

# UPHILL BATTLES: THE CHALLENGES OF REPLICATING THE SUCCESS OF THE PSFC

December 9, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

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By Kim Velsey

When the Park Slope Food Coop opened in 1973, it was one of some 3,000 coops started in the United States during that era, according to Anne Meis Knupfer's *Food Coops in America*—part of a movement to bring lower-priced, healthy foods to communities through a noncorporate grocery model. Only a fraction of that number exists today—somewhere closer to 300—but the Park Slope Food Coop has thrived, growing from a small second-floor bulk-buying operation to a 16,000-member cooperative that is the busiest grocery store in the United States by sales per square foot. Members travel from around the city to shop here, while those hoping to join clamor to secure the

limited spots available for new member enrollment.



PHOTOS BY ROD MORRISON

Many food co-ops that have closed their doors.

"COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS ARE PRECIOUS AND THERE WILL BE SOME CHALLENGING INITIAL TIMES. IS IT POSSIBLE? YES. IS IT EASY? NO."

*JOE HOLTZ*

Over the years a number of groups have tried to replicate the Coop's success in other neighborhoods. The density of New York City, combined with the lack of healthy affordable foods in many neighborhoods, makes the coop model an especially attrac-

tive one here. What's more, the Park Slope Food Coop offers not only advice and mentorship to other coops interested in following its model, but also low-interest loans. Even so, most attempts to replicate Park Slope's model here have faltered or fizzled out. The Bay Ridge Food Coop never got beyond the buying-club stage; the South Bronx Food Co-op closed after three years, in 2010; the East New York Food Coop had a similar run; and the Bushwick Food Coop closed after 13 years, hobbled by a fire, Covid and the inability to secure a new affordable space.



Four New York City food co-op success stories

Others however, have managed to find their footing, notably the Greene Hill Food Coop in Clinton Hill, which follows the Coop's mandatory member labor model, and the Windsor Terrace Food Coop, which does not. The Flatbush Food Coop is a cooperative that dates to the mid-1970s but has no member labor at all, and the 4th Street Food

Co-op in Manhattan, which opened as the Good Food Coop the same year as the Park Slope Food Coop, exists entirely as a member-run space that is also open to non-members.



PHOTOS BY ROD MORRISON

Joe Holtz, the Coop's co-founder and former General Manager, retired over the summer.

Why has it been so difficult for others to follow in the Coop's footsteps?

## Space Challenges

"Space is a big challenge in New York City," said Joe Holtz, Park Slope's recently retired general manager, noting the challenge of "finding a space that is big enough and affordable enough." This, he says, was the problem Bay Ridge Food Coop faced and was ultimately unable to overcome, despite considerable interest from the com-

munity (Holtz recalls that 2,000 would-be members signed up). If a space is too small, or a coop never moves beyond the buying-club stage, members will find themselves doing a lot of work for a coop that offers supplemental groceries at best. Even if a coop starts off strong, it usually needs to scale to allow for staple shopping at some point, which is where a lot of coops fall apart.

# co-op

## GREENE HILL FOOD CO-OP



PHOTO BY FROD MORRISON

Sarah Chinn, pictured outside the Green Hill Food Co-Op. The store is located on Fulton Street, at Classon Avenue.

Sarah Chinn joined the Park Slope Food Coop in 1991 and was a member until the mid-2000s, when she joined the effort to open Greene Hill as one of its founding members. She said that finding a space was definitely the biggest challenge early on. Greene Hill needed something “flexible, that had a basement we could put storage in, that we could put a walk-in fridge in, that was affordable, that was in the neighborhood,” she said. The founders also wanted a place that had good foot traffic, which their Putnam Street store didn’t really have, but the coop nonetheless eked out an existence for its first few years, managing to just barely stay afloat. Then they found out their landlord was selling essentially the whole block and they’d have to leave. The board told the membership that they had to close: Not only did the coop not have the time or wherewithal to move, it didn’t have the money. Chinn and a few other members decided to look for a new store anyway and after touring many spaces, found the coop’s current spot, a few blocks away on Fulton Street. It was that rare phenomenon in New York real estate: a better deal. The Greene Hill Food Co-op’s new space is bigger, has better foot traffic, and “sales just went up and up and up.”

## **Merchandise and Pricing Challenges**



PHOTOS BY ROD MORRISON

Sarah Chinn was a PSFC member before co-founding the Green Hill Food Co-Op. Figuring out where to buy merchandise, and how much to buy, is another early hurdle: Coops need to find high-quality food suppliers who will offer bulk pricing that makes shopping at the coop less expensive and justifies member labor, in turn helping keep costs low. “When we opened, our Coop understood we had to get fruits and vegetables from the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx,” said Holtz. “We also knew we didn’t have the wherewithal to do it, but there was a small distribution company that wanted to sell to coops and daycares, and they sold to us at very low cost.”

Chinn said, however, that the supplier landscape is more difficult now than it was in the 1970s. The Greene Hill Food Co-op still isn’t big enough to get bulk discounts so their mark-up, which started at 30%, is now 35% for most items, compared to Park Slope’s 25%. Moreover, on “luxury” goods like chocolate and personal care products,

it's 40%. But by leaning heavily into bulk bin items Greene Hill has managed to offer a solid and growing inventory of affordably priced groceries, expanding to bulk cleaning supplies (like laundry detergent) without taking up too much of the limited shelf space. In the beginning, there were also divisions over whether Greene Hill should carry only non-GMO, organic, local foods or add in mass market brands that would help draw in new members and the community on Sundays, when the coop opens its doors to non-members at no extra markup—something that the membership felt was important in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood like Clinton Hill. Greene Hill settled on a solution that for every organic item, there would be a nonorganic alternative. Bananas also became a year-round staple, even if they weren't local because, said Chinn, "no one is going to shop at the coop if they can't pick up bananas."



The Green Hill Co-Op is a well-stocked, neatly laid out, and welcoming store.

## Membership Challenges

Greene Hill, which started as a buying club in 2011, opened about a year later, and is now going on nearly 15 years—it has one full-time and one part-time employee. The coop recently started doing \$25,000 a week in sales, a milestone, but Chinn said they still sometimes have to close early when someone cancels a shift. And every week, an email goes out listing emergency shifts that need to be filled.

Large-enough membership is a key factor in a coop's success but can be hard to build, especially in the early years when members must put in a lot of time for something less than a full-fledged grocery store. A too-small membership was a big factor in the South Bronx Food Co-op's closure, leading to erratic hours and falling sales, which caused the coop to fall behind on rent. After a deal to sublease part of the space to city greencarts was nixed by the landlord, the coop folded. The Lefferts Community Food Coop, which lasted five years, also struggled with membership. When the landlord listed their building for sale—the coop had what one of its founders described as a “super-generous landlord” who required “minimal rent”—the board decided it was time to throw in the towel.

“PARK SLOPE WASN’T PARK SLOPE RIGHT OFF THE BAT. PARK SLOPE IS A REALLY MATURE BUSINESS THAT HAS BEEN DECADES IN THE MAKING.”

SARAH CHINN

For Holtz, the ability to overcome early crises like Greene Hill's store loss comes down to member labor, and the sense of connection necessary to keep a coop running. “When I hear members talk about our Coop, sometimes I hear them saying things like, ‘Well, they don’t have that at the Coop,’ or the neutral, ‘the Coop doesn’t have that,’ but most of the time it’s ‘We don’t have that at the Coop.’”

## Managing Expectations, Nurturing Mission



The Lefferts Community Food Coop folded after just five years.

There is another, less tangible but no less significant, challenge for any coop trying to follow Park Slope's model: managing expectations. As Chinn noted, "Park Slope wasn't Park Slope right off the bat. Park Slope is a really mature business that has been decades in the making."

And while there have been plenty of would-be coops that disappeared before ever opening their doors (like Greenpoint) or folded after a few years of not quite making it (like Lefferts) new ones keep trying to open, underscoring the appeal of the coop model, despite all the difficulties of making it work in New York City. For example, the Central Brooklyn Food Coop, which has been trying to find a storefront since September 2022, recently announced that they finally secured one on the ground floor of a newly

constructed building in Bed-Stuy. They are currently building membership, according to their website, so that they'll have enough community members to run it.



PSFC jam-packed with shopping members pre-Thanksgiving

As a leader of the food coop movement, the Park Slope Food Coop will continue to encourage and support others to follow. Offering cause for optimism, however cautious, Holtz reminded, "Community organizations are precious and there will be some challenging initial times. Is it possible? Yes. Is it easy? No. But are there other people that want to help? Yes."



*Kim Velsey has been a Coop member since 2020. When she's not writing for the Gazette, she's a staff writer at New York magazine.*

ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

# LA OSA, A MADRID FOOD COOP INSPIRED BY OUR OWN

December 9, 2025



September 16, 2025

By Kim Velsey

In 2015, Madrid was caught up in the wave of progressive social change sweeping Europe and, after two decades of conservative rule, elected far-left mayoral candidate Manuela Carmena. For Tomás Fuentes and a group of about 15 other people who'd been running a small grocery exchange—buying organic and fair trade products directly from suppliers—it felt like the right time to do something bigger. "We had been pretty happy meeting people from the neighborhood, getting good food, knowing the suppliers," said Fuentes. "But then we were emboldened, we wanted to be part of the

ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

changes happening in the city.” The following year, the group opened a small organic grocery store, measuring a little over 400 square feet, in Malasaña, a neighborhood in the center of Madrid. The store operated on a cooperative model, though both members and nonmembers could shop there, with worker-members paying lower rates.

“I HAD A DREAM TO TAKE THE PARIS SUPERMARKET TO MADRID, WITHOUT ANY CHANGES, AND START RUNNING THE BUSINESS IN MADRID.”

*TOMÁS FUENTES, LA OSA*

From the beginning the founders wanted to open a larger store—one big enough and with enough worker-members to lower prices significantly and make healthy foods affordable to everyone. In 2019, Fuentes visited La Louve in Paris, started by two Americans who follow the Park Slope Food Coop model. The full-scale supermarket staffed by member labor, with both organic, specialty foods and staple groceries, inspired him. “I fell in love with that supermarket,” he recalled, describing how taken he was with the professionalism of the staff, the low prices and the 16% margin La Louve was operating with at the time. “I had a dream to take the Paris supermarket to Madrid, without any changes, and start running the business in Madrid.”

In late 2020, La Osa, or “the bear,” opened in Barrio del Pilar near the border of Tetuan, a working class neighborhood in northern Madrid. At about 8,500 square feet, it was much bigger than the group’s previous store, with vibrant green signage, lots of natural light, some 700 member-workers and a large selection of organic produce and healthy foods. It was, however, a terrible time to open a grocery store—the peak of the pandemic had passed, but ongoing restrictions and changed habits, shopping and otherwise, made running the store a challenge. Still, Fuentes and others believed in what they were doing: while supermarkets abound in Madrid, organic foods, though growing in popularity, do not. They’re also very expensive.

But the pandemic wasn't the only significant challenge. Unlike in Paris, where the mayor's office helped La Louve find a large, affordable retail space in a neighborhood with a solid middle-class base, the real estate prices in Madrid made locating anywhere close to the center of Madrid prohibitive. Opening in Barrio Pilar, about five miles away from Malasaña, led La Osa to lose about half the members they'd had at their old store—a significant blow. Finding new members in Barrio Pilar proved difficult: Processed foods are widespread in Spain and very cheap, and it was hard to convince people with little money to spare to pay more for fresh, healthy foods, even if those foods were less expensive than they would have been anywhere else.

The founders were forced to take drastic measures to keep their coop alive: cutting the staff from six to two, raising the product margins and cutting other costs wherever they could. The first year, said Fuentes, was "catastrophic."

But the store managed to stay open and the situation stabilized. Four years later, "the market is much better now and the people who are participating in it are happier, so they buy more," said Fuentes. There are currently four full-time staff and one part-time worker and the coop has increased revenues, with better selection and a greater sales volume—they now have just over one million euros in product turnover—although Fuentes added that that's because members are buying more, not because there are more members.

Membership has hovered around 700 since the store's opening, with about half the members coming from a neighborhood that's a 20-minute walk away. About 150 new members join every year, but about the same number leave, many because they're leaving Madrid altogether. The cost of living in the city is high, and housing eats up a huge portion of residents' incomes—rental prices have increased 57% since 2015. Someday, La Osa hopes to get to at least 2,000 members. With more members, they could reduce the product markup from 25% to 20%, and maybe one day get to three million euros in product turnover.

“A LOT OF THE TIME, COOPS GET A SMALLER SPACE AND DO A TEST BOUTIQUE WHILE THEY LOOK FOR A LARGER SPACE AND THEY COLLAPSE IN BETWEEN.”

*TOM BOOTHE, LA LOUVE*

Tom Boothe, one of the founders of La Louve in Paris, noted that there are a number of coops in other European cities that are have followed the worker-member model and are doing well: Bees Coop in Belgium, La Cagette in Montpellier, Super Quinquin in Lille. Munich has one that's been successful, and there's a group in Vienna that has a small shop and is well on the way to opening a larger one near the center of the city. A handful of others are keeping their heads above water, although some just barely. The difficult part, Booth added, is locating in a neighborhood that can support the store, ideally where the founders live (many are pushed to more remote areas by real estate prices), and getting capital to transition from a boutique model to the full supermarket—necessary to make it worth members' while to do regular labor in exchange for shopping there. “A lot of the time, coops get a smaller space and do a test boutique while they look for a larger space and they collapse in between.”

La Louve had a lot of factors in its favor, Boothe added: a supportive local government that helped it secure space in a neighborhood they wanted, being able to get a low interest loan from a French not-for-profit lender, favorable press, and a culture that really cares about good food. “We work with the best cheese distributor in France and carry a really nice comte. Most people in France know the difference between that and an industrialized version, they can tell it's really high quality, and when it's half the price it would be in other stores, that really helps us a lot.”

While La Osa had a rough start, Fuentes says that he's really proud that it managed to keep going without compromising its principles, like requiring member labor. Working to change the food system is quite hard, he added, but people are interested in healthy food and the coop model. People who live in other neighborhoods are always

telling him that they'd love it if a supermarket like La Osa opened near them. His response? "OK, first come to our supermarket and increase the membership. And then, maybe someday, we'll do that."

*Kim Velsey has been a Coop member since 2020. When she's not writing for the Gazette, she's a staff writer at New York magazine.*

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## INSIDE ANOTHER BROOKLYN FOOD COOP'S JOURNEY TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

December 9, 2025



By Sara Ivry

The first rule of a Food Coop shop is: Arrive at its storefront. I'd forgotten this basic tenet this past summer when I set out to buy milk and whatever else struck my fancy at the Greene Hill Food Coop (GHFC). When I was there last—several years and an entire pandemic ago—it was located on Putnam Avenue, around the corner from a bar, just near Fulton Street in Clinton Hill, the neighborhood I call home.

Now, it was nowhere in sight. That is, in my sight. It had moved a few blocks away, closer to the border of Bed-Stuy, and I had no idea.

And there's the rub: too few would-be shoppers know anything much about the GHFC's existence. And fewer still take the step of becoming a bona fide member. Indeed, membership has hovered around 300 for several years now. The GHFC General Manager Jake Boxenhorn wants to change that. He's making a renewed push to grow his member pool and ensure its longevity.

"I really had no idea what a coop even was until I got here to New York City," says the Long Island native. After graduating college two years ago, he moved to Brooklyn "right down the street from where Greene Hill is now, and I was looking for part-time work, as well as a good place to shop. Greene Hill happened to be offering a part-time job on the weekend, and to become a member at the same time."



Opportunity knocked and Boxenhorn welcomed it in. About eight months ago, he graduated from part-time weekend gig to full-time General Manager when his predecessor left.

Since then he's been stymied—as have others before him—by the question of how to gain new members, how best to spread word of the GHFC and how to get people to join up.

**"WE DON'T BEAT THE PRICES OF OTHER COOPS. WE DON'T HAVE THE BIGGEST SELECTION, BUT WE HAVE A GROUP OF REALLY PASSIONATE PEOPLE."**

"Everyone knows about the Park Slope Food Coop, and everyone shops there," he says. "I've done a lot of work on the floor at other coops and see that people just

don't really know who we are. We're pretty small."

General Manager of the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC) Joe Holtz agrees the relative size of GHFC vis a vis PSFC presents a hurdle.

"A Coop like ours has 9,000 items, and 6,000 square feet, and theirs has many thousand fewer items because of the smaller selling space, and because of our size we can get better prices," he says. "We're a problem for Coops near us, so we try to help in every way we can."

PSFC members are allowed to shop at the GHFC, and support the tiny food coop. The *Linewaiters' Gazette* has covered the GHFC's efforts to shore up membership, the PSFC has given the GHFC loans, and Holtz has responded to Boxenhorn's request for semi-regular meetings to think of what policies and changes might work best for the GHFC to meet its growth goals.

Among them, having "open shopping" days this past summer, to entice passersby and members of the local community as well as allowing PSFC members to shop at Greene Hill without having to work there. So doing raises overall sales and encourages PSFC stalwarts to consider joining Greene Hill as well.

"They said, 'Can we let your members shop here?'" Holtz says. "And we said, 'You can do whatever you want for our members. But I'll tell you what we don't do: let your members shop here because that would be like us killing you.'"

"When I think of any Coop, your first job is will you survive, and your second job is will you thrive," Holtz says. "Surviving without thriving means you're still vulnerable."

At present, GHFC is vulnerable. It routinely does about \$20,000 a week in sales, Boxenhorn says, a figure it can live off of—if modestly.

"We'd like to get up to 25, that would help us thrive," Boxenhorn says. "Right now,

we're in a survival mode. And we're trying to get out of that through inward restructuring."



Getting there is contingent on growing membership; Boxenhorn is aiming for a base of a solid 500.

He says he and his board are discussing a lot of ideas regarding how to grow. He wants to improve the Coop's operation and its general presentation by patching up and painting the basement and the store's interior, fixing its flooring, and generally swapping its "original homey Coop look" for something less worn in and, hopefully, more compelling. He's also hoping to change how shifts at the GHFC are structured—to shorten them and make them more frequent and to implement more serious repercussions when a member is delinquent.

"WHEN I THINK OF ANY COOP, YOUR FIRST JOB IS WILL YOU SURVIVE, AND YOUR SECOND JOB IS WILL YOU THRIVE?" HOLTZ SAYS. "SURVIVING WITHOUT THRIVING MEANS YOU'RE STILL VULNERABLE."

"We've been very lax about how we maintain our shift structure," he says, contrasting it with the rigor of the PSFC. "What you guys do is much more strict. That's something that we're thinking of doing to make our membership more accountable in general."

He also has embarked on a semi-regular meeting with Holtz to brainstorm other ways that Greene Hill might start to thrive. Holtz welcomes this opportunity to lend his insight, accumulated over more than four decades as a PSFC staff member.



"When I was the only employee in June of 1975," Holtz says, "I was given a lot of freedom to try things. I would ask Jake if he feels like he has that freedom, because I think that's important—a certain entrepreneurial aspect."

Holtz says he'll also encourage Boxenhorn to consider lowering prices on produce and ensuring it is of a quality superior to what is generally available in the area. "Increase the sales on that, increase the turnover, and become famous for that," Holtz suggests.

Until then, Boxenhorn is buoyed in this work by the community he stumbled into.

"I feel so strongly about this Coop in the sense that we are so close knit," he says, noting that he knows the name of every single member. "We know each other so well. It's such a friendly environment that I don't think any other coop has. The vibe of the Coop is what makes it special and you have to experience that to understand. We don't beat the prices of other coops. We don't have the biggest selection, but we have a group of really passionate people."

"We've been around 12 years," Boxenhorn adds, "and we're still here. So whatever we're doing is working."

*Sara Ivry is a long-time member of the Park Slope Food Coop.*

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## THE COOP MAKING IT THROUGH COVID

December 9, 2025



By *Travis Hartman*

In the spring of 2020, after the city-wide shutdown, Coop members stood patiently, six feet apart, snaking around the block, waiting for their turn to enter the Coop. Members would often wait for over an hour, with short lines only occurring during poor weather or sheer luck.

Some members dealt with it well, while others did not.

## LONG LINES

Paul Schickler, a member for 17 years, said, “I remember once the line was all the way down the street, around the corner and halfway down President Street.” It did not deter him from waiting, though, and he carried a chair with him to sit in.

There were also members like Janet Gottlieb who, estimating the length of the line and the amount of time to wait, sometimes concluded it was not worth the wait. “If I saw that the line was down to the corner of President, I wouldn’t wait,” she said.

Many shoppers stayed away altogether due to concerns about long lines or fear of infection. Shopping hours were drastically reduced, and for a short period, around a half day was set aside for senior citizens, to comply with COVID-19 safety protocols. The reduced availability of hours for members increased safety for members and workers alike, and allowed workers to properly maintain the Coop, in a world of ever-evolving information about how to combat the virus.

## HUGE DROP IN SALES

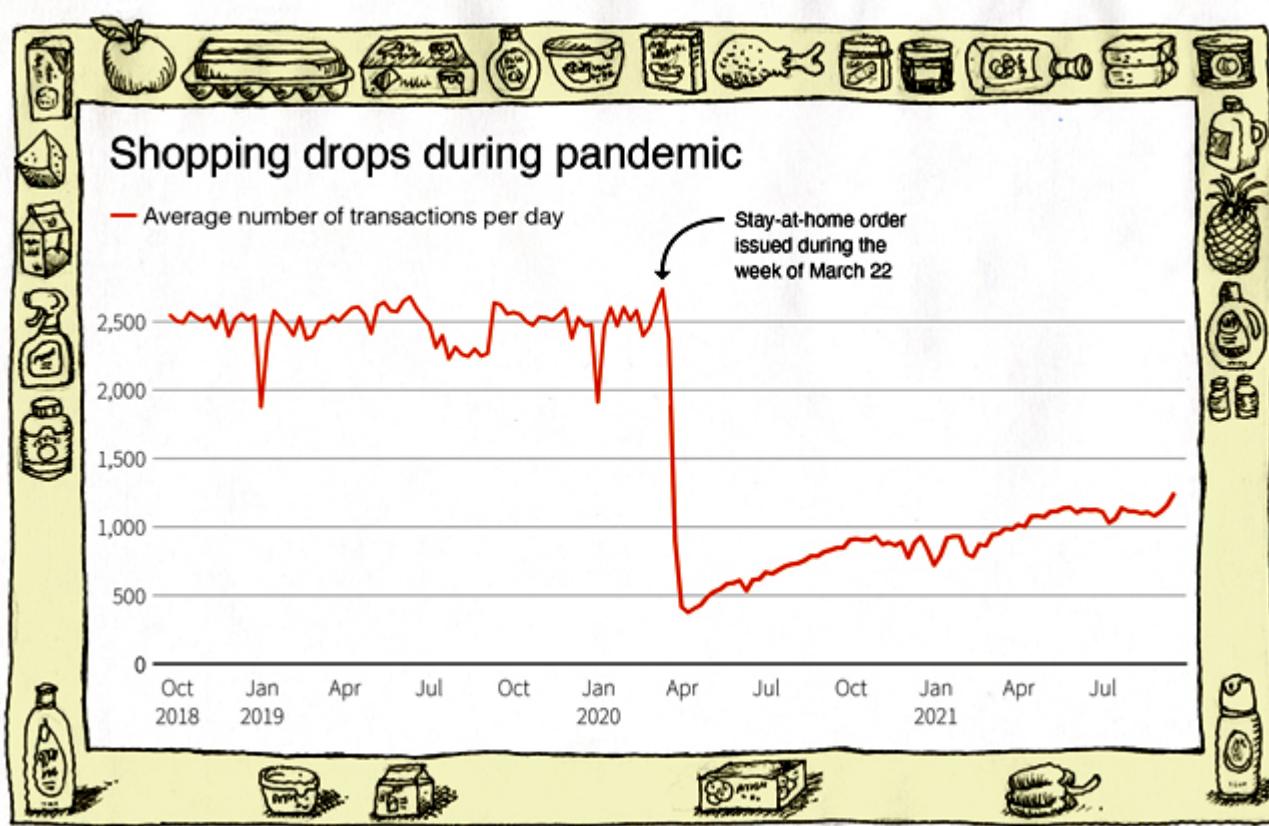


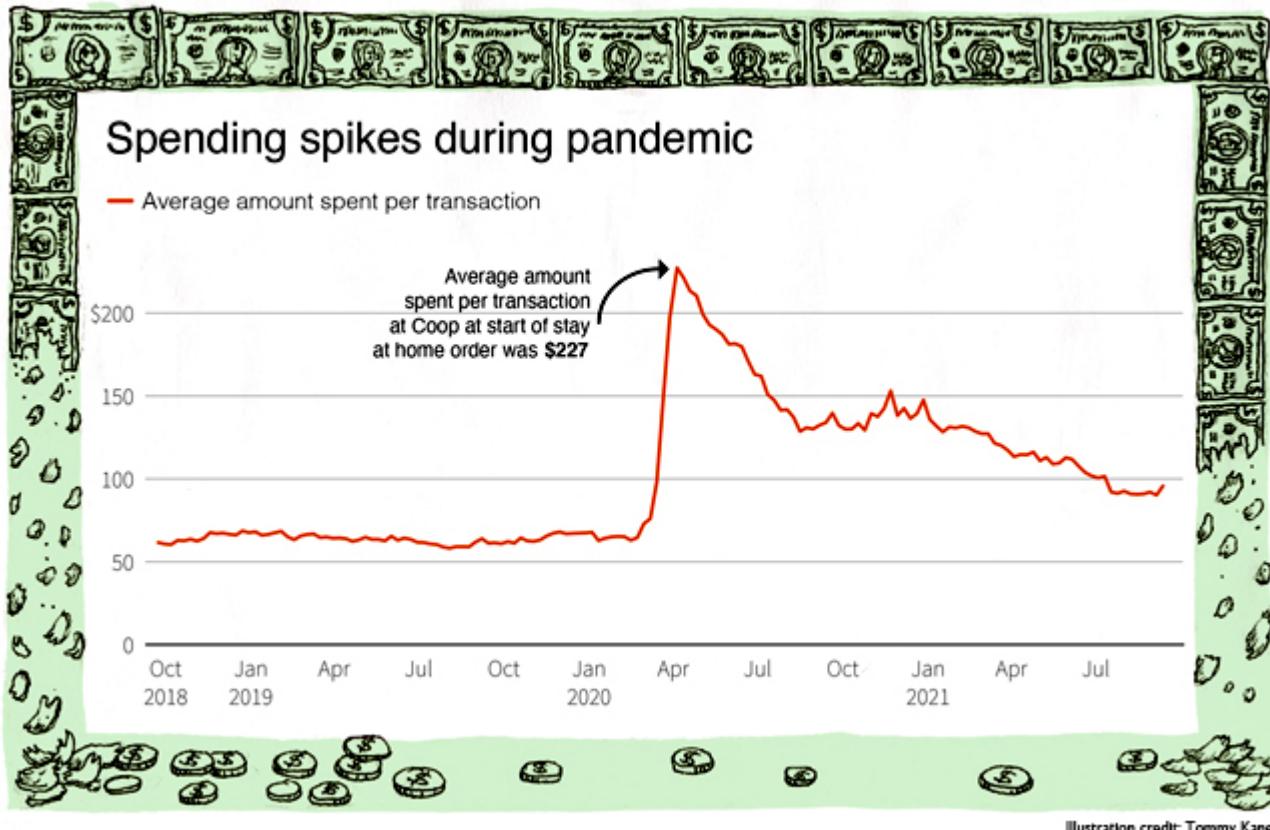
Illustration credit: Tommy Kane

Over the course of the first month of the New York State stay-at-home order, the average number of daily transactions dropped by 87%. It hit a low point of just under that figure, and the number of transactions has been rising steadily ever since, though tempered by lines, shortened shopping hours and a restricted number of members in the Coop at any given time.

Flora Wu said she would often stop by the Coop every day in pre-pandemic times, as she lives very close by, but the long lines kept her away initially, and she found other places to shop for various reasons.

“But I like that there aren’t so many people inside now,” she said, noting that not all the restrictions were without silver linings.

## BUYING MORE STUFF



Despite the drastically lower number of transactions, the Coop saw a massive upsurge in the average amount per transaction. So while fewer people were shopping, they were spending much more. This resonates with recollections of stories about hoarding toilet paper and other sundries. Over the first month of the stay-at-home order, the average transaction tripled from \$76 to \$237. Since then, it has been returning to a more normal high, decreasing steadily to around \$95 as of mid-September.

## BIG LOSSES

The reduced sales volume and hiring of temporary staff in place of member labor saw the Coop losing around \$100,000 per week in the beginning of the pandemic. In response, the Coop applied for and was granted a \$1.4 million PPP loan, as well as asked members to increase their voluntary investment in the Coop, which amounted to an additional \$800,000. Members also voted for a 4% mark up—which went into effect in August 2020—to improve financial solvency.



Photo credit: Zac Schulman

Coop members are back working their shifts, but it will take a while for membership to return to pre-pandemic levels.

## RECOVERY

In some ways the Coop is still a shadow of its former self, but there are signs that it is recovering in significant ways. Currently, there are 84 shopping hours available in the week, compared to 100 in pre-pandemic time. 54 shoppers are allowed in the store compared to 35 or so when the pandemic began. There have been huge improvements in air filtration at the Coop to keep members safe, because as Coop manager Joe Holtz said, "We've taken great measures to make the air safe, and we're gonna err on the side of keeping members safe."

Two of the main drains on the Coop's finances are currently in flux. The temporary pandemic support staff that was hired to work both full-time and part-time at the Coop was released when member labor came back online in mid-July.

"It was crucial that there were members willing and able to help, that was really im-

portant, and I thank them, they helped keep the Coop open—while we figured out how to have a safe return to member labor,” said Holtz.



General Coordinator Joe Holtz expressed his appreciation for the temporary labor that worked through the pandemic allowing the Coop to stay open.

## SHRINKING MEMBERSHIP

The other financial drain is Coop membership, which is down an estimated 4,000 members, or around 23%. This equates to 23% of sales evaporating as well. Membership had been held at roughly 17,000 for the past few years, with about 2,200 members leaving each year for normal causes such as moving away. This was never a problem—every time a member left, there was a new one to replace them.

In terms of when we open membership back up at the Coop, and remove the financial drain of paying workers, Holtz said, "I don't have an exact date; it's an urgency and it should be as soon as possible, and we're working towards it," citing the logistics of balancing the safety of current members while devising a new orientation system. "The desire is there," he said. "Inventing a new system is not finished."

Overall, coordinators say the Coop is struggling because it needs more people to shop—and that the Coop needs more members.

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## HOW CREATIVE CHEFS SUSTAINED COOP WORKERS

December 9, 2025



*Above: Chefs Kate Zuckerman (R) and Kim Pistone (L) cooked amazing lunches for up to 90 Coop staffers right through the pandemic.*

*By Hayley Gorenberg*

Chef and Coop member Kate Zuckerman surveyed banana boxes full of food that the Coop would, pre-pandemic, have donated to CHiPS soup kitchen. But it was April 2020; COVID had shuttered the kitchen, and with member labor suspended for the first time ever, the Coop was operating with temporary help and staff. And the staff was hungry.

Familiar with Zuckerman's professional culinary talents after years of her FTOP work creating festive meals celebrating staff milestones, Coop staff members hired her to help sort through the food and figure out how to whip up tasty lunches on a shoestring budget. The assignment lasted through the middle of July.

## FLOUR, EGGS AND DENTED CANS

"It was like a puzzle," Zuckerman said. She sorted through boxes that included dented cans, slashed bags of flour and post-dated eggs. There might be a case of something mistakenly delivered that a distributor didn't pick up, or boxes of berries with a berry or two molding in each—not salable, but certainly salvageable.



Photos by Kim Orlitzky, Kase Zuckerman, and Yanik Onad

## JAMS AND CAKES

The inspiration flowed. “I made so many jams—blackberry, fig, raspberry. And endless cakes!” Not having a mixer, she poured olive oil from dented cans into a blender and frothed it with sugar, a process that began from necessity that she now uses intentionally—the whipping lightens the resulting dessert. Zuckerman rhapsodized about the fancy herb-infused brown butters on an endcap, and used them with bags of cocoa that were past their date to create a luscious dessert.

Word of sumptuous lunches got around. “When it started, it was, ‘Can you cook a meal for 30 people?’ And then it was 60. And then it was 90, every day.” The job couldn’t be handled alone for long. With numbers growing and emerging COVID regulations for food handling, the lunch squad grew to include another chef, Kim Pistone, as well as a helper, to assist with prep for a few hours and wash dishes afterward.

Pistone, a self-taught chef, had ended her own catering business with a well-timed event before joining the Coop lunch squad. “I did a beautiful wedding March 13. It was like a great send-off: ‘OK, I’m done now!’ Every single thing on my resume ended

in March 2020." She rang up the Coop office and said, "Do you guys need any help, or what?" Her home situation also motivated her to reach out. With her husband and child at home, she said, "I thought somebody's got to *not* be here. Too many people under one roof 24 hours a day!"

"I threw myself into being at the Coop," Pistone said. "Physically it was really exhausting. But I think it kept me sane. I didn't feel stuff other people felt—depressed—because I was working."



## MANY DRESSINGS

"Every day I would do a different vinaigrette. Sriracha lime toasted sesame! Raspberry red wine! I would mix it up so it would complement whatever we were serving," Pistone said. "I tried to make as much comfort food as I could. It was a lot of sanity for a lot of people, the stability of having a place to go and having lunch and a community

of people you could talk to." For safety, the Coop had socially distant meals and also built plexiglass carrels. "A lot of people are by themselves," Pistone remarked. "I think it was a touchpoint for a lot of people to just have a meal with somebody once a day."

"It was really fun for me," said Zuckerman. "It was a race to make the best meal I could in an efficient way with whatever ingredients they were getting rid of, spending as little as I could." No-knead focaccia with long fermentation, "allowing gluten to form and stretch and hold" was a new skill for her. Zuckerman and Pistone used new flours, learned to make egg substitute, baked gluten-free tahini cookies, and made their own cashew milk. They created vegan butter and "tons of things with chickpea flour and polenta," Zuckerman said. A box of peppers yielded roasted pepper soup. "I made so many vegan soups—because I had to." The chefs made stock from fennel tops, deteriorated onions and carrots—all boiled for six hours.

## LOTS OF COUSCOUS

The food available was a daily surprise, including, at one point, two 50-pound bags of Israeli couscous! "I didn't spend too much time at home thinking or stressing about it," said Zuckerman. "I would just come in and see what was there and make something. It was always tasty and delicious. It was nice to be governed by what was there and what equipment we had, and just show up and know you were going to cook for eight or ten hours."

## INSPIRATION FROM MEXICO AND INDIA

They made custards with past-dated cream; Mexican lasagna with tortillas; curry and other Indian-inspired recipes, including a variation of saag paneer that substituted braised escarole and chard. There were lots of pasta, pesto, dips and sauces; along with fruit, fennel and lots of mushroom barley soup.



Photos by Kim Olstone, Kate Zuckerman, and York Ohad

## CURRIES AND COBLERS

"Kate and Kim were the most amazing chefs ever," said 23-year Coop veteran Alexandra Hodgson MacDonnell, who came to work as a temp, and is now a Membership Coordinator on staff. "I saw them cooking with food that was maybe not salable but perfectly good for cooking, and turning it into curries, an absolute delight. When I came to lunch I would see something I hadn't used. In particular, they loved watermelon radish. I found everything to be so inspiring; it was amazing. Some days they would go the whole nine yards and make dessert. We'd come up and there would be a blueberry cobbler."

## UP ON THE ROOF

MacDonnell observed that many temporary Coop workers came to work because they lived alone and felt isolated, especially the case for artists and restaurateurs “completely out of work.” In contrast, MacDonnell shares her home with her husband and four sons, all of whom were working online. Working twenty-seven hours per week doing check-out at the Coop was “a little bit of an outlet.” (Though she hastens to add, “Don’t get me wrong! It was a lovely, great time to regroup with my teens and young adults!”) At the same time, she enjoyed taking an occasional rooftop break with a Coop member she thinks she’d never have met otherwise—over an excellent lunch.



## THE LUNCH BILL

The Coop staff went up to 205 employees at one point during the pandemic hiring period, and there wasn’t enough space to even store the staff lunches, let alone have

each person use the kitchen. Hiring a chef was the solution. According to Coordinators, it cost \$4,000 a week to feed the staff and that expense lasted for 65 weeks—and included ordering from restaurants occasionally. Coordinators also say it was important to have a plan like this for safety reasons: The staff members could easily grab a boxed lunch, then go off and eat on their own, since during the pandemic, staff members were encouraged not to eat together.

Check out the recipes: <http://www.sweetcyclebrooklyn.com/recipes-1>

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## NEW HIRES SINCE COVID

December 9, 2025

From top: Kamila Nuritova, Gustavo Lopez, Tim Mahoney, Zili Wang and Moussa Thiam. They're all Receiving Coordinators, except Kamila, who works on membership, and Tim, who in addition to receiving, has maintenance and repair responsibilities.

Photos by Zachary Schulman.



• Kamila Nuritova



• Kamila Nuritova



Gustavo Lopez



• Gustavo Lopez



• Tim Mahoney



Tim Mahoney



• Zili Wang



Zili Wang



• Moussa Thiam



Moussa Thiam

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## COVID-19 ATTACKED AND UNDERMINED THE COOP

December 9, 2025

We can't fit working and shopping members and maintain safe social distancing. The results are financial and social. We are losing money and members.

Coop finances depend on required member labor—whose value in dollars is never counted in the budgets—to sell elite health-food store products for commercial super-

market prices. We're built on equity and solidarity of member/owner/worker/shopper; the same privileges and same responsibilities for each member.

Our traditional squad system fell apart as about 4,000 of 17,000 members (18%) left. Under emergency conditions, the management collective (General Coordinators) hired members to run the store for minimum wage. More expenses; less income.

In mid-July, the GCs instituted a new system of member labor. Members sign up for shifts doing different tasks on different days under the supervision of a different paid staff person who is under the supervision of the GCs. Less social cohesion.

Many of us want to restore the traditional system of squads with member leaders. We created a process to identify, recruit and prepare member leaders (over several months) to step into place and then to organize members into squads if/when it is safe and feasible. The item was discussed at July General Meeting. The vote will be at the October 26 GM.

A QR Code to the complete text will soon be available.

Those registered will receive the document in an email.

Please study the plan, comment and vote at the Oct GM.

*Susan Metz*

*Editor's note: Please see "The Coop Making It Through COVID" for Gazette reporter-researched information on the percentage of members who departed the Coop during the pandemic.*

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## TIME FOR A VACCINE MANDATE AT THE COOP

December 9, 2025

DEAR *LINEWAITERS' GAZETTE* EDITORS,

It is time for the Coop to implement a vaccine mandate for its members. I understand that not everyone is able to get a vaccine, including those with autoimmune disorders, those receiving chemotherapy, etc. However, the vast majority of people, including the vast majority of Coop members, do not fall into these categories. For those of us who are able, the time to hesitate is through.

It was heartening to see, during the pandemic, how Coop members eagerly adopted public health best practices: social distancing, masking, limiting the number of members in the Coop at a time, etc. The Coop did a much better job than most other institutions at keeping its members safe and healthy.

Now the Coop must take the next step: require members, who are able to receive a vaccine, to be vaccinated if they intend to remain members.

While I understand indoor masking will be the norm for some time, if we are ever to return to a world without masks, we must be vaccinated. It is not fair that the majority of members must continue wearing masks on their shifts indefinitely because a few holdouts refuse to get vaccinated. Life must eventually return to normal. The best way to accelerate that process is to require all Coop members who are able to get vaccinated to do so.

*Sincerely,*

*Taylor Wofford*