

HEY-HEY, HO-HO! GET TO KNOW JOE 2.0

August 5, 2025



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

INCOMING GENERAL MANAGER JOSEPH SZLADEK ON SNACKS, CYBER ATTACKS AND THE COOP'S NEXT CHAPTER

August 5, 2025

By Anita Bushell

It took eight months and a nationwide search to identify a successor to Joe Holtz, who announced his retirement in October after 50 years at the Coop, but the food cooperative has a new General Manager. Joseph Szladek, who has worked at the Coop for fifteen years, began his new role on June 23.

Szladek, 46, held managerial roles at Whole Foods Market in New York and Boston before joining the Coop staff in 2010. His first job was as a Produce and Meat Buyer. Since 2015, he has served as the General Coordinator for Purchasing and Operations, overseeing a team of 16 buyers and managing \$50 million in annual wholesale purchases. He also co-managed the 45 Receiving Coordinators who supervise over 1,000 weekly member-workers.

Over his career at the Coop, Szladek has used technology to enhance operational efficiency, developing an in-house inventory system and introducing electronic shelf labels. He played a crucial role in stabilizing the Coop's finances throughout the pandemic and was pivotal to ensuring a smooth return to member labor. We sat down with him to hear about his vision for the Coop's next chapter.

As you think about the health of the Coop going forward, what would you say your biggest concerns are?

So many things. Increased competition, supply chain instability, food inflation, automation, for starters. These are all serious challenges, and each one is becoming more acute, seemingly by the day. I'm also concerned about internal divisions among some members, particularly around how to move forward on issues like governance, General Meeting formats and boycotts. These tensions are putting a strain on the Coop's membership body, committees, staff and operations. That said, between the membership and staff, the Coop has a *tremendous* amount of institutional knowledge and institutional resilience. We've navigated tough situations before, and I believe we're well prepared for whatever comes next.



What can we look forward to with you stepping into this new role?

Another 50 years [of the Coop's existence], at the very least! And, continuity. Of course, we'll remain committed to the values and practices that have kept the Coop running strong for so long. Beyond that, we're preparing to join Coop Deals, a program through National Cooperative Grocers (NCG), where members will see lower prices on about 100 rotating items every two weeks. We also have plans to expand our prepared foods offerings, building on the success of the Court Street sandwiches and Chez Chrystelle salads.

How is the Coop addressing the financial realities of recovering from the pandemic?

We've made it through the more intense financial challenges that the pandemic brought—most notably the suspension of member labor in March of 2020 due to Covid protocols and its resumption in the Summer of 2021. Operating the Coop without member labor was extremely difficult for the Coop financially. We weathered that period by raising the markup from 21% to 25% with General Meeting approval, receiving increased investment from members, tapping into federal pandemic relief programs and availing ourselves of the help of over 150 members who worked at the Coop as temporary staff members. We're so grateful for their support during that time!

Looking ahead, we're not confident that similar federal programs would be available to grocery stores in the event of another pandemic, so we've committed to keeping larger cash reserves on hand.

"MY NAME IS ALSO JOE, BUT I SUSPECT OUR APPROACHES WILL DIFFER IN SOME WAYS."

If you were able to address each Coop member individually, what would you like to say to them?

When I speak with members I ask some of the same questions about the Coop that you're asking me right now. What do you value most about the Coop? What concerns you? What frustrates you? What changes would you most like to see in the future?

I'd say to each member that I know I need to earn your trust in me in this new role as General Manager. And I thank you for giving me that chance.

When you shop at the Coop what frustrates you the most?

An empty shelf when I know we have that item in the basement!

How does the Coop represent your personal values?

The Coop provides amazing food at low prices to 17,000 working members. In the process, we support small farms and small businesses. We are a great employer and strong member of the community. My personal values align with so much of what we do. That's why I'm here. I know so many members and staff feel the same way.

What did you buy last week at the Coop?

It was my daughter's tenth birthday so I bought something that I've never purchased before: Harry's Berries Strawberries. She loved them, but I told her to not get used to them—they're so expensive! Otherwise, I picked up lots of peaches, mangoes and cherries, in addition to the regular assortment of produce. We eat a lot of medjool dates and dried figs at home. I also bought my favorite snack combination: Mi Niña Pico De Gallo chips and Momo Edamame dip.

“WE’VE NAVIGATED TOUGH SITUATIONS BEFORE, AND I BELIEVE WE’RE WELL PRE-

PARED FOR WHATEVER COMES NEXT."

If someone were to ask you why it's better to shop at the Coop than Costco, how would you respond?

Well, for one, you don't have to buy a gallon of Bonne Maman if you just need some jam. Costco is a great employer, better than most in grocery retail, but the intersection of selection, quality and price at the Coop is unmatched. That's only possible through Cooperation. Members contribute over 80% of the labor needed to run the store—and they own the place! It's a model rooted in community, not profit. This allows us to prioritize small local farms and small businesses whose values more closely overlap with ours. It also provides a real alternative to both big-box consolidation and giant jars of Bonne Maman jam.

How do you see your role as being different from Joe Holtz?

Joe was such an integral part of the Coop's founding. His fingerprints are everywhere, from developing our electronic inventory system back when that was unheard of to writing the bylaws, to everything in between. My role, working alongside staff and members, is to build on that foundation while preserving its strength. There are systems to improve and opportunities to increase transparency. I want to continue Joe's legacy of using technology thoughtfully, while focusing on updating operations, strengthening communication and keeping the Coop strong into the future. My name is also Joe, but I suspect our approaches will differ in some ways.

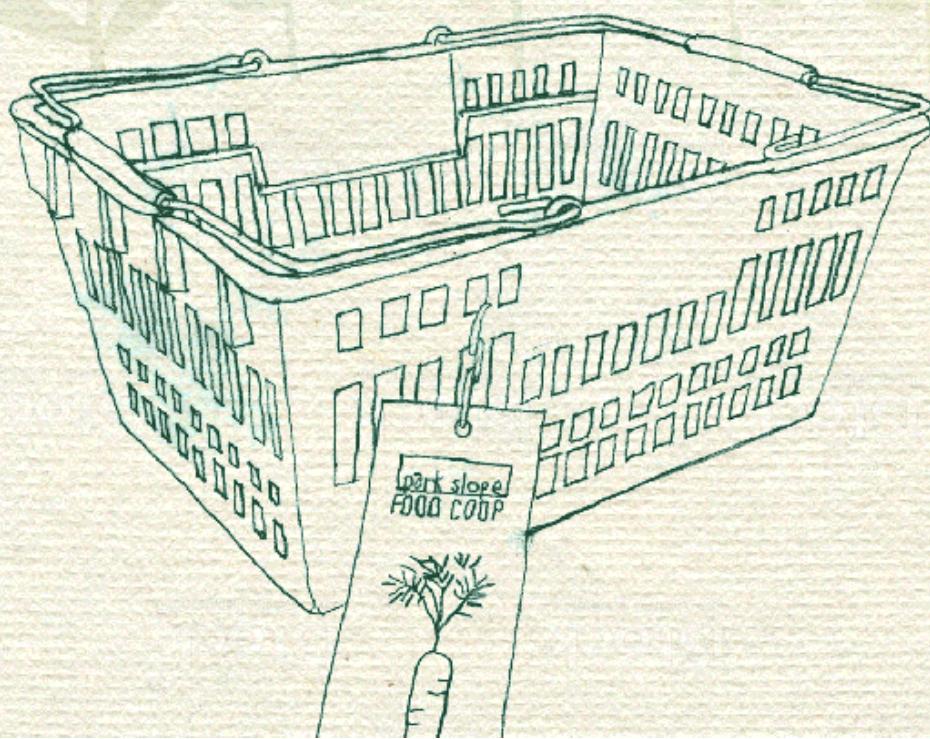
Did Joe have any advice for you?

Joe has so much excellent advice to share but one thing that stands out is when he says we should never be overconfident about the Coop's future and continued success. Joe injects humor into nearly everything he talks about, but come to think of it, not so much when he's talking about risks to the Coop's future.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer who has been published in Friends Journal, Ford Foundation Report, and Uncensored: American Experiences with Poverty and Homelessness. She just published her debut novel, One Way to Whitefish.

READING THE LABEL ON A COOP STAPLE: A LOOK INSIDE THE FIELD DAY BRAND

August 5, 2025



March 11, 2025

By Emmett Lindner

Any day of the week, the Coop shelves are filled with a variety of colorful produce, a bounty of cheeses and canned goods that can save dinner in a pinch. But in many of the aisles there is at least one constant: a Field Day product.

Whether it's a bag of spaghetti, a can of tuna or a jar of peanut butter, Field Day, a private label, is always stocked and at an affordable price. Some of their products regularly (and staggeringly) outperform competing goods.

Eden black beans, which come in at \$2.29 apiece, average sales of 90 cans a week, while Field Day's equivalent, for \$1.27, has average sales of about 400 a week, according to Gillian Chi, one of the Coop's buyers.

"It's not even the price at that point, because if it tasted bad, people wouldn't be buying that many more cans of it," Ms. Chi said. "I like to buy the Field Day Honey Nut O's, because it is one of the few store-brand cereals that my children will eat."

THE COOP HAS BECOME THE LARGEST SINGLE-STORE PURCHASER OF THE FIELD DAY BRAND IN THE COUNTRY.

A promotion last fall at the Coop helped increase awareness of Field Day's products. Discounts ranged from 10 to 27 percent, Ms. Chi said, and the effects are still making noise at the checkout aisles.

The promotion was the brainchild of the National Co+op Grocers (NCG), of which PSFC is a member, and UNFI, which, when it started, was called United Natural Foods, Inc. NCG and UNFI jointly launched Field Day in 2009. Ben Nauman, the chief commer-

cial officer and senior director of purchasing of NCG, who worked to get Field Day into members' pantries, said the two organizations were victims of their own success.

"A lot of shoppers tried Field Day for the first time as a result of that promotion, and they've come back to buy more," Mr. Nauman said. UNFI, he added, has had a hard time keeping up with demand: "It's been an exciting thing—a short-term problem, we'll get it solved long term."

The Coop has become the largest single-store purchaser of the brand in the country—across the board, Field Day is the top brand in all NCG member coops, with retail sales 25 percent higher than that of Organic Valley products, according to Mr. Nauman. NCG member coops sold more than \$45 million in Field Day products in 2024.

Like any highly visible product, members can be left to wonder about the story behind the label. In an interview, Mr. Nauman discussed Field Day's origins, its appeal and what's next for the brand. This interview has been edited and condensed.

How did NCG's relationship with Field Day begin?

The Field Day brand was initially launched in 2009, at a point in time when NCG was actually in the middle of doing private-label research. What would it take for us to own our own brand?

Whole Foods has the 365 brand, Kroger has the Simple Truth brand. When they go to get products manufactured with their label, they typically will go to a manufacturer or a co-packer to do that, and it's very difficult, even with NCG's combined volume of all of the coops nationally, to secure the product that you need, and at the cost that you want to get it at.

UNFI created the brand from scratch. They launched it with a very small number of items, and also with pricing that was a better value. If you were to look at Field Day pricing in 2009, versus Westbrae or Eden, it was a better value, but [it] was not com-

parable to Whole Foods 365, or Kroger Simple Truth or Trader Joe's pricing. It was only in 2015 when we focused on trying to get the pricing dialed in to be more competitive with other retailers' private labels that it really took off.

MOST OF OUR DESIRE FOR PRIVATE LABEL WAS REALLY DRIVEN BY BEING ABLE TO MAKE ORGANIC AND NATURAL AND BETTER-FOR-YOU PRODUCTS MORE AFFORDABLE, AND ACCESSIBLE TO MORE OF THE SHOPPERS.

What did you want out of a private label, and how did Field Day fit those needs?

In terms of the desire to have a private label, it's really to provide for the need of the opening price point in many product segments. Most food coops don't operate with the Park Slope model, where you have extremely low retail margins that are provided. Most of our desire for private label was really driven by being able to make organic and natural and better-for-you products more affordable, and accessible to more of the shoppers.

Field Day was a good fit for us because they share many of the most important values that we have in terms of product attributes and what sort of product specifications are required for the brand.

On a couple of different occasions, we've actually put the business out to bid and allowed competitors of the Field Day brand to bid to be our partner, doing something like what Field Day does. And Field Day has consistently come back with the best economics.

What attributes, specifically, made Field Day attractive?

By and large, we're looking for products that are natural. We're looking for products

that are free from a lot of different food additives and organic wherever possible. UNFI was willing to look in the space of things like sugar, where adding fair trade certification or fair trade spec without adding any additional cost was really meaningful to us, since we know that that matters a lot to some of the smallholder farmers that are involved in the sugar business.

Similarly, they've been willing to work with us on packaging specs moving towards either more recyclable or glass packaging in some areas where that's really important to us, ensuring that the packaging is BPA free.

Where does Field Day source their products?

They've got both an international and national supply chain. For a product like Field Day, more often than not, there's very little that is actually manufactured and then produced by a single label.

Most of the products are actually produced by what are referred to as co-packers. Oftentimes, the Field Day items are going to be piggybacking a production run for a brand like Whole Foods 365 or a brand like Kroger Simple Truth. They may know who the supplier is, and they may go to that supplier and say, "When you finish the Whole Foods run, do an extra three truckloads for me in the Field Day label."

You'll often find then that there's a lot of similarity in product when comparing one retailer's private-label product to another, and that stems in part from this contract-manufacturing business model, where a retailer (or in the case of Field Day, wholesale grocer) pays the manufacturer to keep the production line going and simply change the label. It's also one of the reasons private-label products tend to cost less than many of the brands we're familiar with, and in most cases will result in a retail price typically at least 20 percent lower than the national brand.

FIELD DAY WAS ABLE TO CUT IN HALF WHAT IT TAKES TO BUY A BAG OF SUGAR,

AND WE DID THAT AT A FAIR-TRADE SPECIFICATION, WHICH IS FANTASTIC.

As Field Day grows, does that mean more new products?

In the next year, I think we'll add 50 new items. I think the year after that, we're planning on 75 additional new Field Day items and starting to push into some of the perimeter departments in the refrigerated case and the frozen case.

Is there one that you're most excited about launching?

I do really like the sugars. I'm excited about those, because I think if you looked at what was available in the natural products industry prior to the Field Day sugars coming to market, we were able to cut in half what it takes to buy a bag of sugar, and we did that at a fair-trade specification, which is fantastic. Organic sugar versus a bag of Domino, or a bag of C&H [from the California and Hawaiian Sugar Company], that sort of thing has always been awfully expensive, and sugars really come down a lot with Field Day.

What is the foundation of the NCG?

National Co+op Grocers is a purchasing coop, first and foremost, and we've got about 160 members with over 200 retail locations throughout the United States. We were created by regional associations of food coops, and, kind of curiously, those regional associations created NCG, initially, to go out and develop a private-label program.

There were some logistical challenges inherent in doing that. And so NCG had to reinvent itself, and one of the ways in which it did that is to create one strong national organization, so all of the regional organizations combined, and now we're able to go to market as a national, virtual chain of retail food coops. We basically pool the purchasing power of food coops all across the country to provide lower costs and better terms of service to our community-owned food coops.

Emmett Lindner works on the breaking and trending news desk at The New York Times.

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: GET TO KNOW COOP MAINSTAY KAREN MANCUSO

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February 18, 2025

By *Susannah Jacob*

Karen Mancuso has been a steady presence at the Park Slope Food Coop for over two decades. She's often one of the first people who members see when they walk through the door, and though her official title is Membership Coordinator, she has a finger in seemingly every pot of Coop life—from DJing during shopping hours and stepping in as traffic cop when the lines get unruly, to working as the *Gazette* Staff Liaison. And yet, she keeps a strikingly low profile. We convinced Mancuso, 51, who is nearing her 23-year Coop anniversary, to sit down with us and spill some (herbal) tea.

When did you join the Coop?

I joined the Coop in 2001, right after 9/11. I had come to an orientation at the Coop as soon as I moved to Park Slope in 1997, but never got around to joining. I was working in publishing: I was a fact-checker at *Entertainment Weekly*, a freelance writer at *Time Out*, and a copy editor at Barnesandnoble.com. I was laid off when the big tech bubble burst [in 2000]. I was going to move to Seattle because my best friends had moved out there. I had a ticket and everything, I was leaving on September 12, 2001. And then 9/11 happened, and I reassessed. I thought: I want to stay in New York. And then one of the first things I did when I really decided I was going to stay was join the Coop. My first shifts were stocking shelves. And then I was hired as a Membership Coordinator six months later.

What do you recall about your first days as a Coop employee?

At the time I was hired, the office had a certain reputation. It was an intimidating place, where no one wanted to go. Other than the time I came to the orientation, I had never even been upstairs. As an outsider, I wanted to avoid it at all costs.

What was intimidating about it?

The reputation of the people who worked there, who would, of course, later become my colleagues and my friends, was similar to the Coop's reputation for rules and order. But I applied, and I got the job. And so there I was, now one of these "scary" people in the office. I think when I was hired, along with a few other new people, it was the beginning of a shift where the reputation that the office had for being strict started to sort of soften. A group of us helped shift the culture unknowingly. Ann Herpel, who is a General Coordinator now, and Alex Marquez, now in the IT Department. The three of us weren't interested in making people feel bad because they were suspended. We wanted to help them.

"AT THE TIME I WAS HIRED, THE OFFICE HAD A CERTAIN REPUTATION. IT WAS AN INTIMIDATING PLACE, WHERE NO ONE WANTED TO GO."

Tell me more about your different roles over the years.

Membership Coordinators work in administration. We help create and keep systems running. We help coordinate the labor of almost 17,000 members. One of the first things that I started helping with when I was hired was the *Gazette* because there was one general coordinator, Linda Wheeler, who has since retired—she was in charge of the *Gazette* and she wanted some help. I started out doing basic editorial assistant stuff for her. And eventually she retired, and I took over the *Gazette*. Some of my other responsibilities over the years were supervising the Orientation Committee and coordinating the Board of Directors elections. I also have done a lot of in-house writing—manuals, flyers, letters to members. And I've been the de facto Coop proofreader. I also help manage the Membership Office and I'm on the shopping floor several hours a week.

And how has the culture of the *Gazette* changed over the years?

Well, we still have reporters and editors, and we still have photographers and illustra-

tors. But the members work from home now that we moved from print to online. A lot of the art department used to come in on the weekends and work together at the Coop.

How have you seen the internal culture of the Coop change?

Fundamentally, the Coop is the same place it was when it started in 1973 and when I joined the staff in 2002—it's a group of people working together to save money on groceries. But I think the culture has changed a lot. There are a lot of members who disengage by using their phones—they're stocking shelves and they're listening to a podcast or to music. Some checkout workers are staring at their phones. In the membership office, we were certainly busier before we digitized everything, because people were calling on the phone all day, they were coming in with questions. Now you can manage your membership from home online. The office was a lot busier back in the day. And I'd say we probably all talked to each other a lot more. Now, in the down-time, people are staring at their phones. Listen, I have a wife and a kid and they text me a lot so I get it, but I do wish we could all put down our phones more. I still think the Coop is a special place where there is a lot of communication. You can be standing in an aisle shopping, and there could be someone standing right next to you, and you might start talking to them. You may not know them, but you might start talking to them because we're in the Coop together. You're not going to do that in Key Food.

How do you personally use the Coop as a grocery store?

Right now I work four days a week instead of five, because I have a toddler and I share childcare responsibilities, but I shop every day that I'm here. We have a lot of dietary preferences in my house. Whereas I eat everything, my wife doesn't eat meat or dairy, and then I have a soon to be four-year-old who only eats pasta and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Some of the things that I've been buying forever are probably some of the most popular things we sell, like Lacinato kale and dried mangos. I do love our cosmetics department. Right now, I'm really into the Ursa Major products.

Do you consider yourself a Coop lifer?

I'm 51, and I started working here when I was in my late twenties. I think there's probably a good chance that I'm going to retire here. If you're a lifer, you feel really protective of the Coop. I really want it to succeed. I want it to continue. I want my son to grow up shopping here. I wish that maybe we could work on a second location. Unfortunately, that got squashed at a General Meeting, but I hope that in the next couple of years, that conversation could be picked up again, because there's no reason why our model can't be in other places.

"YOU CAN BE STANDING IN AN AISLE SHOPPING, AND THERE COULD BE SOMEONE STANDING RIGHT NEXT TO YOU, AND YOU MIGHT START TALKING TO THEM. YOU MAY NOT KNOW THEM, BUT YOU MIGHT START TALKING TO THEM BECAUSE WE'RE IN THE COOP TOGETHER. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO DO THAT IN KEY FOOD."

Where did you grow up and how did your upbringing inform your commitment to the Coop?

I grew up in suburban New Jersey. My parents were very conventional, and I think I rebelled against that. I always wanted to move to New York. My father grew up in Queens and my great grandfather owned a bookstore for decades in Murray Hill. New York City is in my blood. Growing up, my family shopped at ShopRite, but I had a good friend whose parents shopped at the local health food store, and I would go in there sometimes with them. I remember seeing a bar of Tiger's Milk, one of those old protein bars, and Tom's of Maine toothpaste, and being like, what is this cool stuff? And just wanting it, even at nine-years-old.

What creative work do you do outside the Coop?

The one thing that few people probably know about me is that I was doing stand-up

comedy for a while. I did it for a few years, sort of as a challenge from a good friend of mine. I had been writing satire for the *Gazette*'s April Fool's issues and then I just started writing stand up from there. I took a class at Carolines, which is a way a lot of people got started. And then I was able to do a few nights there, and then some bars and restaurants, and a queer comedy festival. When Covid hit, that shut everything down, and then I ended up having a kid right after. Now that I'm a mom I have not really had the time or energy to return to it. But I've always been a writer.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Susannah Jacob is a native Texan and PhD student of US history. She takes pride in her proficient operation of the slotted, plastic bag-taper machine in the Coop's bulk department.

THE PUSH BEHIND THE COOP'S SWANKY NEW STREET CARTS

August 5, 2025



By Anita Bushell

Got a lot of groceries to cart home? You're in luck: The Coop has a fleet of bigger, shinier grey beasts to aid the journey back to your doorstep. The new models have a smoother glide and don't make as much noise on the sidewalk as the older street carts, but they have their downsides. Coop member Tom Paul, who does the walker shift, observes: "They aren't deep enough to carry heavier loads of grocery bags but they are lighter and have less rattle than the older, heavier carts."

We spoke with General Manager Joe Holtz, who oversees the cart supply at the Coop, about the need for new models, the replacement process and his favorite features of the new fleet. We also got to the bottom of a rumored "national cart shortage."

Let's start with terminology. What are the outdoor carts called?

The carts you are referring to are what we call street carts or walker carts or simply outdoor carts. The manufacturer of the old carts called them "Carry Out Carts." The company we're using now calls them "Grocery Bagger Carts."

How would you describe your role in overseeing our cart supply?

I have been ordering outdoor carts since we started using them in the early 2000's. Before I order new carts, I consult with other staff, in particular membership coordinators, as to whether the number of carts that we have are insufficient for the Coop's needs.

THEY HANDLE GREAT. THEY OPERATE MORE LIKE A SPORTS CAR. I HAVE NEVER DRIVEN A SPORTS CAR.

What was the problem with the old carts?

There was no problem with the old carts. The old carts were made by Technibilt, which was bought by the German company, Wanzl, in 2012. I believe we started buying them around the time we expanded into our third building in 2001 (the third building is where aisles four, five, six, and seven are, as well as all the checkouts). Then Wanzl/Technibilt decided to stop making them.

How long did we have the old carts?

The first carts we bought from Technibilt were around 2001. The first model we bought had wheels that were inset, meaning that the wheels did not add width to the cart. The problem was that many times people found that the wheels interfered with where one needs to place one's feet while walking behind the cart. Then a new model came out with the wheels on the outside and that problem was solved.

What are the features of the new street carts at the Coop?

They are a little wider. It's a little harder to hang bags from them due to shortness of the upper extension of the verticals. They handle great. They operate more like a sports car. I have never driven a sports car.

THE "NATIONAL CART SHORTAGE" WAS MENTIONED ON A LOUDSPEAKER ANNOUNCEMENT THIS WINTER URGING SHOPPERS TO BE PROMPT ABOUT RETURNING THEIR SHOPPING CARTS TO THE PARKING AREA WHEN THEY WERE NO LONGER NEEDED.



New cart on the left; old cart on the right.

Why did we need new carts?

Over the years, the main reason we need new carts is that they go missing. Occasionally a cart gets so old and so beat up that it can longer be repaired. But that is rare compared to carts going missing.

We heard there is a “national shopping cart shortage.” Have you heard of this shortage as well? [Editor’s note: the “national cart shortage” was mentioned on a loudspeaker announcement this winter urging members to be prompt about returning their shopping carts to the parking area when they were no longer needed.]

Not a “shortage” but rather a lag. It took about 18 weeks for the new carts to arrive after we placed an order. They arrived in October after having been ordered in June.

How many outdoor carts does the Coop own, and how many new ones did you order?

Based on input from other staff, we determined that we should have a minimum of eight carts. I was pleasantly surprised that we still had six old carts when the [six] new ones arrived. I expected that the old carts could have been as low as four based on historical attrition rates. As of last week, two of the new carts were missing, one was out service as it was in need of repairs, and three were in service. There were still six old carts last week. Sometimes missing carts come back.

How much do the new carts cost?

The price for each cart, including the cost of delivery, was about \$450.

What has feedback on the new carts been like?

I have not heard much from anyone except that it is nice to not have a cart shortage—but that is temporary. We may have to order more soon. The new carts are not as rugged as the old carts, in regard to the back wheels system. Our Facilities Coordinator, Crystal Goldenstein, is looking into improving the wheel system on the new carts so that they are more durable.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer and native New Yorker who just released Object Essays. Her work has been published in Friends Journal, Motherwell Magazine, and Grande Dame Literary.

IT'S ALWAYS ICE CREAM SEASON AT THE COOP

August 5, 2025



By Sara Ivry

Ice cream has been a favorite treat since as far back as any of us can remember. I grew up in Massachusetts in the 80s, where my fellow New Englanders and I hoovered nearly 23 quarts of ice cream per person annually, far outpacing the rest of the country, where, according to data from the International Ice Cream Association, the average hovered closer to 15. In the decades since, the national average has

ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

ticked up; the International Dairy Foods Association estimates that Americans now eat about 16 quarts per person per year. In the early part of the pandemic, I satisfied my hankering for ice cream care of Arethusa Farm, a Litchfield County, Connecticut purveyor whose work is, in a word, sublime. I was, at the time, staying with my parents in Northwest Connecticut, near the creamery's headquarters. But once back in Brooklyn, the only place I could find Arethusa was at a specialty grocer where the mark-up from what I paid per pint in Connecticut was nearly 100%. I mostly went without it.



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

Then, earlier this year, to my great delight pints of Arethusa appeared at the Food Coop. There was chocolate! Vanilla! Toasted almond and coconut! When I realized my all-time favorite flavor—coffee—was missing, however, I submitted a member request that the Coop carry it, too. Soon thereafter, it materialized in the shelves. That's thanks to Kimberly Curran, one of the Coop's frozen foods buyers, who pays close attention to members' tastes and recommendations in the eternal and noble pursuit of

deliciousness. Curran started shopping at the Coop as a kid with her parents some 30 years ago. Now a parent herself to a 13-year-old, Curran took the position of frozen buyer six years ago. She spoke about about her work stocking one of the Coop's most popular destinations.

Sara Ivry:

First, I'm so grateful that you brought in that Arethusa coffee flavor.

Kimberly Curran:

I'm so glad. That's what I strive for. Customer service runs in my blood. My grandfather was a grocer on Lenox Avenue in Harlem. I relish buying the ice cream because people really respond to affirmation like, "Hey, I want this pint in the Coop." And then you get it and they buy it. It's a great ecosystem.

Ivry:

What factors must you consider in buying ice cream for the Coop?

Curran:

Procurement. You have to be mindful of a heavily perishable item. There are cold chain supplies to be mindful of, like, you know, keeping things that come off a truck. You want it back in this cold storage as fast as possible. Consideration for what will sell. People love a classic vanilla or chocolate or, in your case, coffee. And we make room for epic stuff as well. We have a lot of everything-but-the-kitchen-sink kind of pints.



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

KIMBERLY CURRAN, A FROZEN FOODS BUYER AT THE COOP, PAYS CLOSE ATTENTION TO MEMBERS' TASTES AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE ETERNAL AND NOBLE PURSUIT OF DELICIOUSNESS.

Ivry:

What's the weirdest request that you've fielded?

Curran:

When someone first said "the Arethusa toasted almond and coconut needs to happen" I had to look it up. They have a huge following for just that flavor specifically. I went through three vendors—emailed them—they're like, 'No, I don't have this.' Then I found one, and I was like, 'Send me three cases.' It's always a nuanced conversation to bring a new item into the Coop.

Ivry:

How so?

Curran:

You have to be mindful of bringing items in that will sell that meet the Coop standards for dairy or the ingredients list. And that people will enjoy buying and are reasonably priced. We have expensive ice creams, but we also have reasonably priced pints. We need that middle ground. I personally always strive to have small businesses if I can, local businesses, if I can, you know, being a Coop kid.

The Coop's mission really does stick in my head. As a full-time employee, I've taken that to heart. In recent years—2020 was a reckoning for everyone, retailers included—I took it upon myself to research more POC companies. More small companies, more local companies to encourage more of them in the ice cream case. That I could do my part as far as creating or continuing to create an inclusive environment that is cost effective as well.

That we can bring in people of color and women-owned businesses and that my supervisors allow the space for that—I really do appreciate that. I want that case to feel like it's got something for everyone. I want it to be inclusive. If somebody comes to me with, 'We don't have something,' I'll try and bring it in. I always strive to do that, and that's the messaging I give to any member who reaches out. Including you.

Ivry:

Are there many ice cream companies that are owned by women or by people of color?

Curran:

Luckily, I got a lot of really great leads on quite a few. Noona's, Korean-inspired pints, was in before I had ice cream as a category for buying. It's amazing; they have yuzu blossom flavor, they have a dairy-free green tea ice cream. They have a black sesame that everyone goes crazy for. And the founder's husband owns Brooklyn Cured.

It's a New York story where there are two vendors that provide to the Coop. It's a fairy tale, very romantic.

Throughout the years I've brought in epically strange pints by Oddfellows. They're owned by people of color. How they started their company is adorable; it was a trio, a wife and husband and their friend, who's a chef. The wife was pregnant with twins and she couldn't quell her cravings for a strange sweet pint, and the chef made something pretzel, something chocolatey, something peanut buttery, something miso. And then they started a company based on a really satisfying ice cream. There are so many stories like this in Brooklyn.

We have Caribbean-inspired Island Pops, they're on Nostrand Avenue; I have Del's and Adirondack, who are local. They feel it's important to be part of the Park Slope Food Coop, it's worth their time and energy. When I bring them in, it's supporting the local businesses of Brooklyn and New York. That's super vital to having small shops survive in this economy. I want to keep a good cycle of purchasing and providing going.

IT'S YEAR ROUND. IT DOES NOT SLOW DURING THE WINTER. THE FLAVORS JUST SHIFT.

Ivry:

Do the ice cream sellers come to you or you go to them to find new flavors and makers?

Curran:

It's a combination. Before the pandemic, makers would call the membership office, create a vendor date, tour the Coop, and chat with the buyer. Post Covid, there's no demonstrations of food, and no real schedule for vendors to come in, so it's been kind of a challenge.



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

A lot of member suggestions. Word of mouth. It could be the buyer's research. You have to follow trends, watch stats. Look at trends from years past. Historically, vanilla has always been popular at the holidays—'We need vanilla for pies!' But other people have holidays, and interesting flavors are really welcome. Malai has these wonderful seasonal spiced chocolate pints. I ordered a bunch of roses and cinnamon. I have at least five new SKUs apart from the chai and the Turkish coffee pints we always carry. I have some holiday favorites that I try and bring in every year that I highlight. And then *New York Times* highlighted Malai like last week so that we'll see a surge by word of mouth.

Ivry:

How much ice cream does the Coop sell per week?

Curran:

Cases upon cases. If we had to put a price tag on it, it would be innumerable. It's year round. It does not slow during the winter. The flavors just shift. In the summertime it's

sorbet and then sorbet slows down. And then the shift goes back to like 'lighter' flavors in the summertime.

Ivry:

Are there other notable trends?

Curran:

People have a vast palette. I have people who absolutely love the holiday movie-inspired ice creams. I just brought an Oddfellows capsule, which is a small run, in for the holidays. We have Banofee Pie from *Love, Actually*. They had *Elf*'s Buddi Spaghetti Sundae; it doesn't have spaghetti in the pint, but it's everything he threw on his morning spaghetti. We have Razzleberry Dressing, which is one of my dad's favorites from *Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol*.

Ivry:

But it's not all small, indie ice cream purveyors.

Curran:

We have Aldens. We have Haagen Dazs, and it sells. If I took it out of the roster, I would get a lot of push back from membership. Why get rid of Ben and Jerry's? Why get rid of Haagen Dazs? You cannot get radical; you can't just tell people they can't eat the ice cream they're requesting.

Ivry:

What's your personal favorite?

Curran:

If I had to choose—the Dolcezza marscapone and berries. It has a tartness and a beautiful swirl of seasonal fruit. That's the first one that comes to mind. I love the yuzu by Noona's. If I had to pick a third, it would probably be the Malai rose with cinnamon. It's so unctuous and delightful as far as the floral palate.

Ivry:

When you do get a new flavor in how much of it you buy?

Curran:

It depends. Sometimes I'll ask colleagues, "What do you think about this pint?" while we're ordering? You know, and I kind of take the temperature. If I ask our social media person to post it, I don't want to run out. Sometimes people will see something on the Coop's Instagram account as a story and they'll run to it. A new item brings excitement.



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

I had a coworker who really had her hand on the pulse of like, you know, arts and culture. She would go, "Hey, you know, this was in the *Times* article last weekend," Or my sister who's much younger will be like, "Hey, Del's got a spot in this local article," and then you should probably bring more in.

Ivry:

I once produced a radio interview about an ice cream shop on Cape Cod that was selling lobster ice cream. Vanilla with lobster bits it in.

Curran:

Amazing. People will try crazy flavors. We had bacon, egg, and cheese. It has a swirl of custardy Velveeta, which I'm not crazy for. I thought people would like it. It also had soy bacon pieces in it. And, I think it might've had lard. Then we had a cornbread ice cream that people would buy cases of; it did have lard and I had to put it on the label, so people knew even if they were vegetarian and they ate honey and ate dairy, that it had lard.

Ivry:

Do you taste every ice cream that you bring in?

Curran:

I get a little taste. And I encourage staff to give feedback. If a vendor has given me a sample, I'm like, "Hey, it's in the fridge. Let me know what you think. Here's the details on it."

There was a particular pint that was not for the faint of heart. Not for the food unadventurous. It had granulated garlic and onion on like a sesame stick or something. I was like, "Please be mindful that there are aromatics in there and please also be mindful that everywhere else in the world with exception for America has savory puddings and desserts and ice cream." Like, "Don't get it twisted just because we're sort of middle of the road in our palate and adventures in America, this is not unusual and you should research it before you say anything out of bounds." People did enjoy it. But ice cream shouldn't have a disclaimer. You should be brave or you shouldn't try it.

A long-time Food Coop member, Sara Ivry lives in Clinton Hill with her son, who is partial to Blue Marble's strawberry ice cream.