

OLIVE OILS AT THE COOP: PRESERVING QUALITY AND FAIR PRICES IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES

October 15, 2024



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON



ILLUSTRATION BY ROD MORRISON

By Jess Powers

October 15, 2024

If you suspect that recent increases in olive oil prices are due to climate change, you are correct. But, happily, the Coop carries many interesting, tasty olive oils at fair price points even with a global market that's in the pits.

The Climate Crisis' Effects on the Olive Oil Market

Southern Europe, in particular, has experienced numerous conditions related to climate change that have limited olive oil production: drought, scorching temperatures, wildfires and flooding. Aging olive trees, which typically can't be shaken by the harvesting machines that resemble Edward Scissorhands and need to be hand picked, produce far less fruit and require additional labor costs. Kevin O'Sullivan, a receiving coordinator for 19 years, purchases the non-specialty olive oils at the Coop from natural foods distributors. He notes that prices are currently 30-50% higher and that some buyers might therefore have "sticker shock."



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Chosen Foods Avocado Oil prices have hardly changed. Mintec, a firm that provides commodity price data and analysis, notes online that an “uptick in production estimates for Spain’s 2023/2024 season” and “beneficial rains in March and April” led to declines in olive oil prices on the commodities market relative to the shortages in the previous years. But they also point out that there are “dwindling [olive] oil reserves” which producers use to blend their oils. Greek olive production, meanwhile, has faced additional burdens due to heat and the olive fruit fly pest,

causing production to drop, sometimes dramatically. And Turkey has extended its olive oil export ban, further limiting supply.



Coop's Olive Oil Team: Britt Henriksson, Yuri Weber, Kevin O'Sullivan

California producers' prices have also gone up. O'Sullivan notes that there are two big companies in the state, California Olive Ranch and Cobram. Like many producers, many of the oils from California Olive Ranch are 90% blends from Argentina and North Africa purchased on the commodities market. They also produce another, California Olive Ranch 100% California Olive Oil, that is made exclusively with California olives, and is described on their website as "complex with floral, grass, and fresh herb notes." It's "quite expensive," says O'Sullivan, at \$35 for one liter. Cobram, meanwhile, didn't sell well and was dropped from the Coop's roster.

IT'S LIKELY THAT CHANGES IN THE WORLD MARKET FOR OLIVE OIL ARE LESS OF AN ISSUE AT THE COOP, WHERE SHOPPERS PAY LESS OF A MARKUP.

While Mintec expresses concerns about consumers choosing alternative oils, including sunflower or rapeseed, due to comparatively high olive oil prices, it's likely that changes in the world market for olive oil are less of an issue at the Coop, where shoppers pay less of a markup. Sales of Chosen Foods avocado oil at the Coop, for example, have remained steady. O'Sullivan notes that a Sicilian olive oil that costs \$25 for a 750ml bottle at the Coop retails for \$45 in nearby shops.



Single producer olive oils are on the endcap opposite the chicken Cheese, Bulk, Coffee and Fancy Foods Buyer Yuri Weber, who has worked at the Coop for 23 years, purchases the four or five brands of single producer olive oils located at the back end cap across from the chicken case with colleague Britt Henriksson, also a receiving coordinator and buyer. Weber agrees that “prices are really going up.” But, he adds, “considering what you’re getting, hand pressed, good product for a little ex-

tra money,” it’s still a very good value.

Specialty Olive Oils at the Coop, Including Mentis Estate, Produced by a Coop Member



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Mentis Estate comes direct from the producer, Anastassios Menti. Spain produces just under half of the world’s olives. Historically, olive trees were planted and cultivated by the Romans; later, Muslims brought their irrigation exper-

tise. Millenary olive trees (those over 1,000 years old) in Catalonia have been formally recognized as a world heritage agricultural site. Olives grow in many of the same regions as wine and different microclimates affect their taste. Spanish olive oils are known for being more yellow in color than Italian versions, which tend to be more green. The former tastes fruity and nutty while the latter is said to have a grassy, herbal profile.

According to General Coordinator Joe Holtz, during the 1980s it was very difficult to find extra virgin olive oil (EVOO). When he noticed a truck delivering the product, however, a sourcing relationship was established. Today, as part of their work to ensure that the Coop carries the best olive oils, Weber and Henriksson meet with distributors, taste oils and learn about the products the Coop sells. Henriksson is even scheduled to travel to Portugal at the end of October to visit olive estates.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

California Ranch Olive Oil is 100% domestically produced

Among the Coop's wide selection of olive oils are several notable brands by smaller producers, including Casa Pareja, a certified organic and biodynamic olive oil producer in southern Spain. Their oil is made from a blend of varieties—Weber describes the flavor as “dynamic, peppery, everything you want from cooking to finishing, and reasonably priced.” It is available in a 750ml bottle and a 3-liter tin. Two others are from Portugal, CARM (Casa Agrícola Roboredo Madeira) and Esporão. CARM also produces

wines in the Douro region. Weber describes CARM as a “great olive oil” and Esporão as “full flavored, round, spicy,” produced on a small farm.

Anastassios Mentis, a Coop member since 2016, is a photographer and olive oil producer who emigrated to Astoria in 1996. An eastern Mediterranean olive farm that his great-grandfather founded and planted in the 1870s used to sell “bulk” olive oil. But a photo shoot with a distributor and a desire to help the local economy after the financial crisis led Mentis to obtain permits to import and bottle the green gold from Greece. He now works with his mother—who is 89 years old and manager of the estate—and is able to cut out the middleman by manufacturing and selling directly to stores and consumers. They also produce a locally hand-harvested sea salt.

Mentis Estate grows Atheniola olives: “In mythology, Athena gave olives from this region, formerly known as Sparta, to the city of Athens,” Mentis explains. Estate labels on olive oils signify that all of the olives are sourced from that specific location. Weber describes Mentis Estate olive oil as “warm and buttery.” Marketing materials describe a “subtle aroma of artichoke” and creaminess. This is a pure, unblended olive oil.

“IN MYTHOLOGY, ATHENA GAVE OLIVES FROM THIS REGION, FORMERLY KNOWN AS SPARTA, TO THE CITY OF ATHENS,” MENTIS EXPLAINS.

Weber notes that there are members who look forward to the annual sale of freshly pressed olive oil in November and December. Organic Tonda Iblea Olio Nuovo from Sicily will be available just before Thanksgiving and last year’s harvest was described by distributors as having “green tomato aroma and fruity flavor.” The freshness of these EVOOs may have added health benefits associated with high-polyphenol (or high-phenolic) oil’s peppery tasting, beneficial compounds with antioxidants and other properties.



Member, Patrick Porter, stocking the olive oil shelves

Bad Actors in the Olive Oil Market

In addition to high prices and supply issues, the olive oil market has been the subject of concerns publicized in a *60 Minutes* episode titled “Agromafia” that aired in 2016. The episode described counterfeit olive oil (diluted with sunflower or canola oil and with added chemical flavorings and coloring) and other food frauds that generate \$16 billion in profits per year.

The Coop decided to source olive oil from California, notes Holtz, because of the “recurring news articles about cheating taking place by some European olive oil purveyors.”

According to Weber, however, the Coop works with “smaller, reputable producers.” He pointed out that the product we get from California is unadulterated, free of pumice, rapeseed and other impurities. It is pure EVOO. Holtz adds that Casa Pareja Miti-

ca is imported by Forever Cheese, a “company [that] has deep ties to many Spanish producers.”

The Coop’s well-established relationships with producers, built on trust, make the Coop’s olive oil selection different — and more reliable — even as climate and market forces continue to challenge this centuries-old industry.

Jess Powers is a former chef who works in emergency management. IG: @foodand-fury.

HOW NEW PRODUCTS FIND A SHELF AT THE COOP

October 15, 2024



By Rahima Nasa

The best place to discover what's new at the Coop is the endcap across from the eggs-and-tofu case. Even when the endcap doesn't boast new products, it usually has seasonal items for holidays—but any day of the year, it's possible to find your next go-to pantry staples. Maybe you find that an item all over your Instagram (such as a certain tinned fish brand) has finally arrived at the Coop. Or perhaps it's something you hadn't even thought about buying but that looks interesting enough, so you plop it in your basket. I've done the latter so many times, I've amassed a treasure trove of these items in my pantry.



Seasonal items, such as different brands of matzos, can also be found on the endcap shelf near the bread section.

I wanted to know more about how the Coop decides what to introduce to our shelves, so I got in touch with one of the Coop's 18 buyers. Gillian Chi has been a buyer at the Coop for nearly 15 years. Responsible for the shelf-stable items, she considers every product suggestion and forwards them to the appropriate buyer. I first encountered Chi through my own misguided product suggestion for a protein bar that had additives that are not allowed for Coop products. (You can find the list of these additives [here](#), which I would urge you to check before making a suggestion.)



The tinned fish items are a delightful display of art in themselves. They can be found on the endcap shelf near the meat section.

Chi notes that there isn't a rigid formula for how buyers approach what to purchase, but affordability, product uniqueness, trade shows, samples and suggestions from members—made via the Member Services page—certainly influence their decisions. “We take risks as buyers... in deciding how much of something to order, even for [one] week because our basement is not that big. We can fit much less than a week's worth of food in our basement,” Chi explained.

Because of the Coop's limited space, buyers treat each shelf like precious real estate and are careful to choose items that members will likely buy. New products are usually purchased in small quantities until buyers can determine how the product does before ordering more.

CHI RECALLS THINKING, “YES, WE'RE DEFINITELY GOING TO TRY THAT. THERE IS NOTHING ELSE LIKE THAT IN THE STORE.”

Though members often submit granola and tomato-sauce suggestions, Chi is reluctant to purchase more of these products since there are already so many options on the shelves. But she is eager to stock unusual products, like the Fila Manilla Ube coconut spread that was recently introduced, and immediately bought up. Chi recalls thinking, “Yes, we’re definitely going to try that. There is nothing else like that in the store.”

My ears perked up because I knew exactly what she was talking about. I picked it up at the Coop a few weeks ago and made coconut ube bread with it. The only other place I would have come across something like this is in a Filipino grocery store in Queens. Fortunately for me, I may be able to make more ube desserts on a whim, because the product did really well, according to Chi, and is likely to return. Products made by smaller brands, however, are trickier to keep stocked because their distributors may underestimate how popular a product will be and then run out, leaving a long gap between when the order is made and the shipment arrives. “They have to create another purchase order. It takes time for that to be shipped to the warehouse, the distributor warehouse, and then to us. So it could be another month before that product comes back,” Chi explained.

When a new product does find a permanent space on the shelves, as my precious ube spread may, it means that something else may have to go to make space. In many cases, it makes the most sense for buyers to discontinue products that are not selling well. But it’s not always that simple because buyers strive to stock products that meet the diverse tastes of all members.

“What I would do is look at a broad category like salsa. We carry a lot of different brands of salsa. And say, okay, which one of those is the slowest seller? I can get rid of that. Or which granola is the slowest seller? Or which cookie?” said Chi.



The many salsas and hot sauces the Coop offers on the endcap shelf near the meat section.

On the other hand, the Coop's buyers sometimes keep products like tamarind paste—one of the slowest sellers in the sauce, salsa and condiments category—on the shelves because it's unique and may be difficult to find in other stores in the neighborhood. Affordability is another big factor in determining what stays on the shelves. Each type of product is usually available at different price points. For example, if there's a brand of pasta that is the lowest seller but it's cheapest, Chi will still keep it on the shelves in order to maintain affordability across the Coop. "Even if we don't sell a ton of it, there are people who are going to come and buy it every time they shop because they know this is the best deal for a pound of pasta." Typically, however, according to Chi, "the affordable items actually sell the most, which is great."

The intentionality with which the Coop's buyers do their job is manifest throughout the store. Chi recalled a shopper paging out a few weeks ago looking for a suggestion for an Asian grocery store nearby. The shopper had a recipe that called for some ingredients they didn't expect to find at the Coop. Another buyer met the shopper in aisle six and found almost every product on the shopper's list with the exception of gochugaru, which was out of stock.



The yummy banana bread found on the endcap shelves in the produce section.

"We don't want people to have to go to other stores to complete their shopping, you know?" Chi added.

Given how carefully the Coop's buyers select our products, the likelihood of finding what we need, and new products to try for the first time, is high.

Rahima Nasa enjoys writing for the Gazette because of all the members she's gotten to meet and because it allows her to learn about how the Coop works. When she's not writing for the Gazette, Rahima likes to experiment with new ingredients and is on a never-ending quest to make the perfect pie crust.

PREPARING FOR THE THANKSGIVING SHOPPING SURGE: A CONVERSATION WITH A COOP BUYER

October 15, 2024



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

By Leila Darabi

While Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is one of the biggest shopping days of the year for most retailers across the country, for Coop staff, it's the week before that

requires intense planning.

“The big picture is we shift from very diversified purchasing, where members are making a variety of meals throughout their week—breakfast, lunch, dinner—to everybody basically making the same meal,” General Coordinator Joe Szladek explained. “That’s basically what happens. Everybody has different ways that they’re used to shopping and cooking, whether it’s pasta or tacos. But then, with Thanksgiving, everyone switches together to the same meal, and that requires a big shift in our workflow in the run-up to the holiday.”

To avoid long lines and cranky shoppers, Coop staff must kick into gear to account for the rigor of a single demanding week followed by a distinct lull.

“What happens on Thanksgiving is that the six- or seven-day run-up to the holiday is very busy. The Friday and Saturday directly after are very slow, as most are recovering from a food coma, but then sales pick up again quickly the following week,” Szladek said. “We all kind of brace ourselves and plan as much as we can.”

Canned Pumpkin

Weekly Sold vs. Supply vs. Unit Sale Price (units)



Jellied Cranberry Sauce

Weekly Sold vs. Supply vs. Unit Sale Price (units)



ILLUSTRATION BY CATY BARTHOLOMEW

PANDEMIC IMPACT

Since 2020, ordering for Thanksgiving has required more trial, error and speculation. Pre-pandemic, the Coop routinely sold more than 1,000 turkeys each Thanksgiving season. Prior to 2020, membership topped out at more than 17,000 members. During the height of COVID-19 lockdowns, that number dipped to around 11,750 members.

"[THANKSGIVING SHOPPING] STARTED TO SHIFT LAST YEAR. THINGS WERE GETTING MORE NORMAL... PEOPLE WERE CELEBRATING IN LARGER GROUPS, AND I THINK THIS YEAR WE ARE WELL ON OUR WAY TO BACK TO HOW PEOPLE USED TO CELEBRATE. WE'RE SEEING PRE-PANDEMIC PATTERNS START TO RETURN."

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK

“The past couple of years were harder to order for than usual,” Szladdek recounted. “Last year, 2021, was a little easier. But 2020 was especially difficult. It was the first Thanksgiving of the COVID era, and though many members certainly wanted turkeys, there were less gatherings because of social distancing. And if there were gatherings, they were smaller and members wanted smaller turkeys, which aren’t always easy to get.”

Today, membership has inched back up to around 14,400, and buyers must approximate purchasing to allow anyone who wants to host a holiday meal to be able to source key ingredients at the Coop.

“That started to shift last year. Things were getting more normal in terms of shopping,” Szladdek said. “People were celebrating in larger groups, and I think this year we are well on our way to back to how people used to celebrate. We’re seeing pre-pandemic patterns start to return.”

While food costs have risen broadly, Szladdek noted that increased prices have not yet impacted Thanksgiving buying. Rising costs have “become a reality of life across the board,” he explained, adding that if members stopped buying specific items, the buyers would listen to the numbers and stop stocking them.



Surveying the pumpkin puree

WHERE TO PUT THE BIRDS

Turkeys present the first operational challenge staff must address. This year, Coop buyers will procure around 900 turkeys, including nearly 800 whole birds plus additional turkey parts.

“Turkeys take up a lot of room, so there’s a challenging operational component to that,” Szladek said. “We have to stagger their arrival times so we can fit them all in our coolers.”

The extra birds begin to arrive about ten days before Thanksgiving, with the majority of sales taking place from the Thursday before Thanksgiving through the following week.

“Ideally our last turkey is sold the morning of Thanksgiving Day,” Szladek said. “We do try to err on the side of having slightly more than we think we’ll need, so that rather than members coming the Wednesday before Thanksgiving to find we’re out of turkeys, we still have options for them. Sometimes that translates into 30-50 extra turkeys left after the holiday, which we’ll often then put on sale.”



Uboats at the ready

SEASONAL STOCKING

Major coordination also goes into stocking for once-per-year surges in demand for Thanksgiving-specific ingredients. In addition to stocking turkeys, sourcing pie, pie shells and the ingredients for homemade pies constitutes a major operation. In reviewing the Coop’s pie deliveries from Wednesday, November 17 to Saturday, November 27, 2021, the store received 1,157 pies. That included 25 varieties from seven vendors, ranging from Four & Twenty Blackbirds to Steve’s Authentic Key Lime Pie.

Flavors included four kinds of pecan (gluten free, brown butter, classic and bourbon) as well as pumpkin, butternut squash and sweet potato pies.

Szladdek pointed out, not surprisingly, that canned pumpkin sales spike each year over this period, as do sales of canned cranberry sauce. In the produce aisle, the buyers plan ahead to make sure bins of brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes and fresh cranberries remain full.



Getting ready for stuffing

STAFFING TO AVOID CHAOS

To prevent long lines, prolonged shopping time and cranky customers, Coop staff also devote significant planning into member-labor staffing for the Thanksgiving rush.

Thanks to the new online Member Services feature on the Coop website, Szladdek not-

ed, allocating member labor for high-volume shopping days has become much easier. Staff add stocking and receiving workslots, as well as additional walker shifts, in anticipation of the rush.

“THESE ARE FOLKS WHO STAND IN FRONT OF THE MEAT CASE AND TALK TO MEMBERS ABOUT TURKEYS.” SZLADEK ELABORATED, “A MEMBER MIGHT SAY, HEY, I NEED A 12-POUND, NOT AN 18-POUND, OF THIS KIND OF BIRD, AND THE TURKEY RUNNER WILL GET IT FROM THE BASEMENT IF WE HAVE IT. THEY ARE TOTALLY KEY TO MAKING SURE WE MOVE AS MANY TURKEYS AS POSSIBLE. SOMETIMES THEY WEAR TURKEY HATS!”

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK

“We’re always analyzing what our needs are. And we can be more nimble now because of the new system. If we feel like, hey, today we were really understaffed for the Thanksgiving rush, we can go ahead and quickly add shifts for the next day and, more often than not, they’ll get filled on short notice. There’s greater flexibility than we’ve ever had with the new Member Services system. It’s very efficient and useful.”

Each year the Coop implements a special seasonal shift: turkey runners.

“These are folks who stand in front of the meat case and talk to members about turkeys.” Szladek elaborated, “A member might say, hey, I need a 12-pound, not an 18-pound, of this kind of bird, and the turkey runner will get it from the basement if we have it. They are totally key to making sure we move as many turkeys as possible. Sometimes they wear turkey hats!”

This limited-time run includes one member in particular who fulfills nearly all of his annual required work shifts during the week leading up to Thanksgiving.

PSA TO MEMBERS: DON'T WAIT TO SHOP

Asked what advice he has to navigate the Thanksgiving rush, Szladek urged members to “Shop early! If it’s November 5, and you know you’re making pumpkin pie or a dessert that needs condensed milk or stuffing, buy the ingredients you need then. If you see it, buy it.”

He clarifies, “It helps smooth out the process for everyone. The more you buy earlier, the less time you and other members will spend shopping during the Coop’s busiest days of the Thanksgiving rush—the Friday through Wednesday before Thanksgiving Day.”

Leila Darabi often posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram; she also cohosts Cringewatchers, a podcast about representations of sexuality on popular TV.

COOP SHOPPERS AND BUYERS FEEL IMPACT OF SURGING FOOD PRICES

October 15, 2024



By Leila Darabi

On a recent Tuesday evening in August, Coop member Sabrina Ramos stood in front of the cereal shelves in aisle seven, comparing her granola options. Any other week she might have made her own, but in 95-degree weather, she had dropped by the Coop to avoid turning on the oven at home. After careful consideration, Ramos selected a favorite variety of Early Bird brand granola, noting that the price, while still high-

er than pre-pandemic, seemed to have dropped from an all-time spike of around \$10 to just over \$8 per bag.

“MY SHOPPING BILL IS RIDICULOUS EVERY TIME I SHOP. I KEEP TRYING TO BE CONSCIOUS TO JUST DO TWO BASKETS, BUT I CAN’T GET OUT OF HERE UNDER \$250 A WEEK.”

COOP MEMBER SABRINA RAMOS

A lifelong Coop member whose parents joined in the 1970s, Ramos now shops for her own family of three and finds herself far more conscious of price tags in the past year. Like many Americans, Ramos has noticed a dramatic spike in food costs recently. The Consumer Price Index Report put out by the US Department of Labor recorded a 10.4 percent increase in overall food costs between June 2021 and June 2022, with more dramatic hikes in specific categories of food.

“My shopping bill is ridiculous every time I shop. I keep trying to be conscious to just do two baskets [instead of a full cart], but I can’t get out of here under \$250 a week,” Ramos said. “When I do come in below \$220, I feel somehow victorious.”

COOP BUYERS SEEK DEALS

Reflected in the ebb and flow of granola prices are a range of national and geopolitical issues, from supply chain interruptions to surging fuel prices to global conflict. As previously reported in the *Gazette*, the Coop buyers are the heroes keeping wholesome, affordable food on the shelves despite these intersecting challenges.

“WHEN THE SUPPLY-CHAIN ISSUES STARTED, IT HIT US RIGHT AWAY. ALL OF A SUDDEN OUR DELIVERY TRUCKS WERE NOT SHOWING UP. IT WAS ACROSS THE

BOARD, AND IT WAS DRAMATIC.”

RECEIVING COORDINATOR GILLIAN CHI

Gillian Chi, the receiving coordinator and buyer for many of the store’s shelf-stable items, recently crunched the numbers for the *Gazette*. They illustrate a startling trend in the costs of household staples:

- Cascadian Farm cereal is up 42%, from \$4.05 to \$5.75 a box
- King Arthur Baking Company flour is up 20%–30%, depending on the size of the bag
- Some varieties of Natural Sea tuna are up as much as 42%
- Bionaturae pasta is up 33%
- Rao’s pasta sauce is up 25%
- Murray’s Chicken is up 25%–30%, depending on the cut
- Slope Farms ground beef is up 12%
- Natural by Nature whole milk half-gallons are up 11%, from \$4.84 to \$5.39
- Grindstone eggs are up 7%
- Cabot unsalted butter is up 19%

A notable outlier, said Chi, are Alderfer’s Omega eggs, the Coop’s top sellers, which dropped by 6% thanks to the sharp negotiation skills of Chi’s colleague, Receiving Coordinator Glorina Phillip.

A number of factors contribute to rising food prices, Chi explained.

“When the supply-chain issues started, it hit us right away,” Chi said. “A few weeks before it was in the news, we were feeling it. All of a sudden our delivery trucks were not showing up. It was across the board, and it was dramatic.”

The scramble to find a steady supply of food meant buyers looked less at the price tags and more at the availability of food staples. Now, with fewer stockouts, Coop buy-

ers are refocusing their attention on negotiating deals.

“The first thing is to compare prices across distributors,” Chi said. “A year ago, I would buy from whoever has [a given product]. Now it’s probably back in stock across three companies.” This availability frees her up to comparison-shop and negotiate discounted prices.

A COOPERATIVE OF COOPERATIVES

To keep costs down, Coop buyers rely on membership in the National Cooperative Grocers (NCG), a relationship that allows member coops across the country to collaborate on bulk purchases and buy into negotiated prices. By representing approximately 160 food coops of various sizes, NCG can bargain and lock in prices with the influence of a large national supermarket chain.

“DOMESTIC CHEESE HAS GONE UP CONSIDERABLY, BECAUSE THE PRICE OF SHIPPING AND MOVING THINGS AROUND FROM POINT A TO POINT B HAS GONE UP, AND THE PRICE OF MILK HAS GONE UP.”

COORDINATING RECEIVER YURI WEBER

The NGC relationship allows the Coop to purchase goods at lower prices through UNFI, a major wholesale distributor and, as previously reported in the *Gazette*, the Coop’s largest shelf-stable food supplier. These relationships help, but have not shielded the Coop from supply-chain stockouts and other price increases.

“NCG negotiates a great price, but UNFI doesn’t always have what we need, and if they don’t we have to find other options,” Coordinating Receiver Yuri Weber said.

Weber is responsible for buying for the bulk aisle, including grains, pulses, rice, nuts

and dried fruit. He also buys the Coop's imported cheeses, a category that was hit hard by Trump administration tariffs in 2019 but has remained fairly stable over the past year. Weber attributes this flat pricing to the strength of the dollar against the euro, which balances out any cost increase.

"Domestic cheese has gone up considerably, because the price of shipping and moving things around from point A to point B has gone up, and the price of milk has gone up," Weber said.

His colleague Lisa Hidem has similarly seen the rising cost of ingredients drive up the price of fresh-baked goods.

"In a lot of the very local stuff, we're seeing price increases. And we try to get bread [from suppliers] as local as we can," Hidem said. "I've seen bread prices go up anywhere from 5 percent to on average at least 15 percent. One went up 45 percent." She attributes the rising cost of bread and pastries to the Coop's supplier's commitment to locally sourced grains and the increased cost of butter, flour and milk.

Both Weber and Hidem noted that suppliers have started to add fuel surcharges as the price of gas has gone up. Makers of prepackaged foods, which Hidem also buys for the store, have seen increased expenses in packaging, driving higher prices. "A lot of [food packaging] is plastic; that's a petroleum product. And we all know the price of gas has gone up."

MEMBERS FEEL THE DIFFERENCE

"I've been amazed by how dramatically prices have risen," Coop member Clara Goetz said. "Not just by 30 or 40 cents, but by very significant amounts. My favorite bread, Runner and Stone buckwheat baguette, was \$3.84 (or something close to that) and is now \$4.49."

A member for 18 years, Goetz said the increased cost has affected her shopping. "In

the past, I would get one if I had bread at home or not. Now I'll pass it up if I don't really need it. Now I hesitate before buying what I consider inessentials. No chocolate-covered almonds, which are now over \$15 a pound. I just can't imagine how people on fixed incomes are managing."

Member Hilda Cohen has also felt the cost increase when shopping for her family of four. "I was just saying this to my kids, I feel like my Coop bill has increased about 20-25 percent," Cohen said. "It does affect the way I shop, but more that I am particularly sensitive to wasting anything, so I am simply getting less and we run out quicker."

FUTURE PREDICTIONS

Coop buyers predict further price increases before the bubble bursts. Citing recent articles on a chickpea shortage, Hidem notes that the premade hummus she buys for the Coop could soon become more expensive.

Weber acknowledges that prices of dried fruits and nuts have remained stable, but that could be because the current supplies may not yet reflect the increased costs of this year's crops. As he updates stock in the store, he anticipates having to pay more.

"I'm super-convinced that we're going to see [more price increases] once the new crop comes in that factors in some of the higher food prices and the shipping," Weber said.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram.

COOP BUYERS: SUPPLY CHAIN SUPERHEROES

October 15, 2024



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

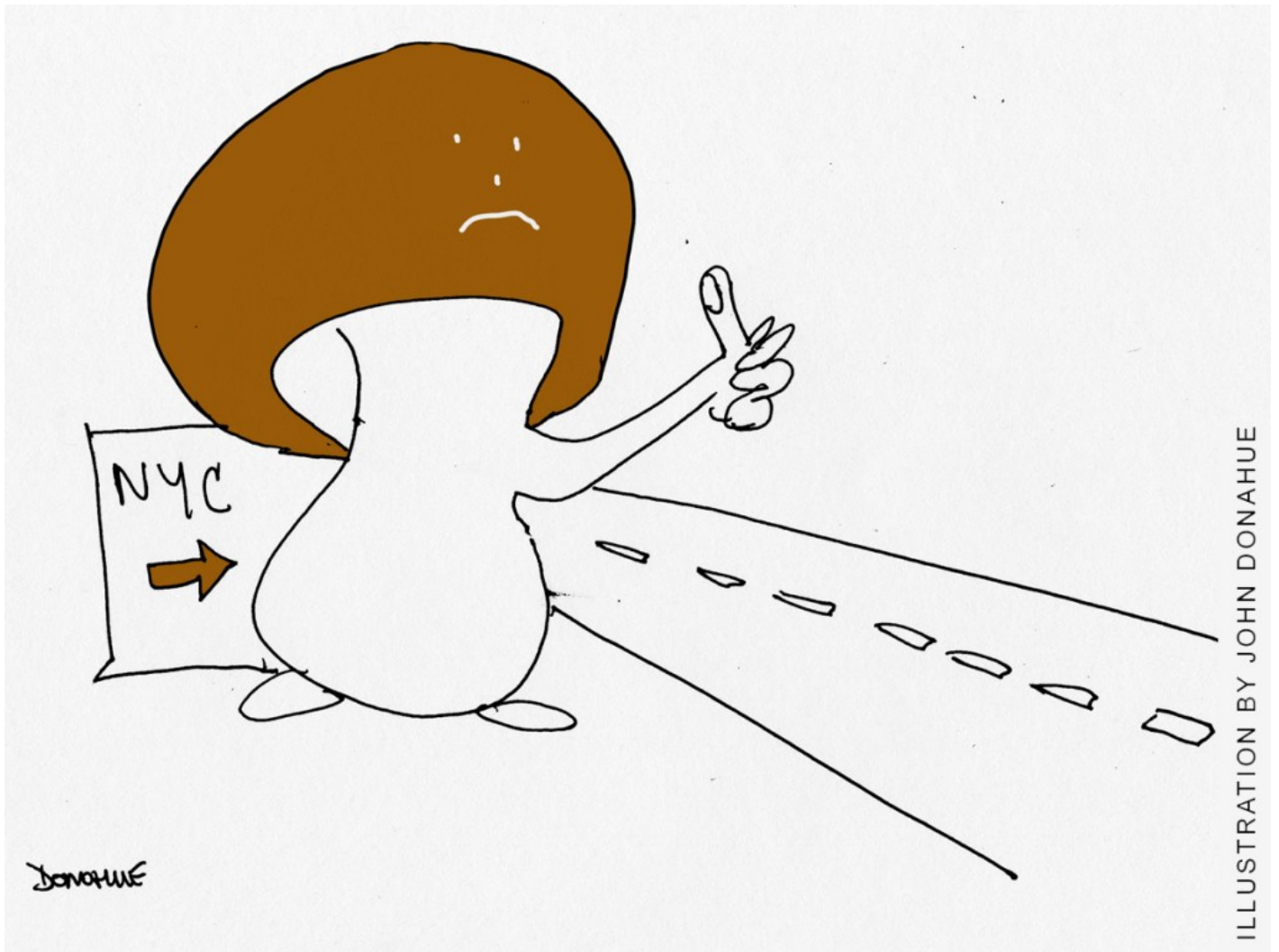
Cecelia Rembert, produce buyer, keeping a close eye on those hard-to-get mushrooms.

“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.