COOP BUYERS: SUPPLY CHAIN SUPERHEROES

December 6, 2021

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 distributers 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."

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."

field DAY organic
Non-BPA Can Lining
Black BEANS
USDA ORGANIC
NON GMO Project VERIFIED
Good Source of Fiber
SERVING SUGGESTION
NET WT. 15 OZ (425g)
field DAY organic
Non-BPA Can Lining
Black BEANS
USDA ORGANIC
NON GMO Project VERIFIED
NET WT. 15 OZ (425g)
Unit Price
$1.27
LB
RETAIL PRICE
$1.19
15 OZ
Field Day Beans Black Organic
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

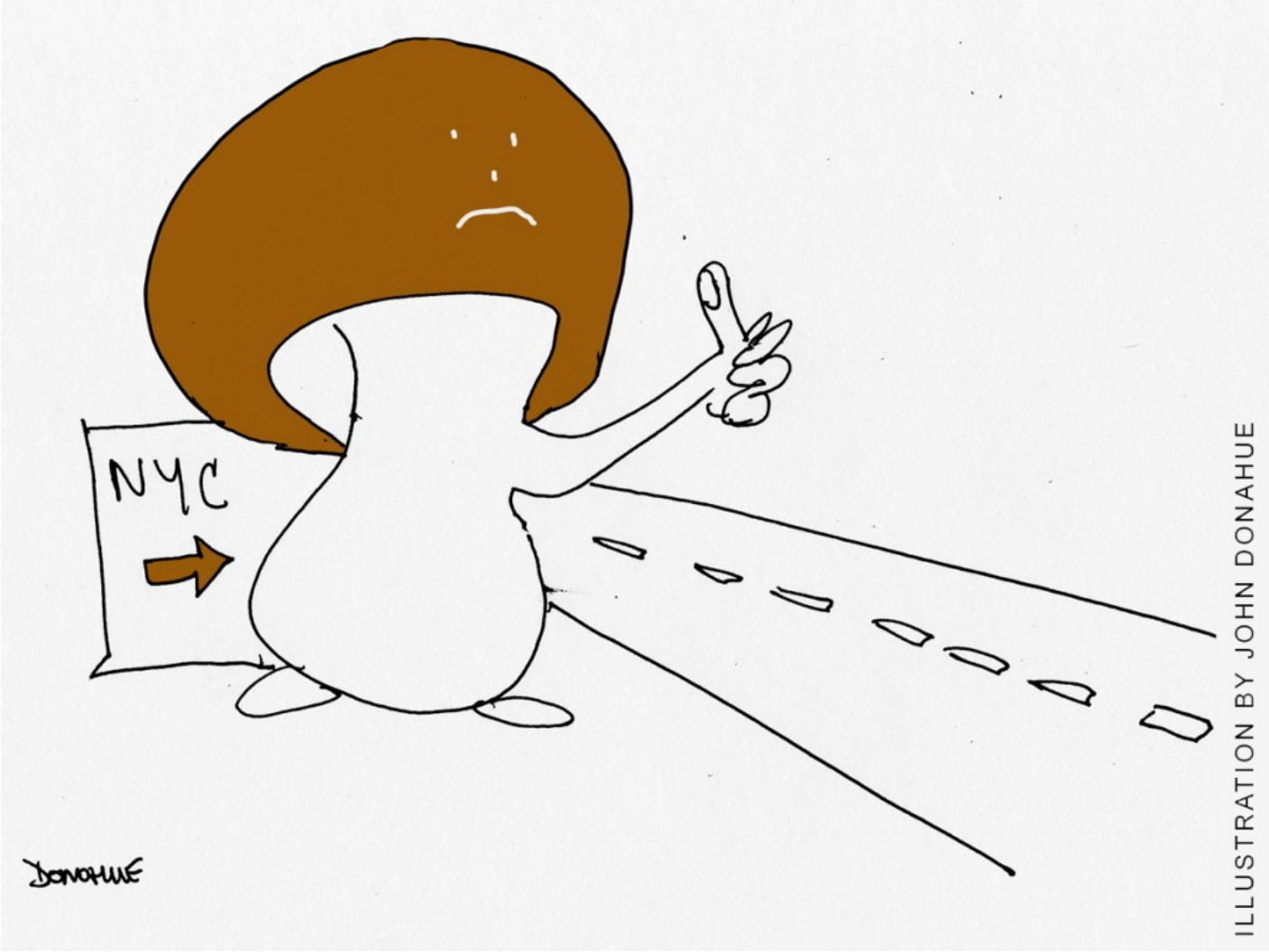
VACUUM COOLED
Fresh
Organic
MUSHROOMS
PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

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.