

# WHERE DOES THE COOP'S FOOD ACTUALLY COME FROM?

April 22, 2025



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*By Dan Bergsagel*

You may think you know where the Coop's Brazil nuts and French couscous come from. But what about the English and Persian cucumbers? Or the Japanese eggplant and Jerusalem artichokes?

If you understand the origin of food and its journey from farms and other producers to the Coop's aisles, you may be able to better grasp the potential impact of tariffs during this tumultuous economic period.

Leila Darabi's insightful article from December 2024 outlined some of the potential

overall impacts that the Trump administration's tariffs could have on the agricultural sector and, consequently, prices at the Coop. Here's a further exploration of tariffs and the Coop, based on an examination of the origins of the products lining the Coop's aisles.

## **BUYING STRATEGY**

The Coop seeks out food using two complementary aims: to source the best and to source locally. This approach is clearest with fresh produce.

"We try to source the best representation of the item," explained Cecelia Rembert, the Coop's fruit buyer. But buyers also try to prioritize sourcing from producers who are local, which the Coop defines as being within a 500-mile radius—a one-day drive—of Brooklyn. Using local suppliers ensures products are fresh and supports the regional economy.

Of course, not all produce can be bought locally.

"The local growing season is from May to September or October. During the season a lot of the food comes locally from the North East," Rembert said. "Outside of the local growing season, a lot of our produce comes from California and Mexico. Certain items are never grown in the United States, so we are always sourcing them from afar. Pineapples always come from Costa Rica. Bananas always come from Ecuador. Avocados come from Mexico almost all year round."

## **FOOD ORIGINS**

What's more, even mapping the origins of the Coop's food is not easy.

"A lot of the data depends on what information is recorded when the food is received. Often we're more interested in getting it on the shelf and selling it than extra paperwork," said Ken Macdonald, a Receiving Coordinator who is involved in IT at the Coop.

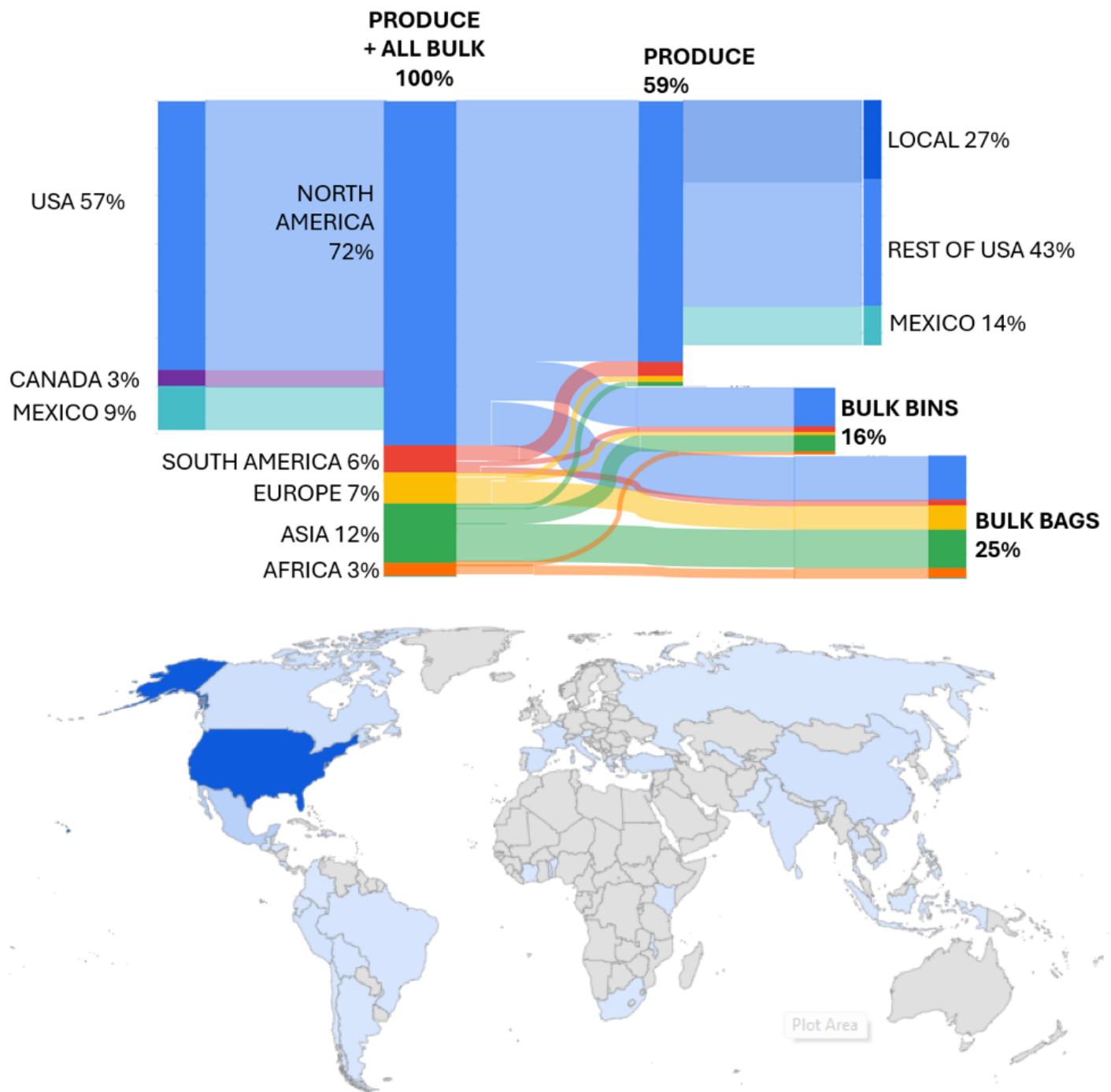
Yet Macdonald provides a glimmer of hope for data enthusiasts: “We are in the middle of a big shift to a new database system right now, so probably in a year or two we will have more access to origin information.”

While not all origin data is currently accessible, the Coop does record and publish weekly information on the origin of produce as well as occasional updates on the origin of bulk items, both in bins and in bags. This does not provide information on many items on our shelves, but it does enable us to generate a snapshot of where we currently source the food placed in the aisles on the far right as one enters the Coop.

Produce and bulk items sourced from North America make up 72 percent of the total, with U.S.-grown food accounting for 57 percent of the total, Mexican-grown for 9 percent, and Canadian-grown for 3 percent. All other countries individually contribute less than 3 percent.

Even though we are not currently in the local growing season, 27 percent of our produce items are sourced within a 500-mile radius, while 92 percent of our produce comes from North America. Some current locally grown produce include famous New York apples and hardy root vegetables like beets, potatoes, turnips and celeriac. Some items are even sourced from within a 5-mile radius, such as Brooklyn-grown Gotham Greens salad and basil.

The Coop’s reliance on other countries and regions increases for bulk items, with only 58 percent of our bulk bin items and 36 percent of our bulk bagged items coming from North America. Additionally, 25 percent of our bulk binned items and 31 percent of our bulk bagged items come from Asia, while 20 percent of our bulk bagged items come from Europe.



The data presented here is based on the variety of items on sale, not on the volume of each item of food sold. Two Coop produce staples skew these statistics significantly when the quantities sold are considered instead of the variety. Rembert estimates that around \$13 million worth of produce is sold at the Coop each year, including \$500,000 of bananas and \$750,000 of avocados. These foods—both sourced almost exclusively from outside the US—together account for over 10% of produce sales by volume.

## THE TARIFFS TODAY

Most of our produce and bulk items are sourced within the U.S., but certainly not all of them. Does this leave the Coop open to price volatility caused by tariffs?

Since President Trump has taken office, there has been significant confusion and instability associated with his tariff policies. Has there been any change in the Coop's food supply? "We haven't heard anything from our distributors," Rembert explained. "The produce business is pretty matter-of-fact. People just do their thing. The market will reflect the supply or the demand, but nothing has changed yet."

It is tempting to try and anticipate food distribution disruption based on prior experience. Does the COVID-19 pandemic offer any lessons?

For Rembert, the banana supply was an interesting case study in supply chain dynamics. "We get our bananas from Equal Exchange—a small cooperative importer. When there was high demand for cargo ships during the pandemic, as a small distributor, they were often bumped. So we had some trouble getting bananas."

Rembert added that "the tariffs are different as there isn't really any supply chain disruption—things are just going to cost more. We're not going to do anything different. The price will go up, and we'll continue to apply the same markup. That might affect member purchasing, and we may see that demand goes down."

The recent headlines have all been about the impact of tariffs on exporting Kentucky bourbon and on importing European wine. Is it only a matter of time before they come for our fabled cheese case? Rembert, again: "It will be interesting to see what kind of impact this trade war—if it continues as a trade war for years—will have on reshaping what the Coop carries and what members are buying."

And finally, for the trivia fans: Our Brazil nuts and French couscous come from Brazil and France, but the English cucumbers are Canadian, the Persian cucumbers are Do-

minican, the Japanese eggplant are Honduran and the Jerusalem artichokes are American.

*Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.*

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## THE COOP'S FIRST 50 YEARS: HERE ARE 10 GREAT THINGS ABOUT THE PSFC

April 22, 2025



*By Liora Fishman*

The Coop is approaching its 50-year anniversary. It's hard to believe that the Coop has remained an institution within Brooklyn for five decades, weathering all of the changes—global, economic, and local—that have come at us.

As a relatively new member, I've learned to love the Coop for all of its eccentricities. And eccentricities abound: I remember my first visit, looking aimlessly for eggs in the dairy section, only to find them next to the tofu, beside spices and racks of beer. In the swirl of Sunday shoppers, I shuffled into a line that I soon realized was Express—which I did not qualify for. As I weaved through the crowd, toward the regular line, I picked up a hyaluronic eye mask and thought: *They sell that here?*

Beginner's confusion aside, the Coop has brought many great things into my life: I've run into old friends with whom I've reconnected, have discovered some of my favorite snacks (the Hudson Harvest Cinnamon Applesauce) and learned that there are more kinds of cheeses than I'd ever imagined.

There are many more reasons to love the Coop, and while I'd love to list 50 things that make the Coop great, for brevity's sake, I'll keep it to 10:





1. **The “Next Member” sign:** Yes, *that* sign. As fickle as it may be, the flashing sign has become an endearing greeter, beckoning me inside as I hastily fish around my tote bag for my membership card. When lines are long and the weather is cold, I keep my eyes on the sign, knowing that the closer those flashing lights, the closer I am to the calming chaos of the Coop.
2. **The music:** I am someone who often gets stressed out by grocery shopping and, ad-



mittedly, the Coop is not a place that quells that anxiety—especially on its busier days. Yet, about 10 minutes into my shopping trip, I find myself scrolling through my grocery list on my phone, tapping my foot to the beat of a song that’s comforting, upbeat and nostalgic all at once. Carole King and Donna Summer are two of my favorite artists to shop to at the Coop.



3. **The bulk aisle:** Sure, other grocery stores have bulk aisles, but I’ve never seen one as thoroughly cared for, and with such diverse offerings, as the Coop’s. When I pass all the different kinds of rice, plus a multitude of other items, I inevitably leave with an additional five products that weren’t on my list. The figs (with stems) and Valrhona chocolates are often the culprits.



4. **The dogs outside the Coop entrance:** Perhaps this one is just as polarizing as the “Next Member” sign, but I love meeting dogs on my way in and out of the Coop. They’re often unbelievably well-behaved, patiently waiting for their owners. I love my dog, but she simply could never.
5. **Limited-time items:** Whenever I find my way to the shelves with seasonal or limited-time offerings, I find myself whipping out my phone to see what I could make



with an ingredient I've never heard of or a shape of pasta I've never seen. The section is often the source of inspiration for my Sunday night dinner.



6. **The plants:** Speaking of limited-time items, I'm a sucker for plants and seeds and just about anything garden related—and there's no better time for a gardening aficionado to be at the Coop than early spring, when the product aisle is blooming with



plants and seeds. Even though my small apartment does not have room for more plants, I know that more will still find their way into my living room this spring from the plant selection at the Coop.

7. **The Linewaiters' Gazette:** At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, I think the very existence of the *Gazette* is a testament to the Coop being so much more than a simple grocery store. One glance through the *Gazette* and you'll see how much the staff and members care about the Coop and the community around it. In a culture of abundant apathy, it's heartening to be a part of a community that, put simply, *cares*.



8. **Shifts:** At first I found the concept of working shifts daunting as well as exciting. But I've come to appreciate the personal connection created between the Coop and the community within and surrounding it, which is established after working even one shift. Plus, there is truly something for everyone: An extrovert may prefer check-out, where they can converse about tonight's dinner recipes and new products. An introvert may prefer to put their headphones in and stock the produce aisle. What-

ever you fancy, there's a shift that can cater to that.

9. **Committees:** The Coop offers so many opportunities for involvement, and committees are a great way to get started. From the Animal Welfare Committee to the Environmental Committee, there is a place where each and every member can deepen their connection to the Coop by aligning their membership with their values.



10. **“500 Miles to Local”:** Perhaps my favorite thing about the Coop is the continuous assurance that the food we’re sourcing is local. The “500 Miles to Local” policy was one that prompted me to join the Coop in the first place. The Coop’s website says it best: “Buying local ensures two important benefits. The first is the benefit that our members reap: fresh product. The second is the support we give to our regional economy.”



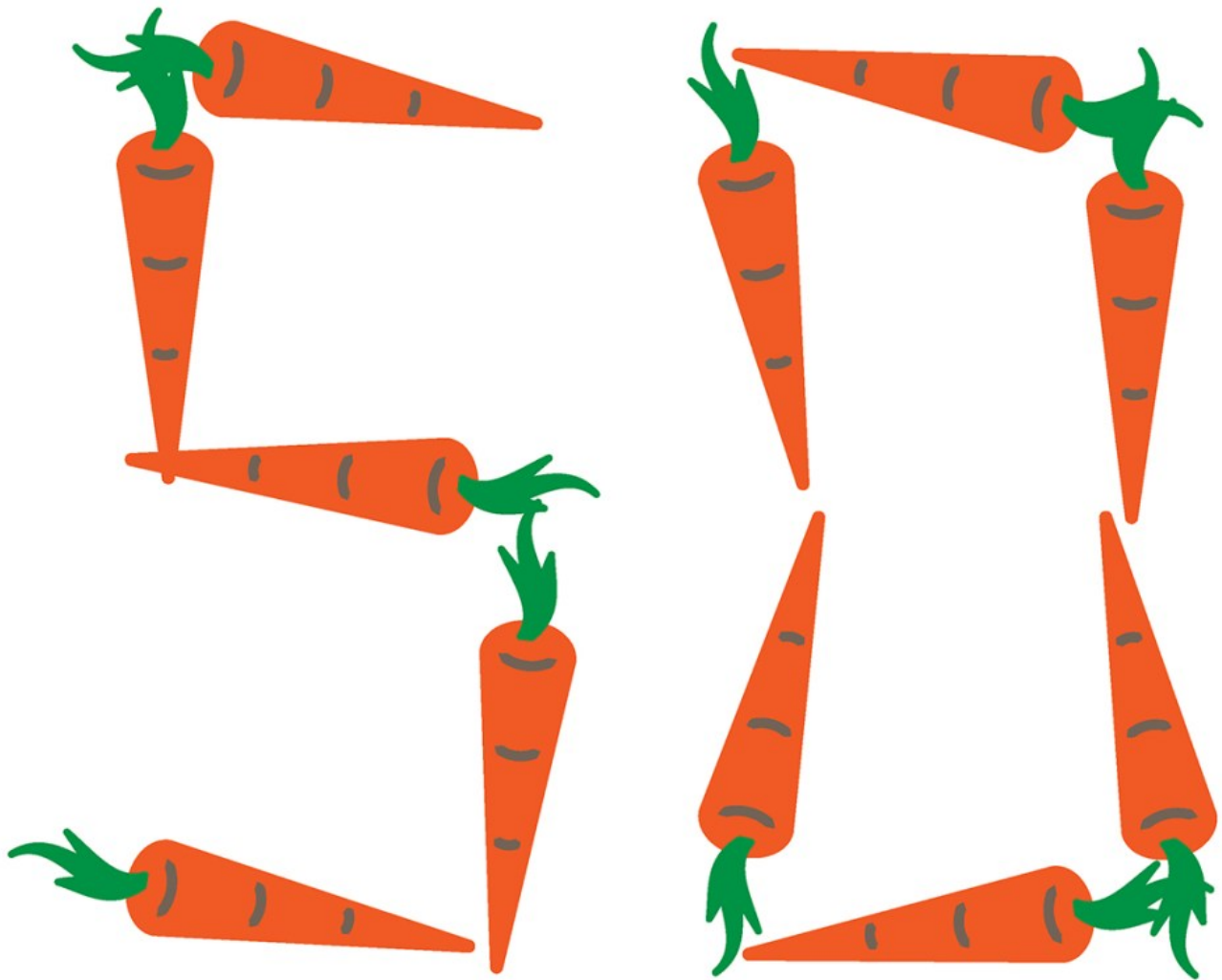


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

In an increasingly globalized economy, we're often taken further and further away from the source of our food. The Coop allows us to connect on a deeper level to the food we're eating, where it's coming from and how it's made. It allows us to shop more sustainably (in the bulk aisle, for example), and to foster a sense of community while we're at it. In 50 years, the Coop has created a thoughtful and invested community, built around a shared love of ethical consumption and—at the end of the day—great food.

*Liora Fishman lives in Prospect Heights, and has a dog named Ollie.*

*Editor's note: This is part of an occasional series marking the Coop's 50th.*

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## COOP BUYERS: SUPPLY CHAIN SUPERHEROES

April 22, 2025



*Meat buyer Margie Lempert is seeing trucking delays and higher prices for everything.*

*By Marisa Bowe*

We've all read about supply chain snarls—including in the last issue of the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. For the Coop's buying team, those snarls have become the new normal.



BULK GOODS AND GROCERIES



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Cheese, bulk and specialty buyer Yuri Weber is encouraging smaller distributors to meet the Coop's shortfall.

"We're just mad scrambling for things," said cheese, bulk and specialty foods buyer, Yuri Weber. "Playing this whack-a-mole game of trying to find who has food, and switching the distributor every week to try to find it. Our stress level is very high."



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Gillian Chi, groceries buyer, sees a shortage of supply across the whole store.

"My job is totally different now," said groceries buyer Gillian Chi. "I used to spend maybe an hour-and-a-half a day ordering. Now I spend four hours a day. There isn't really one particular item [in short supply]," she explained. "The problem for us is that it's across the whole store, and the out-of-stocks keep shifting."





PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

Keeping a huge seller like black beans in stock has been a major challenge.

“We sell a ton of canned black beans . . . All of a sudden I’m not getting any black beans delivered. And then I realize we’re going to run out if I don’t scramble and find a different brand or a different distributor. So I scramble and I find a replacement, and then before I finish dealing with that, it’s pasta. All of a sudden I can’t get La Molisana, a popular brand of pasta. It won’t just be one distributor; it’ll be that nobody has it,” said Chi.

“It’s this waiting game. Do I wait a few more days and see if it comes back in stock, or do I find a substitute? Then I find a substitute, I get a bunch of it in. I put it on the shelf, and then maybe the La Molisana comes back. And then”—with limited storage—“what do you do?” wondered Chi.

This scenario is playing out over dozens of items. “I’ll have a list every day of like 50, 60 different items that are now out of stock,” Chi said. Adding to the difficulties, UNFI, the Coop’s biggest distributor, has been rationing and cutting orders, adding a new word to the buyers’ vocabulary: “smoothing.” Smoothing, said Weber, “is just a euphemism for not sending us what we want.”

“We never used to have limits before,” said Chi. “We could order as much as we wanted,” but now there are limits to the amounts buyers may purchase. “Some days we would order 1,000 cases and get five cases. Some days we would order 1,000 cases and get 300 cases. It was really bad. It was very stressful,” recalled Chi.

It now takes Chi at least twice as long to compile the buyers’ orders each day. “I have to do it on a spreadsheet, add them all up, make sure they don’t go over the case count for that day. And if they do, I have to start making adjustments. It’s very tedious,” she said.



“The reason we order from UNFI,” Weber explained, “is that they’re huge. We sell a ridiculous amount of food for the size of the store that we are.” When the smoothing started, he said, “we were kind of scrambling to find replacements using our pre-existing distributors,” but there’s just one problem. “We clean them out because they’re just not equipped to deal with the kind of volume that we do,” said Weber.

“We’re trying to encourage these more local, smaller distributors to step up their game a little bit,” Weber said. “It’s probably about 40 distributors that we work with that sell cheese and pantry items and things that UNFI doesn’t sell. We had a good meeting with them a couple of weeks ago to try to make that happen. We’re also trying to find places that are kind of close because of the trucking problem.”

“We’re still trying,” he said, “to figure out long term how this is going to work.”

## MEAT

Margie Lempert, meat buyer for the Coop, said some of her meat comes from afar, and she's seeing higher delays than usual because of trucking issues at various distribution sites. She has also noticed that local suppliers are affected, too, with the result being the same for both. "We've gotten cost increases across the board," Lempert said. "Chicken, pork, everything, really."

"We did have price increases from Aberdeen Hill not that long ago," she said. "And we did see some increases from McDonald, who's a local farmer we buy pork and lamb from. I asked Aberdeen about the cost increases, and he said everything has gone up: fuel, insurances, feed supplements, seed, repair parts, etc. The price of piglets has gone up almost 40%. There's increased cost to trucking and butchering, and processing fees, as well."

Hudson Harvest, a Germantown, New York, distributor, sells sausages and other meat products to the Coop. "We just found out they're shutting the processing plant down for two to three weeks because they can't get enough labor in to keep the ball rolling," Lempert said.

In an effort to get members the meat they desire, Lempert has come with a solution: "What I arrived at is ordering much more than we need and asking the distributor to freeze some of it so we can pull it later as a frozen product, and then we'll defrost it. It's not going to affect the quality."

## PRODUCE





PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

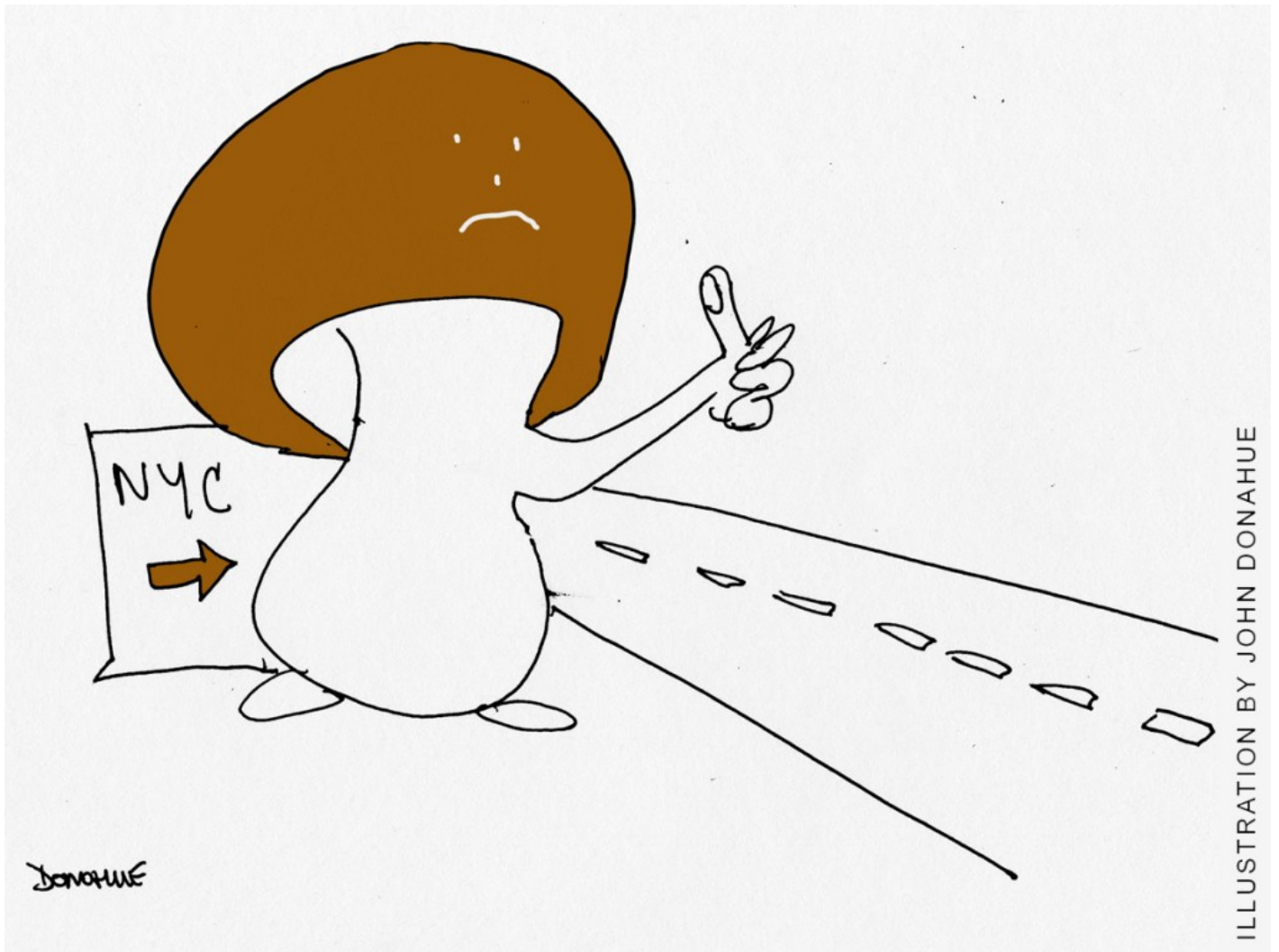
Cecelia Rembert, produce buyer, keeping a close eye on those hard-to-get mushrooms.

“We always scramble somewhat,” said produce buyer Cecelia Rembert, “because produce is always riding waves. Crops fail all the time. That’s just the nature of weather. One of the things that we pride ourselves on is hoping that the Coop membership never notices.”

This year has been different. “Through the summer and fall...from talking to our various suppliers, whether small-scale or large-scale, they had the produce in plenitude,” she said, but “they didn’t have the workers they needed to pack the pallets and drive the trucks.

“Delivery schedules became much more erratic, and there were many more of what we call ‘mispicks’—the wrong item was sent because the person working was new.”

“But,” Rembert said, “we have been recently seeing real genuine produce outages now as well. We get substitutions that we didn’t ask for—like we’d ordered five green kale, and instead we get five celery.”



"The only thing that kind of hurts my heart is not having the creminis," lamented Rembert. "Mushrooms are very hard to get. We tried to order 50 cases of cremini mushrooms, and one of our suppliers wrote back that they're rationing everybody to three cases each. They don't have the people to grow them and pack them. So it's likely we won't have enough creminis for all of our members, which sucks. We really try hard for that not to happen," she said.