

POTLUCK PICNIC!

May 5, 2026



Join the
Park Slope Food Coop

POTLUCK

MORE
INFO.&
RSVP



BIT.LY/
COOP
POTLUCK

PICNIC!

**&
Cookbook Club**

MAY 17, 1-4 PM

Prospect Park

In front of the picnic house

Hosted by the Fun Committee

The Park Slope Food Coop Fun Committee is throwing a Potluck and Cookbook Club on May 17 outside the Picnic House in Prospect Park. We will get together to discuss and eat selected recipes from *Start Here* by Sohla El-Waylly.

RSVP and more information >

FOOD IN COMMUNITY: MEMBERS CONNECT THROUGH MEALS

May 5, 2026



June 3, 2025

By William Doran

Food is at the heart of the Coop's mission. Even in today's divisive world, the need to eat is a commonality we cannot escape as animal beings.

Eating in community is even better. Yet New York City is full of people who eat alone. Even those living—and eating—with partners or children still often mindlessly chomp through meals. Fewer and fewer people seem to truly know their immediate communities, which makes it hard to connect, share burdens, or feel less alone. So I embarked on a mission to find people in our Coop community who are actively connecting through food.

MEMBER RACHEL LUO JOINED THE COOP IN 2018 AND STARTED HOSTING COOK-BOOK DINNERS, WHERE FRIENDS AND STRANGERS COULD SHARE A MEAL.

Rachel Luo joined the Coop in 2018 and has built a thriving network in New York by bringing people together through food. She started hosting cookbook dinners, where friends and strangers could share a meal and forge new connections. She explained, "I pick out a cookbook... something culturally interesting or maybe something I don't know about." She then invites a handful of people to cook items from some of the book's recipes and enjoy them together.



Coop member Rachel Luo hosts cookbook dinners. Photograph by Michael Berman. Picks have included *My America* by Kwame Onwuachi, *Bethlehem* by Fadi Kattan, and *Chinese Enough* by Kristina Cho. In Cho's book, a chapter titled "It Takes A Village" highlights communal recipes prepared with others as a way of bonding. Luo added, "I made dumplings with my parents when I was little, but I grew up in Houston in predominantly White spaces." She recalled, "I wasn't getting a lot of exposure to other people who were Chinese American. Food was the way that I started to understand pieces of that identity." After a recent dinner, Luo gave guests two little bags of frozen dumplings to take home: one containing her own family's recipe and the other filled with Cho's.

"MY FAMILY IS PUNJABI, AND PLANNING AROUND FOOD AND COMMENSALITY IS IN-

GRAINED IN INDIAN CULTURE,” SAYS MEMBER MANDIRA GHAI.

Luo’s passion for connection extends beyond cookbook dinners, though. After moving into her current building, she lamented that the culture there didn’t embrace socializing. So, she created a text chat group, adding people as she met them in the hallways. She then made some food, sat out in the garden, and invited the neighbors. But she wondered, “What if nobody shows and I’m just sitting out here?” Happily, she managed to wrangle half of the building’s 30 residents. She added, “I met one of my best friends through this garden picnic. She lives in my building.”



Reporter William Doran hosted some members of the Cooking Club for dinner at his apartment. His main course was orzo with fresh peas. Photograph by Michael Berman. Other PSFC members are building community at the Coop. Mandira Ghai, who joined

in 2016, co-chairs the Cooking Squad, which hosts free monthly cooking classes. Growing up, Ghai expressed how her parents really set the stage for a life of community-building through food. “My family is Punjabi, and planning around food and commensality is ingrained in Indian culture.” *Commensality* is defined as sharing a meal at a common table.

IN CHALLENGING TIMES—PERSONAL OR COLLECTIVE—FOOD SERVES A PIVOTAL
ROLE IN CONNECTING PEOPLE.

Her parents, newly emigrated from India, ingeniously taught cooking classes from their home in Pittsburgh to expand their social circle. Ghai continued her parents’ legacy when she joined the Cooking Squad in 2018. She fondly remembered: “It was a dynamic shift with people regularly collaborating to put together an instructive hour in a small space. Our squad had a very respectful and welcoming rapport. We became friends.”



The author slicing cucumbers. Photograph by Michael Berman.

When the pandemic hit, everything changed. In-person classes and member labor ceased. The Coop hired additional staff to keep operating, including chefs to feed everyone. Instead of stewing in individual panic, Ghai wanted to contribute. Cooking was still the answer. In 2020, she volunteered twice to prepare lunch for approximately 60 staff members. Ghai reflected that “cooking provided a different level of gratitude and empathy. I saw the staff’s hustle amidst uncertainty and fear. The way they reshuffled to keep members safe and informed was truly remarkable.”

In challenging times—personal or collective—food serves a pivotal role in connecting people. Before the pandemic, the Coop member and professional chef Ronna Welsh found inspiration and community as she navigated caring for her newborn daughter, who was born with special needs.

Welsh described how life's challenges still brought her back to food: "I had a team of therapists come to my house daily for months, and when we weren't talking about my daughter, we were talking about food." The small community that developed around her daughter's care pushed her to develop a larger community around teaching people how to cook. Welsh continued, "I started to teach when I realized that my work as a chef could extend beyond feeding those who paid for a meal. The therapists made up my very first class."



Other members of the Cooking Club join over Zoom. Photograph by Michael Berman. Welsh eventually opened a cooking school in Sunset Park—Purple Kale Kitchenworks—and wrote a cookbook. She also began hosting community-oriented events out of her professional studio kitchen. Welsh recently connected with a close friend who had been organizing storytelling nights in the Hudson Valley, and hosted a storytelling

night of her own in her kitchen. “The storytelling is wonderful, and the space we provide afterwards for people to talk and laugh (and eat!) is magical. I love how food is integral to the evening, but not the star of the show.”

Last year, Welsh deployed her skills to help the Coop’s Cooking Squad. “Ronna brought a lot of expertise and attention to pulling together the details of the classes,” remarked Jeff Bonar, who co-chairs the squad with Mandira Ghai. The squad now films and broadcasts classes from Welsh’s studio, since they are still hosted virtually.

PATRONIZING NEIGHBORHOOD ESTABLISHMENTS IS QUINTESSENTIAL NEW YORK COMMUNITY BUILDING.

Bonar shared some of his own experiences growing up around food in Los Angeles. “My father owned a Jewish deli. So I grew up around barrels of pickles, learned how to slice lox, and made butter in this big wooden churn.” Today, when he isn’t at the Coop, Bonar finds community close to home in Ridgewood, Queens, where he takes his four-year-old grandson to the local coffee shop. “We’ll show up and they know him. They know what he orders. This is a very New York thing—he knows which coffee shop has which pastry that he likes.”



Left to right: Cooking Club members Ronna Welsh, Michael Venzor, Willam Doran, Elana Sigall. Photograph by Michael Berman.

Patronizing neighborhood establishments is quintessential New York community building. Bonar noted that other parents come up and introduce themselves because they recognize his grandson from daycare. “That blows me away about New York. I know it’s a bunch of neighborhoods and people live locally, but this is such a potent demonstration of that.”

At the Coop, Bonar has been working with Ghai to reignite the cooking classes. They recruited local chef Jeffrey Mason to teach the first virtual class in 2023. Mason recently shared his experience: “I had done lots of shifts at the Coop and wanted to do something a little different, something that I connected with. A previous job as a sous chef included training and teaching new cooks. I really connected with sharing my

knowledge with people who wanted to learn.”



Close-up of peas cooking. Photograph by Michael Berman.

Mason became a community builder himself when he recruited his neighbor and friend, Siavash Haghtalab, to join the Coop the following year. Haghtalab grew up in Tehran surrounded by food traditions. He passionately described cooking as a way to show love. “I think community, food and culture go hand in hand. As humans, this is ingrained in our traditions and cultures. I show love to people by cooking them Persian food.” Food connected these two neighbors and it brought Haghtalab to lead two of the Coop’s most well-attended cooking classes.

As I closed my conversation with Rachel Luo, she really hit the core of what it means to build community in an uncertain world. “I invite a lot of random people to my dinners. It’s kind of intimidating!” she exclaimed. “At the same time, building those con-

nections requires you to be a little bit vulnerable. New York City can be a lonely place. It's important to be able to make it smaller. Connecting really changes that dynamic. We're not just random people living next to each other."

Top image, Left to right: Elana Sigall, Rachel Luo, Ronna Welsh, and William Doran.