

HALLOWEEN AT THE COOP: THE TRICK OF TREAT

October 3, 2024

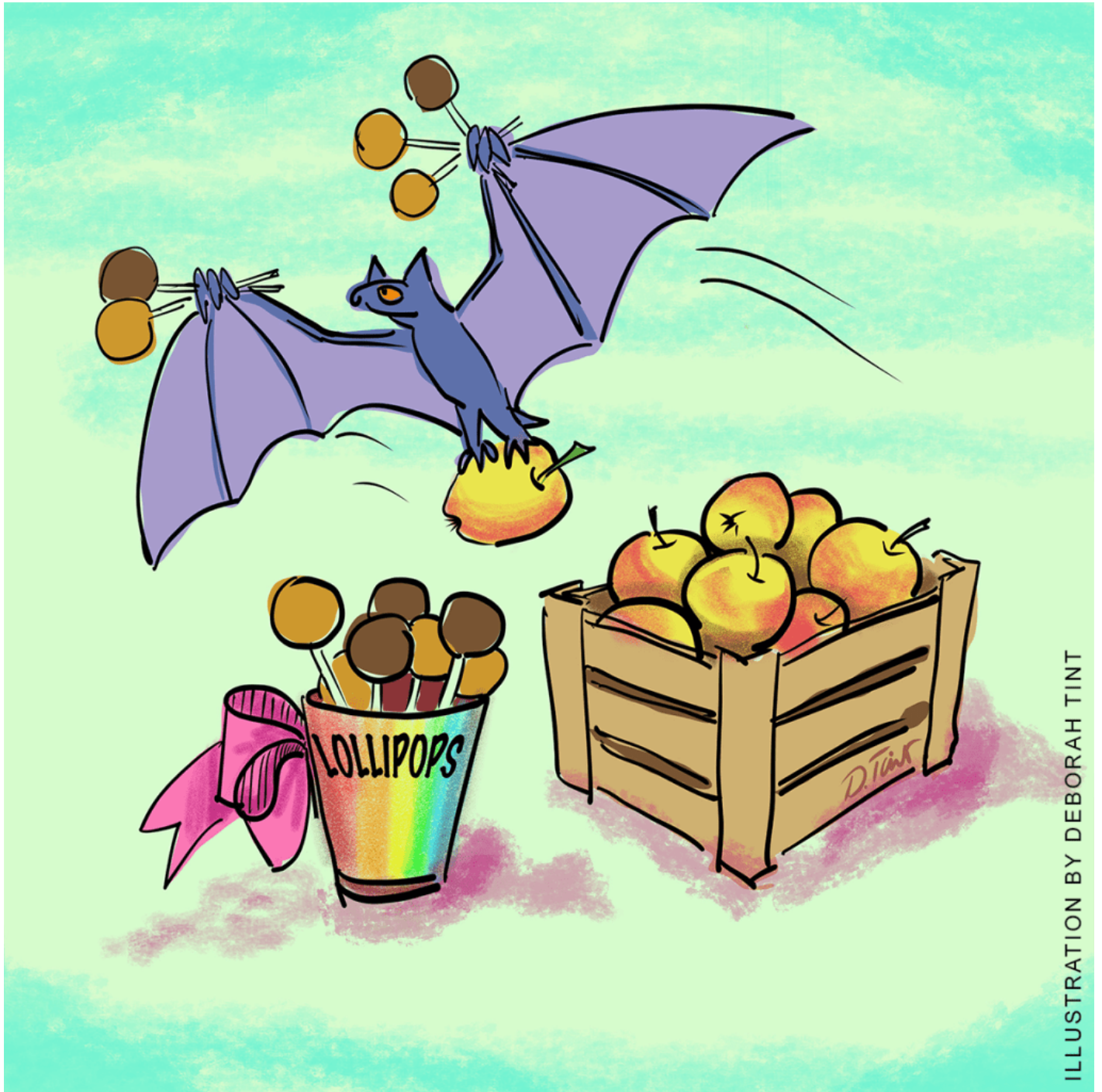


By Kim Velsey

October 15, 2024

Every Halloween, the Coop sets aside small apples donated by Hepworth Farms to give out to trick-or-treaters, a tradition that reflects the Coop's commitment to healthy, fresh, seasonal foods. The holiday is generally a low-key affair at the store, but members enjoy celebrating it—it's common for staff and shift workers to show up in costume that day—and the Coop carries a number of seasonal items for decorating, eating and giving out to trick-or-treaters.

“We bring pumpkins in for the three weeks before Halloween, starting around October 7,” says Cecelia Rembert, a receiving coordinator and one of the Coop’s produce buyers. “We don’t want to get them too soon because they get kind of gross. And we try not to have any left over. Turns out no one wants them on November 1.” Last year, the Coop sold nine bins (or 5,850 pounds) of carving pumpkins, mostly from Hepworth Farms, one of the Coop’s oldest produce suppliers. There are also pie pumpkins, which many people like to paint for Halloween, and a variety of gourds to decorate. You can find turnips and potatoes in the produce department as well, the root vegetables that were traditionally carved at Halloween. Pumpkins, a new world vegetable, didn’t make their way to Europe until the 1500s, and it was several centuries after that that they became associated with Halloween.



There is also, of course, candy. Although this year, there may be fewer options than in years past. Gillian Chi, a receiving coordinator and buyer who handles the Halloween candy, says that many of the pre-orders she put in early this summer for Halloween-themed products from member favorites like YumEarth, Ocho and Tony Chocolonely have been canceled because those products are out of stock. It's not clear why the distributor, UNFI, one of the Coop's largest suppliers, hasn't been able to fulfill the orders (requests for a comment from YumEarth, UNFI and Ocho were not re-

turned), but it's been a problem during the past few years. Chi says she's had luck in years past reaching out directly to contacts at those companies, but that hasn't yielded any success so far this year.

CANDY PRICES HAVE SHOT UP SINCE THE PANDEMIC, INCREASING 27.5% FROM 2021 TO 2023, ACCORDING TO THE BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS.

When Chi first started working as a buyer, she focused on increasing the organic candy offerings: She could see there was a need for organic Halloween candy and it sold well. Popular items in the past have included the YumEarth lollipops in Halloween wrappers—they also made an organic candy corn, the first on the market, but since discontinued—and individual bags of gummy bats and spiders. Tony Choclonely's individually-wrapped Halloween chocolates were a hit as well. Apparently, anything in a Halloween shape or with a Halloween wrapper sells well. Hard candy does not. “For the last eight years or so, I’ve tried to have Halloween candy take over the entire end cap,” says Chi. “But for the last few years it’s been so hard to get stuff [that] it’s just been a couple of shelves.”



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

So what can shoppers expect to see on those shelves soon? Snyder's pretzels in Halloween pouches, Endangered Species Not So Spooky milk chocolate mix, Pirate Booty trick-or-treat puffs, Good Crisp Creepy Crisps and Torie & Howard Halloween lollipops. It's also possible that the gourmet candy buyer may score some Halloween-themed items, if they are buying for themselves (or really trying to impress the neighborhood kids). But stocking up on even the non-gourmet products will be pricey. Candy prices have shot up since the pandemic, increasing 27.5% from 2021 to 2023, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Cacao and sugar prices both went up after disappointing harvests brought on by bad weather, which have continued to be an issue (while there were early fears this might lead to candy shortages, in the end candy just became a lot more expensive). A seven ounce bag of individually wrapped YumEarth gummy candies cost \$3.90 in 2019; last year it cost \$7.64. This year, the Coop hasn't been able to stock it at all.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

If shoppers are disappointed in this year's candy selection, however, they can always follow the Coop's example and stock up on a few cases of apples to hand out. After a late frost last May devastated upstate apple orchards, farmers are reporting a bumper crop this season.

Happy Halloween, shoppers!

Kim Velsey has been a Coop member since 2020. When she's not writing for the Line-

waiters' Gazette, *she's a staff writer at New York Magazine.*

THE HOLIDAYS AT THE COOP

October 3, 2024

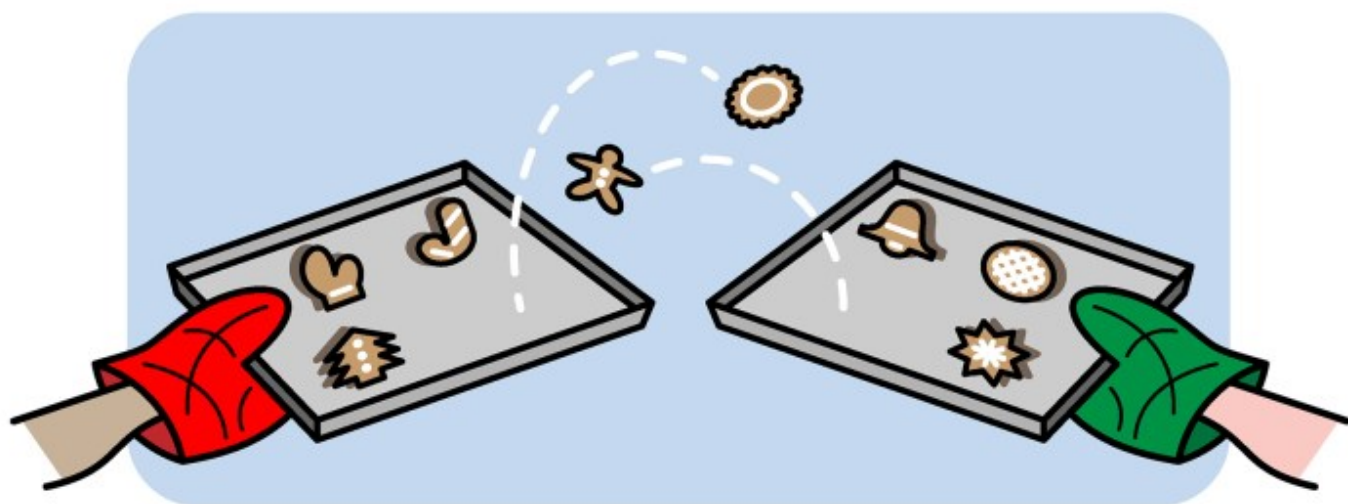


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

A SWEET TRADITION: COOKIE SWAP PARTIES

By Liora Fishman

As the holiday season approaches, I find myself dreading the inevitable onslaught of Secret Santa events I'll be asked to participate in. At the risk of being a Grinch, the volume of gift-giving that comes with this time of year can feel overwhelming, expensive and even impersonal. Don't get me wrong—I love the holidays, and I appreciate my family, friends and colleagues who organize gift exchanges. But when tasked with finding an inexpensive gift for, say, a coworker I don't know particularly well, I often

find myself coming up empty.

GUESTS TASTE ALL THE COOKIES, SWAP THEIRS FOR OTHERS, AND LEAVE WITH A VARIETY TO TAKE HOME.

Enter: the cookie swap party. It's a time-honored way to celebrate the joy of giving and sharing during the festive Christmas season. Each guest brings a batch of cookies, preferably of their own baking. The more unique the recipe, the better! Guests taste all the cookies, swap theirs for others, and leave with a variety to take home. That is, if they don't eat all of the cookies before they get there.

THE ORIGINS OF COOKIE SWAPS

The concept of cookie exchanges, or cookie swaps, has roots that reach back to Europe in the Middle Ages. It was a time when communities came together to celebrate the holiday season, exchanging small gifts and homemade baked goods. This tradition eventually found its way to America, where it would evolve into the beloved cookie swap parties we know today. In the 1930s and 1940s, a significant shift occurred in American kitchens. The availability of ovens and the convenience of pre-packaged ingredients led to a surge in home baking. With more households now equipped for baking, cookie swap parties started to gain traction.

THE VOLUME OF GIFT-GIVING THAT COMES WITH THIS TIME OF YEAR CAN FEEL OVERWHELMING, EXPENSIVE AND EVEN IMPERSONAL.

Fast forward to the present day and cookie swap parties have become a cherished holiday tradition for many. "During the holiday season, it can be hard to know what to get your friends and family—and it's overwhelming to pick out gifts for all your loved

ones,” said Brett Krasner, who has been a Park Slope Food Coop member since 2021. “Cookie swap parties are a great way to bring a personal, home-baked touch to your holiday gifting without breaking the bank.”



COOKIE SWAP PARTY DELIGHTS

Now that you’re familiar with the historical backdrop, let’s talk about the star of the show: the cookies themselves. Elevate your cookie game with these fancy and delectable ideas, starring ingredients from the Coop:

1. Lavender and Lemon Shortbread Cookies: These delicate shortbread cookies are infused with the fragrant flavors of lavender and fresh lemon zest, providing a delightful twist on a classic favorite.
2. Raspberry Linzer Cookies: A personal favorite, these elegant, sandwich-style

cookies feature a delicate almond dough filled with raspberry jam and dusted with powdered sugar.

Pro-tip: If you're short on time, Bonne Maman makes a similar pre-packaged cookie available at the Coop (in the Express Line aisle).

3. Pistachio Cranberry Biscotti: For a sophisticated treat, bake up a batch of biscotti with pistachios, dried cranberries and a drizzle of white chocolate. There are few things more satisfying than dipping a biscotti into a cappuccino or a cup of tea on a chilly afternoon.
4. Matcha Green Tea Snowballs: For a unique twist, incorporate the trendy flavor of matcha into your powdered-sugar-dusted cookies, creating vibrant snowballs infused with green tea.
5. Salted Caramel Chocolate Thumbprint Cookies: These indulgent cookies feature a rich chocolate base with a gooey salted caramel center, garnished with a sprinkle of sea salt.

The pastry chef and former Brooklyn resident Jim Bohovic said making cookies based on your family traditions can be a great way to introduce family and friends to exciting new flavors and textures.

He added that he once saw guests at a New York City holiday party take his grandmother's cookies as if they were attending a cookie swap. Though they did not bring cookies to share, he said the guests filled their own plastic baggies with cookies. Bohovic called it a cookie "theft," à la Cookie Monster.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

FIVE PANTRY STAPLES FOR HOLIDAY BAKING

When it comes to holiday baking, a well-stocked pantry is your best friend. Here are five pantry staples—excluding sugar and flour, which go without saying—that you'll want to have on hand for your baking endeavors:

1. Spices: Cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves add warmth and depth to your holiday recipes, creating a cozy atmosphere during the winter season.
2. Vanilla extract: A dash of pure vanilla extract enhances the aroma and taste of your baked goods, giving them a touch of sophistication.
3. Nuts: Need an excuse to raid the bulk aisle? Almonds, pecans and walnuts are fantastic for adding texture and flavor to cookies, cakes and pies.
4. Cocoa powder: Quality cocoa powder is a must for rich chocolatey holiday treats like brownies and fudgy cookies, perfect for savoring during the winter months.
5. Extracts and flavorings: Beyond vanilla, extracts like almond, peppermint and orange can elevate the flavor profile of your baked goods, offering variety and a hint of luxury.

For those of us who have allergies or dietary restrictions that might preclude participation in cookie swaps, fear not. Gluten-free flour, nut-free recipes and vegan substitutions have never been better. In fact, some products are so good they can fool even the dairy fanatics in your life. “My partner’s family are Francophiles and obsessed with butter,” said Tamar Lindenbaum, who is vegan and has been a Coop member since 2022. “The only way they’ll eat a vegan dessert is if it tastes buttery. I’ve found that the best way to make a dessert that tastes authentically buttery is by using Miyoko’s vegan butter.”

With these pantry staples and fancy cookie ideas, you’ll be well-prepared to impress guests at your next cookie swap party. So, consider ditching Secret Santa this year and opting for a cookie swap: Gather your friends and family, whip up some extraordinary cookies, and share in the joy of this heartwarming holiday tradition.

The last word goes to the pastry chef we heard from earlier, Jim Bohovic, who said, “Holiday baking means fun, tradition, time with kiddos and sharing.”

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

October 3, 2024



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."



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,” Szladek 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,” Szladek 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, Szladek 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 buy-

ers 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, Novem-

ber 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.

Szladek 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, Szladek noted, 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 REFLECTIONS ON 2021 HOLIDAY FOOD SALES TRENDS

October 3, 2024



By Marisa Bowe

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE



Joe Szladek expected that Coop members would return to being festive over the holidays.

As General Coordinator Joe Szladek was comparing pandemic holiday season sales, like so many of us, he lost track of COVID time. “How many years into this are we?” he asked, pausing a moment to think. “It’ll be two in March,” he remembered. “So this was the second holiday season.”

“Last year [2020] was really hard,” he continued, “because we had no idea what people were going to do; if they were going to get together or not. We didn’t have the vaccine yet. Should we get a lot of small turkeys because everyone’s going to be doing individual things? Or are people even going to buy turkeys?”

“People were kind of bunkered down,” said produce buyer John Horsman.

“This year, we expected more people to celebrate in groups that were beyond their immediate pod. We felt like people were really in the mood to be festive with other

people,” Szladek said.

“We figured it would be significantly busier than last year,” said groceries buyer Gil-lian Chi. “I figured whatever last year was may be increased by 10%, so that’s how we ordered. And for Thanksgiving, that was pretty spot-on.”

“It’s pretty consistent, Thanksgiving, if you’ve been doing it for a while,” said Chi. “It’s the same items over and over again. You know how much stuff people are going to buy, how much stuffing and how much cranberry sauce, so that was pretty straightforward.”

But, Chi said, “When it came to the Christmas and the Hanukkah holidays, we sold far more than expected.”

“You pre-order a lot of these holiday products in June or July. And in June and July we had no idea what it was going to look like, so we probably were pretty conservative with our orders. And then December came and things were flying off the shelves,” said Chi.

“Things were selling at double the rate we expected,” she said. “We kept running out of whatever we ordered. Basically, whatever we put on the shelves, people bought, so we just kept having to find new items to order. The things that were available, we grabbed,” Chi added.



Gillian Chi noted that in June and July we had no idea what the holidays were going to look like.

TURKEYS

Szladek said that turkey sales were high as well this year, but specific types were - more popular than others, "What didn't sell as well as expected were the more basic birds, the typical antibiotic-free. The pastured ones, the organic ones—you know, the ones that they read a book to at the end of the night—all sold very well. We - could have ordered more, and that's on our list for next year."

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK SAID THAT TURKEY SALES WERE HIGH AS WELL THIS YEAR, BUT SPECIFIC TYPES WERE MORE POPULAR THAN OTHERS.

Before the holidays, “We were nervous,” he said, “because the prices have gone up on so many things, including turkeys. When price increases occur, grocery stores try to avoid increasing the price of their turkeys because they want to signal to people that they have low prices throughout the store, even though they are increasing the prices on other things. Turkeys are used as a loss leader—they lose money on them or just break even. Whereas we just mark everything in the store up 21%, now temporarily 25%, including turkeys.”

“So as a result,” he explained, “the gap between our turkey prices and other stores was a bit bigger this year. But a lot of the higher priced specialty birds, whether pastured or fed non-GMO or organic feed, they all sold really well.” Szladek agreed that it’s possible these birds are less expensive at the Coop than at other stores.

CHEESE AND GIFTS

Another unexpected change: “People bought expensive things this year as compared to previous years,” noted cheese, bulk and specialty buyer Yuri Weber. “I felt like people maybe just had extra money, or what, I’m not sure.” Some economists are pointing to the stimulus checks.

“Usually we sell maybe double the amount of cheap panettone to expensive panettone,” he said. “This year it was the other way around, like three to one expensive panettone to cheap panettone.”

In general, Weber said, the top-selling items were “more on the gifty side than on the party side.”

“All of the gift tins of stuff, I bumped that pretty hard, and we sold out really quickly. And we sold a lot of gift sets. I couldn’t even keep them on the shelf. I got in those little hot sauce gift packs and some other gift pack things and they just flew out of here. I literally could not keep them in stock, like sometimes I’d put them on the shelf and they’d be gone the same day,” he said.

“PEOPLE BOUGHT EXPENSIVE THINGS THIS YEAR AS COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEARS.”

BULK AND SPECIALTY BUYER, YURI WEBER

Weber added, “We sold a lot more of what I consider super-expensive cookies, like a 10-ounce thing of cookies for 10 bucks. We sold tons of those types of things. They were in a cute little tin. I don’t think people were taking home and opening and eating all of them. They were a gift item.”

On the other hand, he said, “We definitely sold a lot less expensive cheese than we have. We sold a lot more expensive cheese over Thanksgiving than we did New Year’s, which is really unusual. New Year’s is one of those times when I can’t keep triple cream cheese on the shelf to save my life. I could stand there all day refilling Mount Tam and whatever other triple cream cheeses we have, and I couldn’t keep up. But this year, we sold some, but not nearly like we normally do.”



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

PARTIES

In that way, Weber said it was “similar to last year. We didn’t sell a lot of super-expensive party cheese like we did in 2019. Christmas and New Year’s, it just didn’t move.”

“I kind of thought that that might not be the case this year. I thought maybe things would be returned more to normal, but we did not sell a lot of the things you would bring to a party or have at a party,” he added.

“I don’t think there were very many dinner parties at all,” said Weber. “There were definitely many fewer cheese plates this year. I feel like people maybe compensated [for not having been able to gather the year before] and then maybe retreated [because of Omicron].”

Using himself as an example, Weber said, “We had people over for Thanksgiving and

then that was it. That was our thing we did at home. There weren't any other people coming over to our house after that. Everything seemed to kind of shut down after that."



Yuri Weber recalled that the Coop sold tons of expensive cookies in cute tins as gift items.

Marisa Bowe is a Williamsburg-based writer who wishes she lived closer to the Coop.