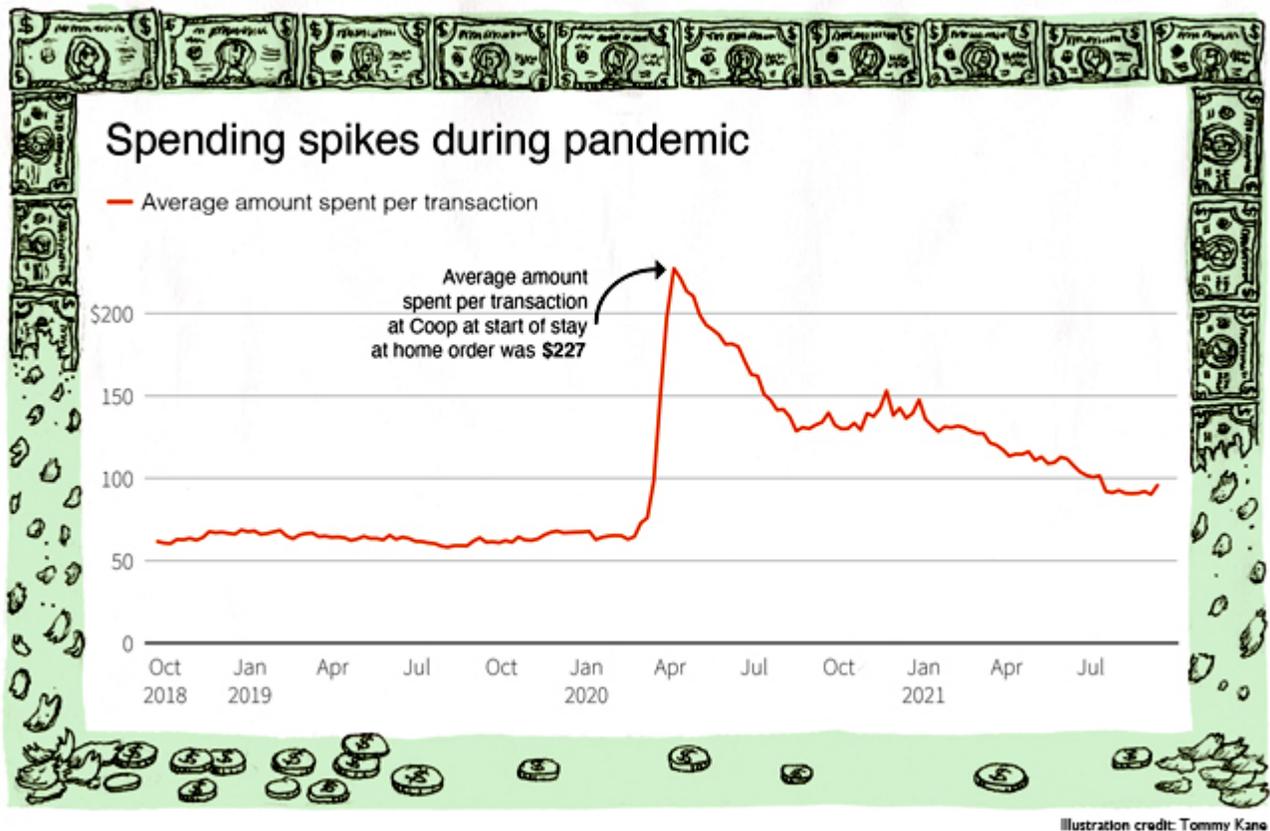
Illustration credit: Tommy Kane

Over the course of the first month of the New York State stay-at-home order, the average number of daily transactions dropped by 87%. It hit a low point of just under that figure, and the number of transactions has been rising steadily ever since, though tempered by lines, shortened shopping hours and a restricted number of members in the Coop at any given time.

Flora Wu said she would often stop by the Coop every day in pre-pandemic times, as she lives very close by, but the long lines kept her away initially, and she found other places to shop for various reasons.

“But I like that there aren’t so many people inside now,” she said, noting that not all the restrictions were without silver linings.

BUYING MORE STUFF



Despite the drastically lower number of transactions, the Coop saw a massive upsurge in the average amount per transaction. So while fewer people were shopping, they were spending much more. This resonates with recollections of stories about hoarding toilet paper and other sundries. Over the first month of the stay-at-home order, the average transaction tripled from \$76 to \$237. Since then, it has been returning to a more normal high, decreasing steadily to around \$95 as of mid-September.

BIG LOSSES

The reduced sales volume and hiring of temporary staff in place of member labor saw the Coop losing around \$100,000 per week in the beginning of the pandemic. In response, the Coop applied for and was granted a \$1.4 million PPP loan, as well as asked members to increase their voluntary investment in the Coop, which amounted to an additional \$800,000. Members also voted for a 4% mark up—which went into effect in August 2020—to improve financial solvency.



Coop members are back working their shifts, but it will take a while for membership to return to pre-pandemic levels.

RECOVERY

In some ways the Coop is still a shadow of its former self, but there are signs that it is recovering in significant ways. Currently, there are 84 shopping hours available in the week, compared to 100 in pre-pandemic time. 54 shoppers are allowed in the store compared to 35 or so when the pandemic began. There have been huge improvements in air filtration at the Coop to keep members safe, because as Coop manager Joe Holtz said, “We’ve taken great measures to make the air safe, and we’re gonna err on the side of keeping members safe.”

Two of the main drains on the Coop’s finances are currently in flux. The temporary pandemic support staff that was hired to work both full-time and part-time at the Coop was released when member labor came back online in mid-July.

“It was crucial that there were members willing and able to help, that was really im-

portant, and I thank them, they helped keep the Coop open—while we figured out how to have a safe return to member labor,” said Holtz.



General Coordinator Joe Holtz expressed his appreciation for the temporary labor that worked through the pandemic allowing the Coop to stay open.

SHRINKING MEMBERSHIP

The other financial drain is Coop membership, which is down an estimated 4,000 members, or around 23%. This equates to 23% of sales evaporating as well. Membership had been held at roughly 17,000 for the past few years, with about 2,200 members leaving each year for normal causes such as moving away. This was never a problem—every time a member left, there was a new one to replace them.

In terms of when we open membership back up at the Coop, and remove the financial drain of paying workers, Holtz said, “I don’t have an exact date; it’s an urgency and it should be as soon as possible, and we’re working towards it,” citing the logistics of balancing the safety of current members while devising a new orientation system. “The desire is there,” he said. “Inventing a new system is not finished.”

Overall, coordinators say the Coop is struggling because it needs more people to shop—and that the Coop needs more members.

HOW CREATIVE CHEFS SUSTAINED COOP WORKERS

October 5, 2021



Above: Chefs Kate Zuckerman (R) and Kim Pistone (L) cooked amazing lunches for up to 90 Coop staffers right through the pandemic.

By Hayley Gorenberg

Chef and Coop member Kate Zuckerman surveyed banana boxes full of food that the Coop would, pre-pandemic, have donated to CHiPS soup kitchen. But it was April 2020; COVID had shuttered the kitchen, and with member labor suspended for the first time ever, the Coop was operating with temporary help and staff. And the staff was hungry.

Familiar with Zuckerman's professional culinary talents after years of her FTOP work creating festive meals celebrating staff milestones, Coop staff members hired her to help sort through the food and figure out how to whip up tasty lunches on a shoestring budget. The assignment lasted through the middle of July.

FLOUR, EGGS AND DENTED CANS

"It was like a puzzle," Zuckerman said. She sorted through boxes that included dented cans, slashed bags of flour and post-dated eggs. There might be a case of something mistakenly delivered that a distributor didn't pick up, or boxes of berries with a berry or two molding in each—not salable, but certainly salvageable.



JAMS AND CAKES

The inspiration flowed. “I made so many jams—blackberry, fig, raspberry. And endless cakes!” Not having a mixer, she poured olive oil from dented cans into a blender and frothed it with sugar, a process that began from necessity that she now uses intentionally—the whipping lightens the resulting dessert. Zuckerman rhapsodized about the fancy herb-infused brown butters on an endcap, and used them with bags of cocoa that were past their date to create a luscious dessert.

Word of sumptuous lunches got around. “When it started, it was, ‘Can you cook a meal for 30 people?’ And then it was 60. And then it was 90, every day.” The job couldn’t be handled alone for long. With numbers growing and emerging COVID regulations for food handling, the lunch squad grew to include another chef, Kim Pistone, as well as a helper, to assist with prep for a few hours and wash dishes afterward.

Pistone, a self-taught chef, had ended her own catering business with a well-timed event before joining the Coop lunch squad. “I did a beautiful wedding March 13. It was like a great send-off: ‘OK, I’m done now!’ Every single thing on my resume ended

in March 2020.” She rang up the Coop office and said, “Do you guys need any help, or what?” Her home situation also motivated her to reach out. With her husband and child at home, she said, “I thought somebody’s got to *not* be here. Too many people under one roof 24 hours a day!”

“I threw myself into being at the Coop,” Pistone said. “Physically it was really exhausting. But I think it kept me sane. I didn’t feel stuff other people felt—depressed—because I was working.”



MANY DRESSINGS

“Every day I would do a different vinaigrette. Sriracha lime toasted sesame! Raspberry red wine! I would mix it up so it would complement whatever we were serving,” Pistone said. “I tried to make as much comfort food as I could. It was a lot of sanity for a lot of people, the stability of having a place to go and having lunch and a community

of people you could talk to.” For safety, the Coop had socially distant meals and also built plexiglass carrels. “A lot of people are by themselves,” Pistone remarked. “I think it was a touchpoint for a lot of people to just have a meal with somebody once a day.”

“It was really fun for me,” said Zuckerman. “It was a race to make the best meal I could in an efficient way with whatever ingredients they were getting rid of, spending as little as I could.” No-knead focaccia with long fermentation, “allowing gluten to form and stretch and hold” was a new skill for her. Zuckerman and Pistone used new flours, learned to make egg substitute, baked gluten-free tahini cookies, and made their own cashew milk. They created vegan butter and “tons of things with chickpea flour and polenta,” Zuckerman said. A box of peppers yielded roasted pepper soup. “I made so many vegan soups—because I had to.” The chefs made stock from fennel tops, deteriorated onions and carrots—all boiled for six hours.

LOTS OF COUSCOUS

The food available was a daily surprise, including, at one point, two 50-pound bags of Israeli couscous! “I didn’t spend too much time at home thinking or stressing about it,” said Zuckerman. “I would just come in and see what was there and make something. It was always tasty and delicious. It was nice to be governed by what was there and what equipment we had, and just show up and know you were going to cook for eight or ten hours.”

INSPIRATION FROM MEXICO AND INDIA

They made custards with past-dated cream; Mexican lasagna with tortillas; curry and other Indian-inspired recipes, including a variation of saag paneer that substituted braised escarole and chard. There were lots of pasta, pesto, dips and sauces; along with fruit, fennel and lots of mushroom barley soup.



CURRIES AND COBBLERS

“Kate and Kim were the most amazing chefs ever,” said 23-year Coop veteran Alexandra Hodgson MacDonnell, who came to work as a temp, and is now a Membership Coordinator on staff. “I saw them cooking with food that was maybe not salable but perfectly good for cooking, and turning it into curries, an absolute delight. When I came to lunch I would see something I hadn’t used. In particular, they loved watermelon radish. I found everything to be so inspiring; it was amazing. Some days they would go the whole nine yards and make dessert. We’d come up and there would be a blueberry cobbler.”

UP ON THE ROOF

MacDonnell observed that many temporary Coop workers came to work because they lived alone and felt isolated, especially the case for artists and restaurateurs “completely out of work.” In contrast, MacDonnell shares her home with her husband and four sons, all of whom were working online. Working twenty-seven hours per week doing check-out at the Coop was “a little bit of an outlet.” (Though she hastens to add, “Don’t get me wrong! It was a lovely, great time to regroup with my teens and young adults!”) At the same time, she enjoyed taking an occasional rooftop break with a Coop member she thinks she’d never have met otherwise—over an excellent lunch.



Photos by Kim Otstona, Kate Zuckerman, and Yonk Ohadi

THE LUNCH BILL

The Coop staff went up to 205 employees at one point during the pandemic hiring period, and there wasn’t enough space to even store the staff lunches, let alone have

each person use the kitchen. Hiring a chef was the solution. According to Coordinators, it cost \$4,000 a week to feed the staff and that expense lasted for 65 weeks—and included ordering from restaurants occasionally. Coordinators also say it was important to have a plan like this for safety reasons: The staff members could easily grab a boxed lunch, then go off and eat on their own, since during the pandemic, staff members were encouraged not to eat together.

Check out the recipes: <http://www.sweetcyclebrooklyn.com/recipes-1>

HOW ABOUT THEM APPLES?

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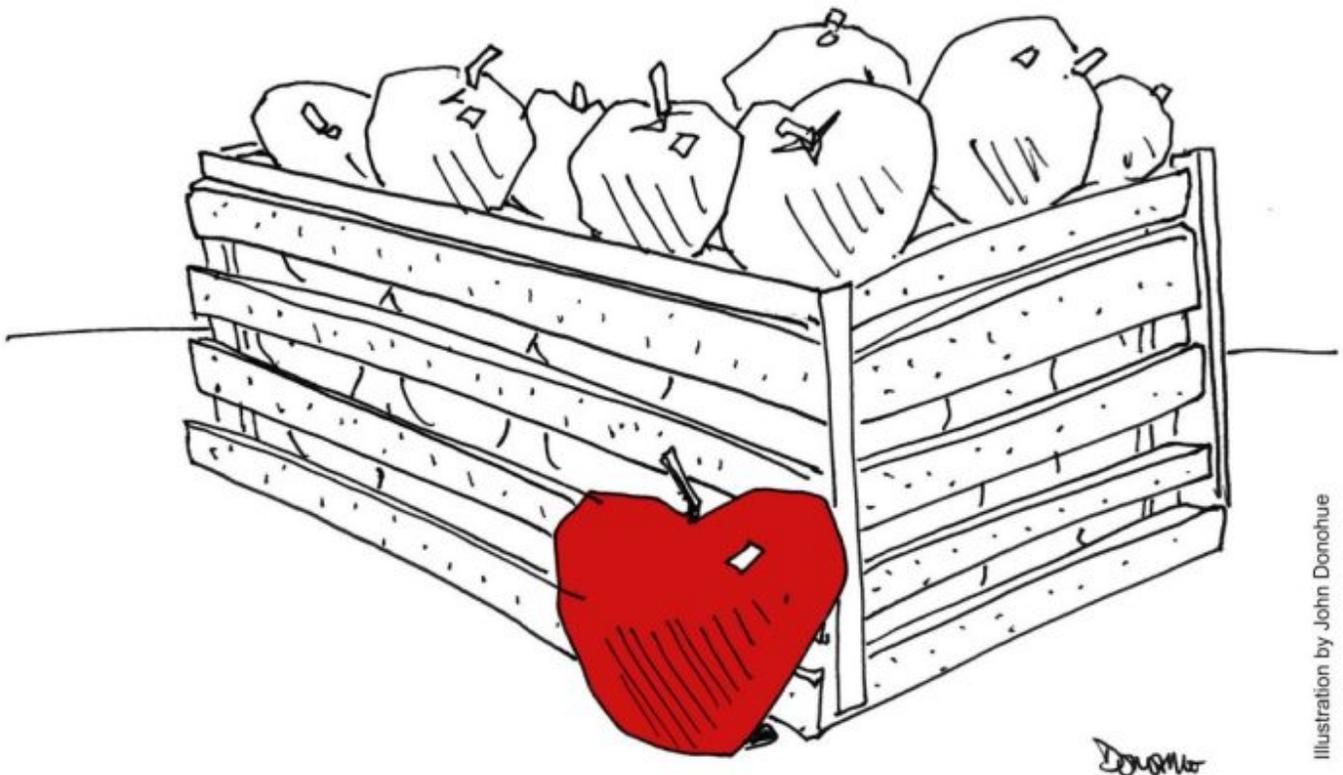


Illustration by John Donohue

By Marisa Bowe

The Coop is bursting with delectable autumn apples. Get ready to nerd out on an encyclopedic survey, from centuries-old heirlooms to present-day, patented and trademarked blockbusters.



Matisse Neal filling up the Coop's numerous apple bins

BEARS HELPED MAKE APPLES SWEET

The domestic apple is native to Kazakhstan, where the primary ancestor of most cultivated apples still grows wild. It was too sour for humans to eat. Bears are thought to be responsible for selecting (and spreading) the biggest, sweetest fruit. This resulted in apples that humans liked, which were probably domesticated as early as the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution.

An “heirloom” is an apple that was cultivated before WWII and the start of large-scale commercial farming. The Coop gets some of its most appealing heirlooms from Scott Farm in Vermont. Simon Renault, the farm’s general manager, points out that without human intervention, we wouldn’t have any of this variety. “An apple will never reproduce true to seed,” he explains. “They need to get pollinated by a different tree. So the apple will never give you the exact same variety. Grafting a variety you like onto rootstock—that’s the only way you can reproduce [it].”

APPLE HISTORY 101

“That’s the fascinating part about heirlooms,” he continues. “The apples we have today pleased somebody, somewhere, way back in the history of humanity. One day there’s a guy who walked by a hedgerow, grabbed an apple, took a bite and was like, ‘Oh my God, this tastes like pear. I bet you this would make a great sauce.’”

Just as Renault describes, the Gravenstein apple tree was discovered in 1669 in Denmark. Or was it Italy? Or Germany? Wherever it was and whoever discovered it, they knew what they were doing. The Gravenstein is renowned for its creamy, juicy flesh and distinctive, well-balanced sweet and tart flavors with a touch of tang.

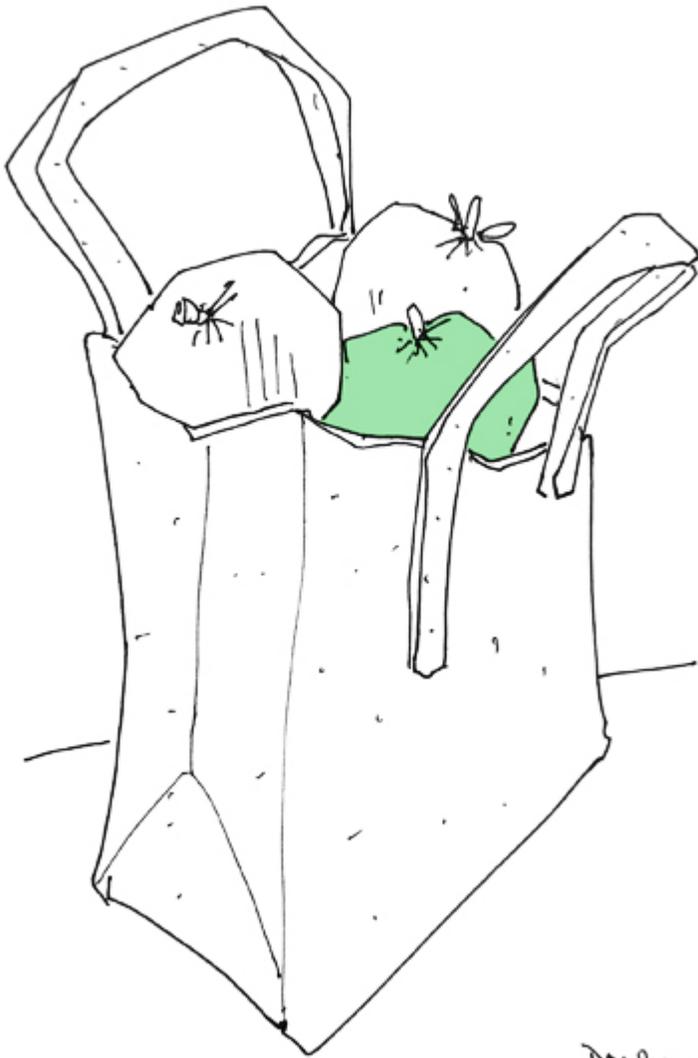


Illustration credit: John Donohue

Donohue

MORE APPLE "SPECIES"

The Reine de Reinettes, known as a dessert apple, also has a convoluted history. It became known in France, Holland and England around 1770 and was called something different in each place. It tastes as good by any of its names, with juicy, subtly crunchy flesh and rich, complex flavor with lush notes of citrus and tropical fruit.

The Lamb Abbey Pearmain apple is named after the place where Mary Malcomb discovered it in 1804, growing on a tree in her backyard garden in Kent, southeast of London. She was awarded a medal for it in 1819 by the Horticultural Society of London. Its firm flesh is intensely flavored with a good sweet/tart balance and pineapple notes.

John McIntosh bought a farm in Ontario in 1811 and discovered apple saplings with especially good fruit. He transplanted them to his garden, and only one survived—to become the parent of every soft, juicy, sweet/tart/spicy McIntosh you've eaten.

Maria Ann "Granny" Smith discovered the apple that bears her name. A midwife and orchardist, the British-born Australian transplant decided to cultivate an apple tree she'd noticed by a creek on her farm in 1868. She gained posthumous fame when it began to become widely grown at the end of the century.

The Golden Supreme was discovered in 1890 in West Virginia—or was it Idaho in 1960? Its soft but crisp flesh is mellow and sweet with a lighter, less complex echo of the Golden Delicious's honey and pear notes.

Cortlands were developed at Cornell University in 1899. Sweet and juicy with a hint of tartness, they're great for fruit salads because they're slow to brown.

Fujis aren't named for the mountain in Japan, but Fujisaki, the town where they were developed in the 1930s. The crisp, firm, juicy flesh has one of the highest sugar contents of any popular apple, and their taste confirms that. Their flavor brings to mind fresh-pressed apple juice.

The Gala was developed the same decade, in New Zealand. Its crisp, soft, juicy flesh is mild and very sweet.

The beautiful Pink Pearl was developed in 1944 in California. Crisp and juicy, it has stunning rosy-pink, tart-sweet flesh.

The Empire was half-discovered, half-bred at Cornell in 1945. It's firm, crisp and juicy, with a tart flavor, and doesn't bruise easily.

The Ginger Gold was discovered among the surviving trees of a Virginia orchard after Hurricane Camille in 1969. It has crisp, fine-textured flesh that's sweet with mildly

tart overtones, and is slow to brown.

Sweet Sixteens were developed over 31 years at the University of Minnesota, making its debut in 1978. Its crisp yellow flesh is very sweet, with a distinctive, complex, rich flavor that's sweet and spicy with vanilla, cherry, anise, bourbon and nutty notes.

The Honeycrisp was developed at the University of Minnesota over 31 years and released in 1991. The blockbuster fruit earned the university ten million bucks before its patent expired. With a juicy, snappy-crisp—but not hard—texture and a syrupy, slightly tart sweetness, it “changed the whole game,” said Fred Wilklow, the owner of Wilklow Orchards, another Coop supplier.

The Zestar!® (yes, the annoying exclamation is part of its trademarked name) was released in 1999 by the University of Minnesota. Crisp and light, its unique flavor is sweet and tangy with brown sugar notes.

SweeTango®, another patented University of Minnesota apple, has its own website. Released in 2006, its crunchy, juicy flesh is sweet and tart, with notes of citrus, honey, spice and maybe some brown sugar.

Sweeties, developed in New Zealand, were introduced in 2012. The firm, crisp, juicy and somewhat coarse pale yellow flesh is mild, very sweet and subtly spicy.

WINTER SQUASH: FALL BEAUTY QUEENS

October 5, 2021



By Marisa Bowe

Unloading U-boats of September cucumbers, Coop member Timo Vollbrecht from Lefferts Gardens says he's looking forward to cold weather gourds: "The squash is coming! I'm looking forward to squash time for sure."

Some of them have already arrived. Working alongside Timo, Dylan Nagler from Park Slope adds, "We do have some acorn squash and other small squash coming in."



It's that time of year again—the Coop's loaded with pumpkins!

FEASTS FOR ELEPHANTINE BEASTS

Native to the Americas, the wild ancestors of our squashes were snacks for mastodons. As *Scientific American* put in a memorable headline, “We Owe Our Pumpkins to Pooping Megafauna.” The precursors of squash were bitter, hard and horrible, so humans began tweaking them at least 10,000 years ago—and haven't stopped since.

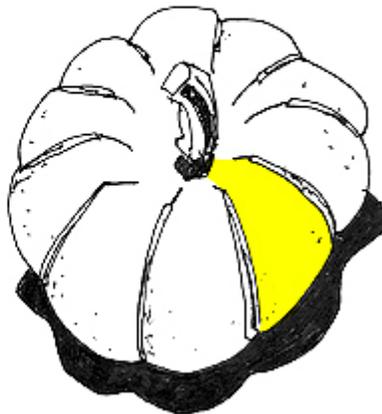
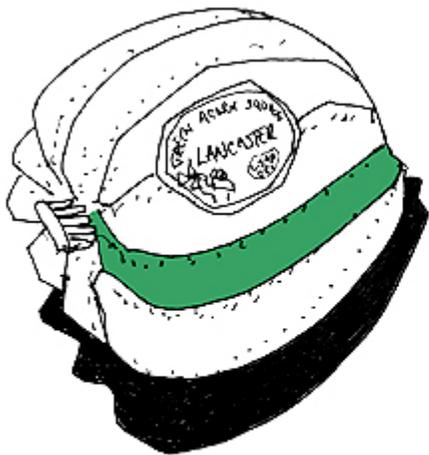
Pumpkins and acorn squash are original gourds; they've been cultivated for thousands of years. You may know what pumpkin tastes like, but be sure to choose the right kind. As produce buyer Cecelia Rembert points out, "Carving pumpkins are bred to have very little flesh. And you'd get very tired trying to carve baking pumpkins."

Both Timo and Dylan are psyched about the imminent arrival of winter squash. "Pumpkins are great once they're in season," Dylan says. "There's a lot you can do with them. Pumpkin pie, pumpkin curry."

"And pumpkin soup," adds Timo.

Acorn squash is mildly sweet and nutty, a bit fibrous and the perfect shape for stuffing.

Spaghetti squash was developed in Manchuria in the 1890s from the kabocha winter squash that Portuguese explorers brought from Brazil to Asia in the 1500s. It's an outlier in a couple of ways: it has a mild, not-sweet flavor, and it bakes into noodle-like strands that are beloved by carb-avoiders.



SWEET SQUASHES

Red kuri and sweet (or “sugar”) dumpling squashes, descendants of the same globe--traveling kabocha, were introduced in Japan in 1933 and 1976, respectively. Red kuri has edible skin and smooth, starchy flesh with a distinctive, sweet, chestnut-y flavor. (*Kuri* is Japanese for chestnut.) Sugar dumpling is (no surprise), one of the sweetest squashes, with edible skin and a creamy, smooth texture a lot like a sweet potato.

CORNELL’S ROLE

The delicata was introduced in New York in 1894, and improved in the late 1990s at Cornell University. It has a thin, edible skin and sweet, velvety flesh.

Butternut was developed in Massachusetts in the 1940s. It has a creamy texture with a mildly sweet, nutty and buttery flavor; and butterscotch-y, maple syrup-y notes.

Carnival came along in 1991, developed by a New York plant breeder. It shares most of the butternut squash flavor characteristics but is sweeter and far better looking.

The Coop carries two recent “designer” hybrids. Honeynut hit the market in 2011. It was bred specifically for deliciousness by Cornell plant professors over 30 years, then refined for a couple more with the aid of a star New York chef. It’s essentially a smaller, more concentrated butternut, with a similar nutty flavor and a smooth texture, but it’s sweeter and richer, with edible skin.

The following year, the two collaborators released Robin’s koginut, a squash with a silky, creamy texture, edible skin and a flavor profile with orange and vanilla notes that people rave about.

NEW HIRES SINCE COVID

October 5, 2021

From top: Kamila Nuritova, Gustavo Lopez, Tim Mahoney, Zili Wang and Moussa Thiam. They're all Receiving Coordinators, except Kamila, who works on membership, and Tim, who in addition to receiving, has maintenance and repair responsibilities.

Photos by Zachary Schulman.



• Kamila Nuritova



• Kamila Nuritova



• Gustavo Lopez



• Gustavo Lopez



• Tim Mahoney



• Tim Mahoney



• Zili Wang



Zili Wang



• Moussa Thiam



• Moussa Thiam

AUGUST GENERAL MEETING APPROVES TEMPORARY MARKUP INCREASE

October 5, 2021

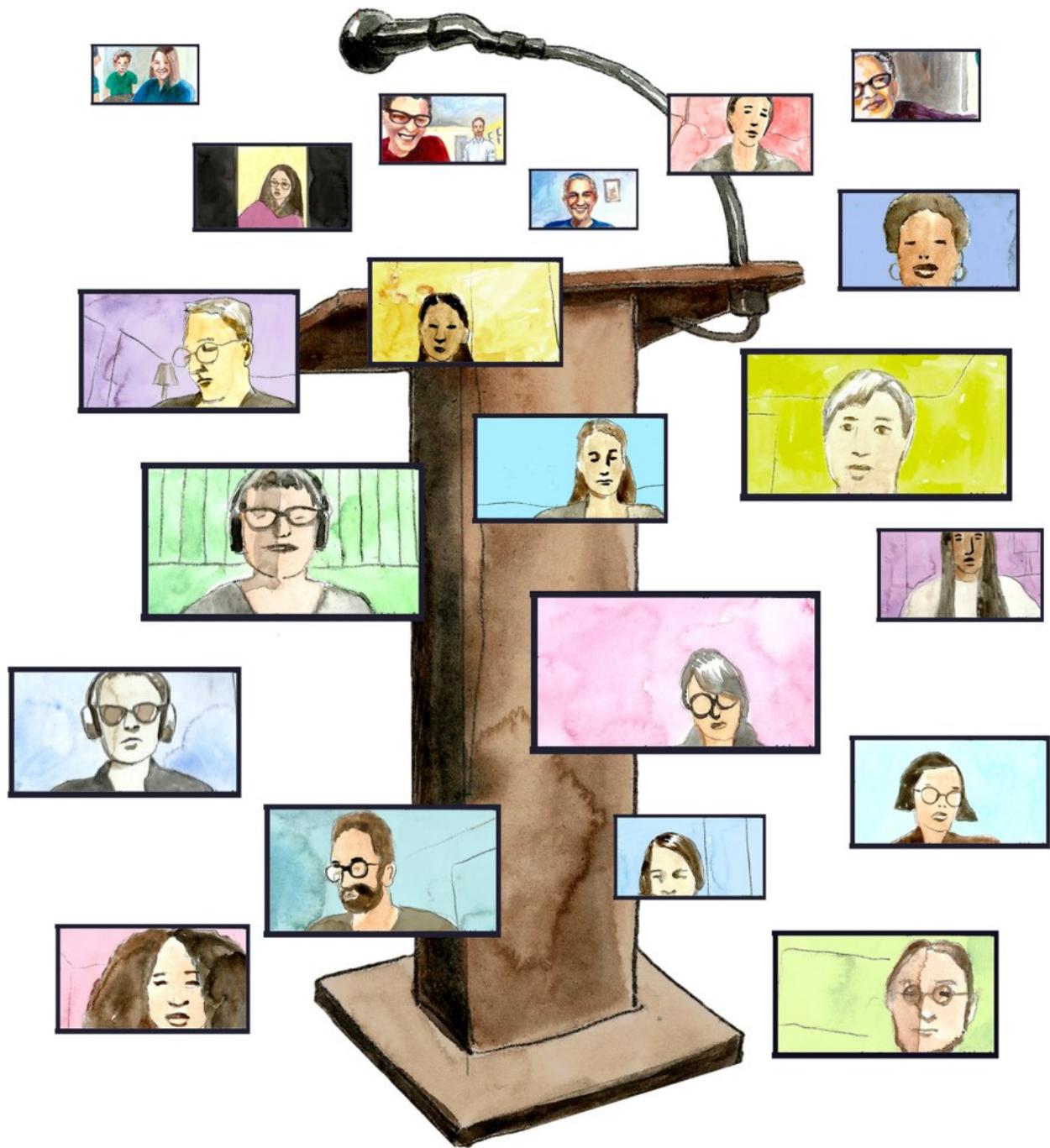


Illustration by Caty Bartholomew
By Christopher Cox

At the fourth General Meeting conducted via video, members voted in favor of a temporary increase in the standard markup applied to all products sold at the Coop, responding to the sharp drop in overall revenue during the pandemic. The meeting, held at 7:15 p.m. on August 25, was attended by 451 member-owners. They voted

368 to 63 to increase the markup from 21 to 25 percent, though individual members will be able to opt out of the price increase.



NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE OLD STONE HOUSE

October 5, 2021



Photograph by Caroline Mardok

By Frank Haberle

Long before there was a Park Slope Food Coop (or a Park Slope neighborhood, or for

that matter, any “Slope” at all) there was the Old Stone House. In 1699, Dutch settlers built a little stone farmhouse by a marsh, on land that had been occupied and used by the Lenape tribe for thousands of years. In August 1776, during the Battle of Long Island, a key battle in the American Revolutionary War, this small building became the focal point of the battle, changing hands between the British and the Americans several times, as the Continental army slipped over the Gowanus. Later, the building became the clubhouse of the original Brooklyn Dodgers; was buried as part of the re-grading of the current neighborhood; and was then reconstructed, along with the surrounding Washington Park, as a WPA project during the 1930s.



CHECKING IN WITH JOE HOLTZ ON COOP LIFELINES

October 5, 2021



Joe Holtz hopes we can find a way to expand the Coop's hours from 77 per week to 112.

Photo Zachary Schulman

By Leila Darabi

Six months into the Covid-19 pandemic, the Coop is working on increasing store hours, allowing more members to shop at a time and other strategies to bring more cash in the door.

General Coordinator Joe Holtz described these efforts in an interview with the Gazette in which he also shared an update on finances, delivery and member labor. "Bringing back member labor is the most important essential element of our Coop. It's the most unique, foundational, spiritual thing about our Coop," said Holtz who is also the Coop's treasurer and co-founder.

JULY GM OVERWHELMINGLY APPROVES BLACK LIVES MATTER STATEMENT

October 5, 2021



Illustration Tommy Kane

“The Park Slope Food Coop unequivocally supports Black lives and the dismantling of all systems that propagate and empower systemic racism #BlackLivesMatter”

Coop Finances, Temporary Markup Strategy, Return to Member Labor Also Explored

By Frank Haberle

Coop members overwhelmingly approved a statement of solidarity and support for the Black Lives Matter movement at the July general meeting after a number of members expressed disappointment that it took so long for the Coop to take a stand on such a heartfelt issue.



GM FEATURES FINANCIALS, FOOD, AND FRICTION OVER BLM STATEMENT

October 5, 2021



Illustration by Maggie Carson
By Hayley Gorenberg

The June 30 GM veered from troubling financials, to a mouthwatering description of what luscious summer produce is on offer, to an online near-uprising over public positioning on Black Lives Matter.

From the outset several hundred attendees learned there would be no open forum or voting, though Zoom polling figured prominently and became the subject of many members' ire.

BLACK SEEDS OF FREEDOM

October 5, 2021



Photograph by Taigi Smith

By Taigi Smith

It was June 18 and after four months of seclusion, I was on my way to tape an interview at the historic Abyssinia Baptist church in Harlem. I had been producing television from my home for the past four months and I was desperate to get out and see the world again.



PROPOSED PSFC STATEMENT ON BLACK LIVES MATTER SUBMITTED BY THE DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY COMMITTEE

October 5, 2021

The Park Slope Food Coop supports the Black Lives Matter movement and a dismantling of all systems that empower and enable systemic racism.



AFTER THE GENERAL MEETING: BLM FOLLOW-UP WITH TOISHA TUCKER

October 5, 2021

Interviewed after the GM, member Toisha Tucker expressed disbelief that the Coop had not spoken up, even after earlier killings of Black New Yorkers like Eric Garner (and many others). Tucker linked food justice, climate justice and racial justice as intertwined and called on the Coop to engage in “reckoning with racism and white supremacy in America.”



WHAT A TIME TO START A JOB: THE PANDEMIC AND THE NEW RECEIVING COORDINATOR

October 5, 2021



Caroline Mardok Photographer

Moussa Thiam Coop coordinator

By Frank Haberle

In the relatively worry-free days of last September, longtime Brooklyn resident and Coop member Moussa Thiam struggled with a worrisome decision: should he abandon a successful but frenetic 25-year career as a Chef, or set aside his lifelong dream of building a successful film production company that created and promoted new films from Africa?

