SECRET SHIFTS, PART II: AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE COOP'S COOKING SQUAD AND VITAMIN SHIFT

September 16, 2025



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By Nikia Dawkins

Co-chair of the Food Class Committee, otherwise known as the Cooking Squad, Mandira Ghai has been preparing for her role at the Coop since she was a child. "I'm from a Punjabi family where we plan from meal to meal," she said, "and my parents are great cooks who taught Indian cooking classes in our home after immigrating to the United States." In fact, if you'd asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she would have said a grocery store checkout clerk. "Anytime we went to the super-

market, my mom would patiently wait while I ‘rescanned’ all of our items on the kitchen floor, imitating the barcode beeps, before putting them away, some partially melted.” Since then, Ghai has worked as a research associate and docent at the Museum of Food and Drink, as a career mentor for the Food Education Fund, and currently serves on the advisory board of the Street Vendor Project. So in 2018, when she saw an ad in the *Linewaiters’ Gazette* about joining the Cooking Squad, she jumped at the opportunity.

PHOTO BY COOKING SQUAD

Co-chair of the Food Class Committee, otherwise known as the Cooking Squad, Mandira Ghai

The Cooking Squad's mission is simple—to create informative and engaging cooking classes for Coop members and nonmembers alike. The virtual classes are free for all, while newly restored in-person classes require a $10 cash-only fee to cover the cost of ingredients for the tasting.

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The squad is particularly interested in reflecting the diversity of the Coop and incorporating seasonal produce and multicultural traditions (like the Sichuan class hosted in honor of Lunar New Year this past January and the second annual Nowruz class hosted in March).

PHOTO BY COOKING SQUAD

Chef Ronna Welsh ran a recent Cooking Squad session.

The classes are designed to be as transformative as they are engaging, and Ghai's work on the squad has changed the way she cooks at home. "I feel much more laid-back and spontaneous," she said, "not fretting too much if I don't have everything on hand, but equipped with more freedom and confidence to substitute and experiment." On top of that, the quality of the Coop's products is so stellar that a very simple preparation is all that's required to create a beautiful and satisfying meal. "So, in some ways," Ghai shared, "it's ironically made me a lazier cook, but it's also opened my eyes to a plethora of previously unknown ingredients. I don't think I'd have considered adding carob molasses or algae oil to my shopping basket before Jeffrey Mason, a personal chef on our squad, highlighted ways to use them on our Instagram account."



Dumplings in Spring Stock was prepared during Ronna Welsh's recent class.

One of the best ways to support the squad is by becoming an instructor yourself, and

professional experience is not required. Home cooks eager to share their signature dishes shouldn't hesitate to reach out. "Anyone in the membership is encouraged to propose an idea. You do not need to be a trained chef to teach a class. Our environment is welcoming, so please don't be intimidated! If you've got enthusiasm for a family recipe and its accompanying traditions, have a dinner party dish everyone requests, went down a sourdough rabbit role or are about to publish a cookbook, we want to hear from you at info@foodcoopcooks.org."



Jeffrey Mason, a personal chef on the squad, recommended ingredients like algae oil and molasses.

The squad's first in-person class since the pandemic was hosted on July 30 by Rebecca Gorena who shared her love of Texas-style breakfast tacos. Its second (and last) in--person class of the year, "Eggplant 101," will be held at 7:30 p.m. on September 24

at the Coop, where guest chef Leila Darabi (who also writes for the *Gazette*!) will teach participants how to make two Persian eggplant dips: kaleh kabob (a vegan dip with walnuts, pomegranate and herbs) and kashk-e bademjan (a vegetarian dip with whey). To register, visit foodcoopcooks.org/rsvp.

To stay up to date on the Food Committee’s classes and openings, please follow them on Instagram.


PHOTO BY COOKING SQUAD

Austin-style Papa Con Huevo breakfast tacos prepared during Rebecca Gorena's class To the average Coop member, the vitamin aisle probably looks a little overwhelming, with so many products, so many categories, and so much fine print, but it's actually an incredibly well-organized machine. "Sometimes when I'm working in the aisle, members will ask me about a product, and they will be absolutely astonished that I can get them to it," said Martha Hoffman, a Receiving Coordinator who supervises the department. "If they have time, I'll show them how the computer has the precise location—not just the aisle but also the column and the shelf number. Ninety-five percent of the time, that information is accurate. Sometimes, members will ask if it's new, but that system has been in place for at least a decade, which is how long I've worked in the aisle."


Multivitamin
Anima PARADE
NATROL KIDS
Melatonin
OLLY.
COLLAGEN
RESIST
PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Martha Hoffman and Julie Tarney reviewing items that need replenishing on Aisle 4’s vitamin shelves.

Although the vitamin shift doesn’t require any prior experience, it does help to have a good eye for detail and a desire to learn the system. “Sometimes it is meticulous work!” Hoffman noted. “For example, all NOW products have very similar packaging, and certain ones are particularly hard to tell apart. Stocking can also be a challenge on a busy day as there is often a U-boat of products in the aisle for the other side of Aisle 4, as well as the checkout line.”

According to Hoffman, the ideal person for this shift is generally interested in vitamins, shops in the aisle regularly, and enjoys a little problem-solving while they figure out the products and learn their proper locations. “It does help to work the shift more than once.” During a typical day, vitamin shift workers will check in orders, stock products, put away back stock and on Sundays, help do inventory. “Once in a while there are special projects like rearranging products, putting up labels and cleaning.”



Danny Lee, on his first day with the vitamin shift, stocking vitamins and supplements that require refrigeration

Although Hoffman has learned a lot about vitamins as a result of her job, she doesn't like to be prescriptive because the main thing she's learned is that no product works the same for everyone. Even different forms of a particular supplement (such as capsules, softgels, liquids or gummies) have varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the person who's taking them.

"On the whole, I don't give advice, just information. Sometimes members will ask what products I use, and I say, 'Whatever samples the companies send!'" Recently, Hoffman found herself on the receiving end of good advice when a member suggested she try something new: "The Herbalist & Alchemist Osteoherb, which we have in Column C, Shelf 9, among the joint/skin/nails support products. I really like it! It's an

herbal formula, more subtle than some other approaches, but I really feel it has helped. The packaging says it promotes healthy bone structure. I don't know for sure that it's doing that for me, but it's improving my nails and skin."

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Hoffman believes that one of the best parts of the vitamin shift is learning about new products, and even though she doesn't like to give advice, she did want to draw attention to a great skincare line. "One last thing I will mention are the Peak Scents and Super Salve products," she said, "most of which we've moved from the back endcap to Aisle 4, Column C, Shelf 5." "They're a nice small-batch product from a small company. I just hope people who like those products are finding them in their new location!"

PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Nikia Dawkins is a creative writer and journalist.