CHEAP CROISSANTS BUT LIDL CHARM

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ILLUSTRATION BY FRAN MENESES

GERMANY’S BARGAIN-BASEMENT GROCERY CHAIN LIDL COMES TO PARK SLOPE

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By Anita Bushell

An outpost of the German discount grocery chain Lidl opened to great fanfare on 5th Avenue on December 10. Shoppers lined up at dawn, and raced home to post their reviews on Reddit: “I was surprised at how big the store was, and also how much space they dedicated to anti-theft at the entrance/exit, since that means less space for things to sell,” shared one early visitor. Another Redditor posted a nostalgic lament for the grocery store that had once occupied Lidl’s location: “That Key Food had the best music,” they recalled. “Well-curated, 50s and 60s classics and deeper cuts played just a little louder than it needed to be.”

In addition to basic goods at affordable prices (most famously, a $.49 freshly-baked croissant) and hard to find European products, Lidl is known for its rotating stock of specialty goods that won’t break the bank—think of it as a Teutonic Trader Joe’s. Or, given its small footprint and sterile aesthetic, think of it as a downgrade from the beloved and spacious Key Food that was demolished in 2021 to make way for the 184-unit housing development that encompasses Lidl.

Lidl was born in 1973 in Ludwigshafen, Germany. The original store had three employees and some 500 products. By the 1990s, the shop had grown into an international brand, with outposts in France and the UK. 2015 saw the establishment of its U.S. headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. The chain now operates 190 stores on the east coast of the U.S.

Its arrival in Park Slope comes at a time when households are getting more budget-conscious, and on the lookout for deals such as “seasonal apples” (no name mentioned) at $1.39/lb. or a package of Lidl Preferred Selection cooked shrimp for the low price of $6.99. But the Park Slope newcomer is going to have to work harder if it wants to lure shoppers away from the Coop or fill the shoes of Key Food, whose vast parking lot attracted shoppers from other neighborhoods.

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In addition to being accessible to car owners across the borough, Key Food was known for the classic soft rock that pumped through the loudspeakers and a marvelous management team. In the era before Fresh Direct, this reporter remembers entering the store after days home with a sick child. "Where've you been?" one of the managers asked. When he learned the answer, he responded, "What's wrong with you? You could've picked up the phone and called. We deliver!"

Lidl, on the other hand, is comparatively small and utilitarian. With its gray tones, the street-level entrance has all the charm of a parking garage. The foyer is not warm or inviting, and there are no decorations or classic supermarket advertising posters. An escalator delivers a shopper from the lobby to the lower level, where she is greeted by a glass wall, adding to a sense of entrapment (one presumes the purpose of this barrier is to prevent shoplifting). After cashing out at a self-checkout station—no fun Coop conversations to be had here—said shopper exits through an opening in the aforementioned glass wall.

The store itself feels like a glorified mini-mart, with country music playing and offerings relying on marketing features such as "Monday Must-Haves," "Wednesday Weekly Deals," and "Weekend Super Sales." A myLidl app offers even more exclusive deals.

Should the Coop be nervous about the new kid on the block? Not a bit. To begin with, Lidl has a narrow selection of basic products. It's the kind of place where you might run in to get a carton of eggs or a container or milk, not whole cloves, which I tried and failed to find last week in the limited spice section. The Coop, of course, has an excellent spice section, with everything from Adobo to Zatar, and, all told, lower prices than I've seen anywhere in Brooklyn.

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But there are bargains to be found at Lidl: a bag of mandarins costs $2.78, less than half of the $6.44 a similar bunch costs at the Coop. A loaf of Lidl multi-grain bread is priced at $2.59, whereas a sliced loaf of Arnold's Multi-Grain bread costs $5.03 at the Coop. Croissants are priced at $.49. "Our famous 49-cent butter croissants are flown in from Europe and baked fresh daily in our stores," trumpets a company press release. "We dare you to find a flakier French pastry this side of the Atlantic!"

My family and I took them up on their challenge and embarked on a taste test, comparing the Coop's Colson bakery croissants available for $2.11 with the version from Lidl. The Coop's treat won hands down, with a taller, flakier, and more subtle croissant. Lidl's iteration was smaller, heavier, and left a slightly fatty aftertaste.


PHOTO BY ANITA BUSHELL

A Colson Bakery croissant from the Coop, compared with Lidl’s.
Depending on where you live, the newcomer is an okay option for last-minute dashes to grab basics. But if you’re looking for a sense of community—or croissants that are better than technically edible—don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer and native New Yorker. She is the author of One Way to Whitefish *(2024), and* Object Essays: A Collection *(2022). Her work appears in multiple publications online.*