

WHERE HAVE ALL THE DOMESTIC CHESTNUTS GONE?

March 19, 2024



By Anita Bushell

Ever wonder why chestnuts in the produce aisle come from, of all places, Italy? I did, when I spied them on a dull November day, while placing sweet potatoes in my cart. Late fall had officially arrived, and purchases of berries and melons had transitioned to root vegetables and, maybe, chestnuts.

As I lifted handfuls of the smooth brown nuts into a pale green bag, I thought that perhaps my spouse might roast them later that day. And that was when I saw the sign saying the chestnuts hailed from Italy.

“We sell between 50-150 lbs. at their peak,” John Horsman, a buyer for the Coop’s produce department says, “for a few weeks leading up to Christmas. We purchase our chestnuts directly from Hunts Point Market. Our current suppliers at the moment are not offering an American chestnut but I have asked if they will look into it for next year. We have traditionally purchased our chestnuts from Italy since we have not seen chestnuts offered on any of our availability lists from local sources.”

Why not local? There’s a simple answer: blight. Beginning in the early 1900s, approximately three billion East Coast American chestnuts were wiped out, victims of the fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica*, discovered on the bark of a dying chestnut tree at the Bronx Zoo. Researchers traced the fungus to Japanese chestnut trees, which began arriving in the U.S. as early as 1876. By the 1950s, the number of American chestnuts lost to the blight was an estimated 4 billion.

Yet miraculously the chestnut, which is rich in vitamin C, antioxidants and calories, and whose leaves contain high levels of essential plant nutrients, has not died. Millions of American chestnuts, sprouting from old roots, manage to survive in forests in the Washington, D.C. region and in other locations in the eastern United States.

UNTIL THE BLIGHT, THE MIGHTY AMERICAN CHESTNUT, WHICH COULD GROW AS TALL AS 120 FEET AND WAS REFERRED TO AS THE “REDWOOD OF THE EAST,” POPULATED THE EAST COAST FOR 30 TO 40 MILLION YEARS.

Until the blight, the mighty American chestnut, which could grow as tall as 120 feet and was referred to as the “redwood of the East,” populated the East Coast for 30 to 40 million years, thriving in forests from Maine to Florida, nourishing not only humans, but animals. Its benefits were so widespread that Indigenous peoples of the Appalachians, such as the Catawba, Chantah and Chikasha, cultivated the tree.

In addition, the chestnut was a valuable source of timber that was considered the sin-

gle most American cut tree species in 1915. According to a 2020 *New York Times Magazine* article: “As railroad ties and telephone poles, where durability trumped aesthetics, chestnut helped build industrial America.” Chestnut barns, cabins and churches still stand today. When the blight began killing thousands of American chestnut timber trees, the *Times* called it “the most rapid and destructive fungus known to the world.”

These days the American chestnut is undergoing a transformation as multiple non-profit organizations, including the American Chestnut Foundation, try to develop a blight-resistant American chestnut tree through research and breeding. The foundation refers to the state of the chestnut as one of demise, rather than extinction. According to its website, “The blight cannot kill the underground root system as the pathogen is unable to compete with soil microorganisms.”

As it turns out, the East Coast chestnut is once again available, just not in vast quantities. Thanks to the innovation and hybridization of folks like Kim and David Bryant, founders of Virginia Chestnuts in Shipman, Virginia, local chestnuts are available for purchase on certain specialty websites. However, they’re not yet available in the amount or at the price point that the Coop would need.

On a cold December afternoon, my spouse and I peeled the skins off those warm roasted Italian chestnuts. They were quite delicious, with a rich flavor and velvety texture. Still, I am looking forward to the day when my Coop spoils include the glorious American chestnut.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer and native New Yorker. She just published Object Essays, and is currently working on her second novel. She has written for Bristol Noir, the San Antonio Review, Friends Journal, Grande Dame Literary, Apple in the Dark, Motherwell, and Uncensored: American Family Experiences with Poverty and Homelessness.

NON-ALCOHOLIC SPIRITS AND ALCOHOL ALTERNATIVES AT THE COOP

March 19, 2024



By Juliet Kleber

At a recent dinner out, I spent \$12 on a “mocktail,” specifically, a zero-ABV Yuzu Ginger Fizz. Throughout the past decade my body has started to respond less and less favorably to even small amounts of alcohol. So, while I love a great cocktail, the decision to get one is always a process of weighing long-term and short-term happiness. And when I see a or low- or no-ABV drink list on a menu, it feels like a treat. This particular drink was refreshing and complex, not overly sweet, as many alcohol alternatives tend to be. And though \$12 dollars is more than I like to spend on a drink, it’s become commonplace as the variety and sophistication of alcohol alternatives has proliferated over the past few years.

Part of the price of that particular drink was its key ingredient: Seedlip Grove 42, a popular non-alcoholic spirit and one of several you might have noticed at the Coop. Grove 42 is described by its manufacturer as “a sophisticated, bright, citrus blend of Mediterranean orange, lemon peel, lemongrass and ginger with a dry finish,” and it’s one of four blends Seedlip makes, two of which you can find on the top shelf of the Coop’s fancy foods end cap (which is across from the chicken case).

Seedlip is only one in an array of high-end non-alcoholic spirits, aperitifs and other alcohol alternatives you can find there, and it was a pioneer in the booming market of no- or low-alcohol drinks that grew 31% in 2023 alone (according to consumer intelligence firm NielsenIQ). And, as in the rest of the country, their popularity at the Coop has risen rapidly in the past few years.

“BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, [THE TREND] STARTED TO GET BIG, BUT [AFTER] THE PANDEMIC IT’S GOTTEN REALLY INTENSE.”

RECEIVING COORDINATOR KUSI MERELLO

In an interview with the *Gazette*, Receiving Coordinator Kusi Merello noted, “Before the pandemic, [the trend] started to get big, but [after] the pandemic it’s gotten really intense.” The Coop had always stocked some non-alcoholic beers, she and fellow Receiving Coordinator/Buyer Britt Henriksson explained, but the game changer was Athletic Brewing’s line of alcohol-free craft beers. Their cans (previous options had only been bottled) produced much more excitement and visibility at the Coop—today, canned non-alcoholic beer has its own permanent home in aisle 3. And with the pandemic, Athletic’s popularity surged, as did the overall demand for alcohol alternatives and the selection of available options.



“From what I’ve read,” Henriksson said, “people felt like they were consuming too much alcohol at the start of the pandemic.” And while non-alcoholic beer remains the most popular choice (the same is true nationally), Coop members started asking for the newer herbal and botanical products around that time as well.

Seedlip and Ghia (a non-alcoholic aperitif) were two of the products that came in by member request. “Slowly, we were getting a lot more recommendations for the whole spectrum of drink options from mixers to liquor,” Merello said. In addition to those already mentioned, you might find Lyre’s on that top shelf, a producer of a full range of alcohol-free spirits, including whiskey, gin and tequila alternatives. There’s also Kin Euphorics, which purports to use “nootropics and adaptogens” to improve mood and offer cognitive benefits. The Coop now carries dealcoholized wines and a selection of canned, pre-mixed mocktails as well.

ACCORDING TO THE SAME NIELSEN REPORT, 82% OF NON-ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONSUMERS ARE STILL BUYING ALCOHOLIC DRINKS AS WELL.

Unlike the non-alcoholic options of the past, most of these products are not necessarily targeted to people who abstain from alcohol entirely. They're marketed as an alternative "adult beverage" for people who may want to reduce their alcohol intake (often for health reasons), for people like myself who only drink in small quantities, or for people (especially younger members of Gen Z) who are just not that interested in consuming alcohol. According to the same Nielsen report, 82% of non-alcoholic beverage consumers are still buying alcoholic drinks as well.

And while old-school mocktails made from juices and syrups were less expensive due to their lack of alcohol, the same can't be said for those featuring non-alcoholic spirits. A 700 milliliter bottle of Seedlip retails for \$31.99. A bottle of Ghia goes for \$38 on their website—it's currently \$32 at the Coop, comparable to the price of a bottle of traditional aperitif. This is partly due to the complexity of the alcohol-free distillation process and the fact that, as niche products, they must still be produced at relatively small scale. Some of those brands embrace the price-point as appropriate to a more sophisticated, artisan product.

And across the board (wines, beers, spirits and mixed drinks alike) these offerings are becoming more sophisticated—on their own terms, or as approximations of their traditional counterparts. "The [de-alcoholized] wines usually taste like juice to me," Henriksson said, "but we shared a sample in the office of the brand I brought in last week (Noughty), and it tasted more like what a wine would taste like."

The sales of these products at the Coop tend to follow the same curve that traditional alcoholic beverages do. They sell more in the summer and around the holidays—the times that people are often gathered in groups, drinking socially. With one notable exception: at the time of this writing, we're halfway through "Dry January," a month--

long break from alcohol that millions of Americans participate in (though many do not complete it).

During this time, there's a notable bump in sales of alcohol alternatives—helped in part by a display on the seasonal end cap (which is across from the eggs and tofu case). “Featuring it on the display makes everyone aware of it, whereas the gourmet end cap is usually [stocked for] people who seek [a product] out or ask for it,” Merello said.

According to the coordinators, St. Agrestis's Phony Negroni is always the most popular option at the Coop in this category, but it's been selling especially briskly this month,

“It's insane how much people are buying,” Merello said. The brand makes three “cocktail dupes”: Phony Negroni, Phony Mezcal Negroni, and Amaro Falso, all of which the Coop carries. “I ordered four cases of each last week, three cases this week, and I'll probably have to order more,” said Henriksson, “And they're huge cases.”



“There’ll probably be a new drink trend in two years that people will make a non-alcoholic version of,” she added, “but people are really digging these now.”

The popularity of individual products does wax and wane, so the selection rotates according to demand, as well as the inevitable issue of space on the Coop’s packed shelves. “It’s a balance between the people who like their regular things and the people who always want to try new things,” said Merello. And the Coop is always responding to new trends and member requests too: sparkling hop waters are a recent addition that have gotten good feedback.

But the general trend is clear: alcohol alternatives are not just for Dry January, and they’re not going away any time soon. “It’s pretty unreal,” Merello said, “Even super major brands have non-alcoholic versions. They’ve seen the trend and they’re getting on board.”



Juliet Kleber is a writer, editor, and musician based in Bed-Stuy. She joined the Coop in 2021 and always comes home with too much cheese.

COOP MEMBER BREWS THE RADICALLY SUSTAINABLE “TESLA OF BEER.”
NOW THE COOP JUST NEEDS TO STOCK IT.

March 19, 2024



By Liz Welch

It was June 2020, peak-Covid, and John Midgely, the Brooklyn-based London-born art and fashion photographer was restless. He'd spent nearly four decades shooting celebs like Mos Def and Ozzy Osbourne for magazines, as well as the legendary Bethann Hardison in an iconic Gap campaign—but the industry had “changed radically,” he said over sandwiches at Park Slope’s Simple Loaf. “I was looking for a transition.”

He was in lockdown chatting about new possibilities with his cousin, Doug, who lives in London and who had worked in mergers and acquisitions for the multinational beverage company Diageo before leaving to become a consultant in the beverage industry. The two share a love of lager and Doug suggested that John take an online brewing class. It was called “The Science of Brewing,” and along with how to brew beer, John learned that the malting process, which is how beer is made, uses a tremendous amount of water and energy to turn barley into malt.

“High consumption of good-quality water is characteristic of beer brewing,” John, a Coop member, explained. “More than 90% of beer is water and an efficient brewery will typically use between four and six liters of water to produce one liter of beer.”

John also learned that most of the waste happened during the malting process, as it involves germinating the barley, then making a mash and finally separating the particles from the warm sugary water to get the maltose necessary to make beer. This made him wonder: Was there a more efficient way to extract maltose from barley?

He began Googling around and quickly learned that there was: adding enzymes to the raw barley would cut out all the germinating and water waste involved in the malting steps. The result would be a “raw” beer.

John called Doug to bounce the idea off him.

“The beer industry is ripe for a renewal,” John explains. “It worked with electric cars and solar panels, which are industries that have been revolutionized as a result.” Why not beer? Doug agreed that it was worth investigating. Not long later, Cool Cousin Brewing was born.

John set up a home brewing station on the top floor of his recently renovated Bedford-Stuyvesant home. He ordered the enzymes online and started experimenting by adding them to the raw barley, and forgoing the multi-stepped malting process. It was all very exciting. There was only one problem: the beer did not taste good.

THE BEER INDUSTRY IS RIPE FOR A RENEWAL. IT WORKED WITH ELECTRIC CARS, AND SOLAR PANELS, WHICH ARE INDUSTRIES THAT HAVE BEEN REVOLUTIONIZED AS A RESULT.

“After three months of tinkering, I got closer with taste,” he said. “But it still needed

color.” So he toasted some raw barely and tossed it into the mix, which produced the pale lager golden glow he was looking for.

By then, he had joined a Brooklyn group of home brewing beer aficionados called “Brewminaries” who regularly met up in Park Slope to share stories and taste one another’s samples. “There was a generous and bright high school teacher whom I would lean on all the time,” John said.



John was making a Kolsch lager, which has a lighter crisper taste than the pungent hop heavy IPAs that were all the rage. He continued to tinker and perfect his recipe and, once he was satisfied, even entered a few home-brewing competitions. After he won two—and proved his hypothesis that he could make a raw beer that was delicious—he was ready to move the Cool Cousin operation beyond his home.

He first went to Strong Rope, a small local brewery in Gowanus, whose owner Jason Sahler was a big supporter of sustainability. “He uses 100% New York state ingredi-

ents and wants to help grow the industry,” John explained. Sahler connected John with Rich Michaels, a well-respected master brewer who worked at FXMat, a 500-barrel system in upstate New York that brewed Saranac Beers, among others. Rich had long been interested in making a sustainable beer and agreed to work with Cool Cousins.

“The concept of trying to make beer out of unmalted grain is not new,” Rich explained. “People have been looking at doing this for 40 years—to save both energy and cost. But no one has been able to make it taste like beer.”

Rich was intrigued by John’s recipe, and dedication. “I’ve been brewing commercially for 31 years,” he explained. “Brewers are sustainably-minded, so we are always interested in changing our practices. There have been breweries who have tried to do this but have struggled to make it taste like good beer.”

THERE HAVE BEEN BREWERIES WHO HAVE TRIED TO DO THIS BUT HAVE STRUGGLED TO MAKE IT TASTE LIKE GOOD BEER.

By August 2023, they had a Kolsch lager that they felt was ready for prime time. John began reaching out to potential customers and Cool Cousin’s first sale was to Dan Barber’s acclaimed Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurant in Tarrytown, New York.

“I emailed the website and was invited to bring a sample,” John said. That lead to his first sale—ten cases—and the restaurant remains Cool Cousin’s most consistent customer. Currently, the brand is available in 35 places throughout New York State including Total Wine in Westbury, Long Island. But shockingly, not the Coop.

“As long as Cool Cousin can work with a distributor, we’d be happy to stock the brand,” says Kusi Merello, the Coop’s beer buyer and a receiving coordinator. Known for its eclectic and wide ranging beer selection, the Coop sells more than a hundred

brands of beer. Their best seller is Brooklyn-based Sixpoint, but they also offer small independent brands like the women-owned TaLea. Kusi and her co-beer buyer Brian Robinson are constantly on the lookout for new brands to put on the shelves and Cool Cousins certainly aligns with the Coop's sustainability values. The issue, Kusi maintains, is how the beer is sold.

"The loading zone is not just ours, so we have to consolidate our purchase through one of the six distributors. Otherwise it is too much work for individuals," she explains.

This basic rule is summarized in the Coop's "new product consideration" protocol, which states:

"Product must be sold through a distributor. While we understand that many independent food producers do not use distributors, there are several important reasons for this requirement. Direct shipments increase the number of orders that have to be placed, the number of deliveries to the store, the number of invoices that have to be verified and received, and the number of invoices that have to be processed through our bookkeepers. Additionally, we are beyond capacity with the traffic from the hundreds of deliveries we already receive each week. We seldom add a distributor to bring just one or two products. However, we do *occasionally* make exceptions for local independent producers selling a *completely unique* product."

John has tried to get Cool Cousin distributed through one of the six distributors based in New York City, but it is not easy. "Most want you to be selling at scale," he explains. Hopefully, this will change as the company continues to grow. It just added a hazy IPA to its offerings.

And yet, one could argue that Cool Cousin *is* completely unique. At least according to journalist Don Tse, "the baron of beer" who reached out to Rich Michaels in August 2023 looking for anyone who was brewing with enzymes as he was looking to do a story on sustainable beer.

“We were the only one,” John said.

The story, “This New York Brewery Hopes to Revolutionize the Way Beer Is Made” ran in Forbes magazine on September 2, 2023 with the opening line: “New York’s Cool Cousin Brewing is the first commercial brewing company in America to make beer entirely from unmalted barley, saving water and carbon dioxide with each brew.”

Proof of John’s hypothesis: there is space in the beer industry for raw sustainable beer. And soon, one hopes, there will be space in the Coop’s shelves for the product.



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

Liz Welch re-joined the Gazette as a reporter in August 2023 after a hiatus. She is a longtime journalist and author/collaborator whose work can be seen at <http://www.lizwelch.com>.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO HELP WITH COOP INVENTORY

March 19, 2024



By Walecia Konrad

THE PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP'S INVENTORY SYSTEM EXPLAINED

Coop shoppers may have noticed the new black-and-white electronic price tags hanging throughout the produce aisle. At first glance, they don't look all that different from

the paper price tags they replaced, which are still in use on the rest of the Coop shelves. But these state-of-the-art mini-screens can be changed in an instant, reflecting a new price when, say, locally grown broccoli shows up in the summer, replacing the California crop, or Caraflex pointy cabbage hits the shelves.

Unit Price
\$2.98 LB
0 670274 606767 1 Rows 16 OZ
Nixtamal White Corn Tortilla 5.5"
REGACC Prepared 1.0 05/06/23

PHOTO BY ZACH SCHULMAN

The old static labels are getting an update.

The unobtrusive tags may be the first sign visible to members of a years-long undertaking to update, digitize, share, streamline and consolidate the Coop's massive and unique inventory system.

"THE TECH PART IS EASY, BUT COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE AND FINDING OUT WHAT THEY REALLY NEED IS THE CHALLENGE."

— *COOP IT STAFF*

INTRODUCING CLOVER

The new system, called Clover, was designed by the Coop's inventory development team, which includes Coop IT staffers Jonathan Miller and Ithran Einhorn, as well as Receiving Coordinator Ken Macdonald, all led by General Coordinator Joe Szladek. Clover isn't an acronym and doesn't stand for anything; it's just a pleasant name that's easy to remember, according to its inventors.



PHOTO BY ZACH SCHULMAN



Joe Szladek (top) & Ken Macdonald

The team set out to update the inventory system and achieve four important goals.

Collect and report daily sales data. Sales data is currently aggregated on a weekly basis. Staffers use that data to determine recent sales and how much more or less of a product should be ordered. It's a delicate science that relies on the price from the supplier, anticipated shopper demand and the Coop's limited storage space. Daily sales data reports help staffers make more accurate buying decisions, Macdonald explained.

Update shelf prices. The Coop is committed to passing any change in price to members immediately, even if it's during the middle of the day. Keep in mind, no other store does that: Most grocery stores keep prices for a set period of time, maybe a week or more. Immediate price changes add to the inventory-tracking challenges at the Coop. Members can see this pricing promise happen in real time with the electron-

ic price tags in produce. (By the way, the new tags use a minuscule amount of energy.)

Streamline pricing information. Traditionally, receivers are in charge of changing prices on the shelves when new stock arrives. But it's not enough to display the new price to shoppers—it has to show up at check out too. Those two data points have been on two different systems, which causes some headaches. Clover combines the two and closes that gap, explained Macdonald.

Generate orders, invoices and supplier instructions. Buyers can use Clover to generate orders and even indicate to suppliers how to load their trucks to help the Coop with delivery and storage. With this system, a full palette could be directed into the designated basement storage space, rather than needing to be unpacked and sorted, with items manually stored in different areas.

In addition, Clover allows receiving to communicate with the accounting department. Instead of entering an invoice two times into the two systems, it can be input once, cutting down on multiple layers of paperwork.

"I've been at the Coop for 20 years and spent a lot of time in the basement," Macdonald said. "It was frustrating to not get data on what we had on the shelves, what deliveries were coming in, etc. Now we have all that at our fingertips in real-time."



PHOTO BY ZACH SCHULMAN

The new electronic labels can change in real time.

PRODUCE IS THE PLACE TO START

Because of its high turnover and constantly changing prices, the produce department had already followed a different inventory tracking system that allowed it to price items each day. After all, farmers may change their prices daily depending on the season, growing conditions and so on. Under the old system, produce buyers would be able to calculate new prices quickly—the cost of the most recent shipment plus the Coop’s markup—but would then have to change the paper price tags on the floor manually, which was a time-consuming process.

Now, the inventory system calculates the new prices and changes the electronic signs automatically. No running upstairs with new tags. Because the produce department moves fruit and vegetables so quickly, the inventory team figured that if the new system works there, it can work anywhere. Produce is the inventory system’s test kitchen.

REINVENT THE WHEEL?

The inventory team set out to implement a new system in 2018, well before the pandemic. At first, staffers researched off-the-shelf inventory systems that could potentially be adapted to the Coop’s needs. Why reinvent the wheel?

But the Coop’s unique inventory challenges—high turnover, limited storage, a commitment to passing on price changes—soon made it clear that a custom-made system designed internally was the right way to go. So the team set out to create its own product.

That’s when Miller started talking to people. “The tech part is easy,” he said, “but communicating with people and finding out what they really need is the challenge.”

Miller wanted to dig deep and figure out what the system could streamline to make things easier for people to get their work done on a daily basis. That also meant ac-

commodating different vendors and suppliers and trying to work with their systems and comfort level. “One vendor might like to take orders over the phone, one might want an email. One likes to be paid by the case, another by the pound. All of this has to be taken into account,” he explained.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Efficient inventory tracking has been the aim of the Coop from the very beginning, according to General Coordinator Joe Holtz. He and others were instrumental in devising the Coop’s original system, in which staffers used special cards to track what was bought and sold the week before and what price was paid for the inventory. The next team would use multiple weeks of information to make future buying decisions.

AT ITS FOUNDING, IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT THE COOP’S DEDICATION TO SELLING GOOD FOOD AT LOW COST MEANT THE STORE COULDN’T AFFORD TO BUY MORE THAN IT COULD SELL.

Like now, tracking inventory back then was both an art and a science. Buyers used the data on the cards to hit the sweet spot of meeting shoppers’ needs while dealing with limited storage space. (Back then, storage space was almost non-existent.)



PHOTO BY ZACH SCHULMAN

Joe Holtz looks through the Coop's old handwritten paper records.

At its founding, it was obvious that the Coop's dedication to selling good food at low cost meant the store couldn't afford to buy more than it could sell. That said, a good price on a product will often drive demand, so when suppliers offer lower prices, buyers are tempted to buy more than previous sales may justify. That doesn't always work out.

Holtz cited an incident involving honey when the Coop first started. At one point, a member-buyer was enticed by a great price on honey from a supplier, and they ordered far more honey than the Coop had actually been selling each week. When the shipment came in, there wasn't room for all that honey in the designated storage area, so the excess was put in a different corner.

The following week, the next person taking inventory didn't see the honey in its unusual storage place and figured it had all been sold. As a result, they ordered another ten cases of honey at a much higher price.

Holtz, of course, pointed to the honey as an aberration, and a great lesson in how buying and tracking inventory is so key to the Coop's success. For the most part, the custom-made card system took into account the unique challenges of the Coop and worked well. "The Coop couldn't have grown without a good inventory system from the beginning," Holtz remarked.

Eventually, the card system was computerized and buyers could more easily access sales data and price history to make accurate purchase decisions. Now, Clover will hopefully move the original thinking and systems even further into the future.



PHOTO BY ZACH SCHULMAN

The new price tags might not look electronic, but they are.

WHAT'S NEXT?

When asked about next steps, Miller said they are looking to continue the new system roll out in other areas of the Coop where prices change quickly. Think meat and fish. Afterward, the inventory team hopes to roll out Clover gradually to any area that wants to use it in 2024. "It's not a gigantic cliff everyone has to fall off on a certain

date,” Miller said. “The two systems are working together right now, so we want people to move over to Clover when they want to.”

Shoppers, keep an eye out for the new electronic price tags. Now you know what’s going on behind the scenes when you drop each carefully tracked and priced item into your cart.

BIDDING FAREWELL TO A BELOVED SUPPLIER: MARGARET PALCA RETIRES

March 19, 2024



By Juliet Kleber

Pastry-loving Coop members might have noticed a profound absence in recent weeks: the brownies, loaf cakes, tarts and vegan muffins from Margaret Palca Bakes are no longer on our shelves. After 40 years as a baker Margaret Palca retired in July, closing her long-standing bakery by the Columbia Street waterfront and ending a three-de-

cade long relationship selling her baked goods to the Coop. The *Gazette* spoke to Palca about her career, her time supplying to the Coop and her future plans.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL

Popular Coop baked goods supplier Margaret Palca Bakes has closed.

“WE’D BEEN WORKING ALMOST SEVEN DAYS A WEEK FOR AT LEAST 35 YEARS.
AND THAT TAKES ITS TOLL ON YOU.”

Palca, a native New Yorker, never planned on becoming a professional baker—she graduated from Barnard with a degree in art history—but the craft has always been a part of her life. She began learning from her grandmother as a small child, shadowed a pastry chef for a brief internship during her senior year of high school, and spent two months cooking in Paris during the summer before college. And while at Barnard, she was still baking: “Even while I was in school, I would start making a lot of something and then see if I could sell it to somebody.”



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL

Margaret decorating one of her famous red velvet cakes.

Her professional life as a baker started with madeleines and expanded quickly. “I’d bring my madeleines to a store and they’d say, ‘This is delicious, but could you make brownies?’ So the next day you’re making madeleines and brownies.” Her first “real, serious job in the food business” was at Fraser Morris, a purveyor of gift baskets and fine foods on Madison Avenue. Palca started at a counter selling pre-made cookies, but the store runners liked the home-baked goods she made so much that they built her a kitchen and promoted her to being the store’s full-time, in-house baker.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL

Chocolate-chip brownies were a big seller.

Palca spent five years at Fraser Morris before striking out on her own again: “I decided that if I was getting to work at five o’clock in the morning and killing myself for 12 hours a day, I might as well do it for myself.” She started by baking rugelach (one her

most popular items throughout her career) in her home, to supply to Dean and Deluca and Balducci's. Fraser Morris had no need for a bakery without her, so they allowed her to keep all of the kitchen equipment for her own business, and in 1989, Margaret Palca Bakes was founded in Brooklyn. At the time, the Columbia Street Waterfront District was not the bustling neighborhood it is today: damage from large-scale infrastructure projects meant many buildings in the area were knocked down and vacant lots abounded. But construction also ended up being the bakery's saving grace: "All the workers came to buy stuff from us every day, so we had a steady clientele. They loved having a place to come for breakfast and lunch, to get a snack and coffee. That's what kept us going on a side street in the middle of nowhere in Brooklyn."



Margaret Palca with the tools of her trade now in storage at her home.

But the neighborhood and the business both grew, and in the early 1990s, a visitor to the bakery let her know that the Park Slope Food Coop was looking for a muffin vendor. And so began a long and successful partnership. Over the years, Margaret Palca Bakes adapted their offerings to the needs of the Coop and shifting attitudes about food—supplying full-fat and low-fat baked goods, conventional and vegan muffins. According to Lisa Hidem, the Coop’s bread buyer, the vegan muffins became so popular

during the pandemic that the Coop asked Palca if she could expand her selection, which went from one vegan carrot muffin to cranberry and banana as well.

In addition to muffins, loaf cakes and brownies, Palca supplied the Coop with about 200 Thanksgiving pies (apple, pumpkin, mixed berry, and cherry) every year. Reflecting on her experience, Palca noted, “There’s a lot of pressure around the holidays, but it’s also exhilarating. I do feel I’m letting people down for Thanksgiving this year, and I hope they’ll find a pie they like.”

“I’M SO GRATEFUL FOR ALL THE PATRONAGE AND THE LOYALTY THE SHOPPERS AT THE COOP HAVE GIVEN ME.”

While Colson Patisserie will be providing vegan, gluten-free muffins as well as loaf cakes (one of which is gluten-free, though still baked in a facility that processes gluten), the Coop is still searching for vendors to replace Palca’s pies and the rest of her product line. And that can be a complex task considering the Coop’s logistical needs.

Packaging presents a particular challenge, Hidem explained. In an independent bakery or conventional store, permanent staff are able to recognize and price unlabeled baked goods, but the Coop’s member-labor model makes that much more difficult. Products need to be clearly identifiable for members who are unfamiliar with them to stock and ring up correctly. Thus, a prospective vendor would need to be equipped to provide appropriate packaging, labeling and UPC codes. Volume also presents an issue—if an order is too small, it will often incur a delivery fee, raising the price of the items. And many bakeries have large minimum orders, which can create waste and lose money if their products don’t sell well. “We need to make sure it’s worth our time and the vendor’s time,” Hidem said. “It’s a tricky balance.”

While those logistical considerations were challenging at times, the relationship was

well worth it to Palca. She expressed particular gratitude for the Coop's thoughtfulness regarding packaging and environmental concerns: "I appreciate the Coop because they think about everything—packaging, food waste.... We talked about selling pies in window boxes rather than plastic clamshells because it's better for the environment, and they agreed, even though it's more expensive. It's hard to find another business that cares that much." And overall, she said, "I'm so grateful for all the patronage and the loyalty the shoppers at the Coop have given me."



Margaret Palca's bakery and cafe on Columbia Street sadly now stands empty.

On June 23, Palca threw a retirement party in her shop to celebrate and say farewell to the bakery. It was packed with customers, long-time employees, and friends sharing their stories about the special place the bakery held in the neighborhood and their lives.

Since retiring, Palca has been focusing on projects she didn't have time for, including repainting her house and fixing up her basement. And she's been thoroughly enjoying newfound free time: "We're a little topsy-turvy, but very happy," she said. "I love what I did, but we'd been working almost seven days a week for at least 35 years. And that takes its toll on you." Baking, she acknowledged, has been a tough business: "It's really labor intensive, long hours, hands on all the time. And the profit margin is so small."

She is still baking, of course, though on a much smaller scale: "I make myself cookies all the time because I like to eat cookies for dessert, and I made muffins one morning." She and her husband, Paul, also plan to keep a yearly gig making gingerbread houses for a longtime customer at Christmas time. And with her less hectic schedule, Palca is now considering Coop membership herself.



Margaret relaxing at home with her husband, Paul Kalin. Paul is Vice President at Margaret Palca Bakes.

At the Coop, customers have been missing her offerings. Palca's goods were beloved not only for their quality, but also their reasonable pricing, especially for a local, artisanal bakery, Hidem told the *Gazette*. "We tried warning people—we shared her retirement announcement on Twitter." But the news hasn't made its way to everyone, and plenty of shoppers have asked where their favorite brownies or vegan muffins have gone. "They're always sad, but everyone agrees that Margaret's earned her retirement after so many years."

The
Margaret Palca
BAKES
Cookbook

**Cakes, Cookies,
Muffins, and Memories
from a famous
Brooklyn Baker**

"Margaret Palca has
all the qualities I look for in a baker:
the soul of an artist,
the heart of a nurturer, and
an obsessive perfectionist streak."

—**Ed Levine**, founder of
SeriousEats.com

Margaret Palca
Photography by Michael Harlan Turkell

Margaret's cookbook is available at Barnes & Noble and Amazon for around \$20. And Coop members who really miss those brownies can always try baking them with the help of the 2018 Margaret Palca Bakes Cookbook.

Juliet Kleber is a writer and editor based in Bed-Stuy. She serves as a member of the Editorial Board of n+1 magazine.

JANUARY GENERAL MEETING EXPLORES 25% MARK-UP AND AMY'S KITCHEN LABOR PRACTICES

March 19, 2024



By Frank Haberle

The Park Slope Food Coop's first General Meeting of 2023, held on January 31, addressed two issues: whether to sustain the current 25% mark-up rate until 2024, and unfair labor practices at Amy's Kitchen. The Labor Committee and Animal Welfare

Committee reported briefly on recent activities. In General Coordinator reports, Joe Holtz provided an update on the Coop's finances, and Elinor Astrinsky reported on the recent year-end inventory.

Open Forum

After welcoming members and staff, the meeting chair, Charlie Rogers, opened up the floor for a 15-minute open forum. The first question came from member Neal Last, who was concerned about consumer reports that many dark chocolate products carry high amounts of two heavy metals, lead and cadmium. Astrinsky responded that changes were about to be made regarding the dark chocolate products available.

Another member, Mitzi Rothzeit, had noticed receiving workers with their names marked in masking tape during their shifts, and wondered if all workers—including members and staff—might start wearing name tags to make the environment more friendly. Astrinsky stated that the name tags were intended to help Coordinators manage large receiving squads.

Member Rachel Porter wondered why the *Linewaiters' Gazette* still adheres to its pre-Covid word limits even though it is now an on-line publication; she had recently submitted a member article and had asked if it could be longer as it covered four issues she wished to raise, but was told that the *Gazette* still has strict word limits for member submissions.

Finally, member Ainslie Binder spoke about a product they bought as a gift before the holidays—a coffee filter—only to learn that it was made with porcelain produced in China, which is known to have a very high rate of unsafe metals. Holtz responded that there was a very slight chance that the purchaser would have known this, and he would reach out to find out more.

General Coordinators Reports

Holtz presented a summary of the financial report for the first 48 weeks of Fiscal Year 2023 which showed that the Coop's total assets were \$12,417,000. In terms of cash flow at the 48-week mark, the Coop had \$550,000 more in the bank than at the beginning of the year.

1st 48 Weeks of FY 2023	
Assets	12,417,000
Increased funds at bank	550,000
Sales during 2022	48.4 MM

Members asked how payroll is impacting our bottom line with staff now doing jobs formerly held by members. Holtz responded that our staff costs are high because we are still recovering from Covid. "We are now thinking about a more robust training program for our member workers. The current situation at the check-out area is way more complicated than it used to be. One thing we had to develop is our new, complex online work slot system. We're still trying to build our future. It's a work in progress."

Astrinsky reported on the annual inventory conducted two days before. "We close early, and then we count every lollipop, every pound of cheese. We weigh all of our produce. Our buyers come in and count every boxed item in the basement.



“We had between 70 and 80 members work on this. Staff spent endless hours making sure shelf labels were right, records were right. It was a tremendous effort. Also, we had a construction team come in while the Coop was closed to put in new flooring and metal plates in our receiving area.”

Agenda Item One: The Coop Mark-Up



PHOTO BY ELLY DITTMAR

The Coop's annual inventory must be accurate and involves a huge effort by staff and members.



PHOTO BY ELLY DITTMAR

More than 70 Members worked on the Coop's annual inventory.

WE COUNT EVERY LOLLIPOP, EVERY POUND OF CHEESE. WE WEIGH ALL OF OUR PRODUCE. OUR BUYERS COME IN AND COUNT EVERY BOXED ITEM IN THE BASEMENT.

GENERAL COORDINATOR ELINOAR ASTRINSKY

Holtz presented a general coordinator proposal for discussion, asking the Coop to maintain a 25% mark-up through FY24 (ending January 30, 2024) with a lower base mark-up of 21% for members who are eligible due to financial need. The proposal states that by the October 2023 meeting, the general coordinators will present detailed financial projections and possibly consider changing the rate if conditions allow it. "With a 25% rate in place we still had operating loss in the year just ended," Holtz said, "and we are expecting existing expenses to increase 6% this year. Even with an increase in sales from \$48.4 million last year to \$53 million this year we still project an operating loss. If we maintain \$53 million in sales and a 25% mark-up rate this year, we'll have an overall loss of \$370,000. If we change the mark-up to 21%, we will lose \$1,750,000."

Case for retaining @25% Markup	
Projected Expenses increase	6%
Projected sales 2023	53 MM
Projected loss 2023 @25%	-370,000
Projected loss 2023 @21%	-1,750,000

Members asked whether we were losing sight of our mission to provide great food at low prices and how we can return to a full Coop member-led labor model. General Co-

ordinator Ann Herpel added that “a lot is being tossed around in this meeting about having less staff oversight and returning to member-led workshifts and squad leaders, but in terms of member labor, squad leaders have always been a very small part of the workforce. Members are doing the bulk of work at the Coop right now.”

A member pressed the question about higher costs. “Our mission started with good food at low prices—this proposal doesn’t support that mission. How do we put this on our members? Our prices are increasing but we are not cutting costs.” Another member stated that “there’s a lot of language here that something’s being taken away from us by raising prices, but we need to cover our expenses. Even with a 25% mark-up we are still running a projected deficit. What I’m hearing is a very responsible proposal that we take this into the fall and then we reconsider in the fall.”

Holtz noted that “a lot of things are still unsure after Covid and we need another year. In October we can consider making different kinds of plans if that is prudent.” Astrinsky added, “We are constantly trying to get prices down. And we’ve grown the Coop by 3,000 members, which is great and exciting but we need to spend a lot of time and energy helping them stay safe and do their jobs right.”



PHOTO BY ROB MORRISON

Every pound of cheese was counted. There were 381 lbs of Sharp White Cheddar.

Agenda Item Two: Amy's Kitchen

Eric Frumin of the Labor Committee presented a proposal to ask food supplier Amy's Kitchen to commit to fair labor practices and safe conditions for workers as they prepare to open a new plant in Goshen, New York. "About a year ago we started learning about deplorable working conditions and worker rights being undermined at Amy's, a

long time supplier. Amy's has four factories, including one in Idaho where the injury rate was 10%, triple the average of same industry, and all of their plants have high injury rates. Workers who attempted to unionize for safer work conditions and better treatment were being harassed and fired. We got a request to support these workers who were struggling to find a fair way to form a union, with big obstruction. We wrote Amy's CEO in April asking about these concerns. With help from National Co+op Grocers, we finally got response in November." Amy's stated that they called in a third party to measure rates of injury. The third party only looked at one plant, in Santa Rosa, and only interviewed 15 workers. Amy's said they unconditionally respect worker rights and would never retaliate, but they had just fired a worker for leading a workplace action about safety. When workers started organizing in San Jose, Amy's closed the plant.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Coop supplier Amy's has been found to have unsafe working conditions at their factories.

The Committee has said that it would like to send a second letter to Amy's Kitchen regarding the new plant they propose to open in Goshen, New York, and demand that they respect labor laws. In conversation, Coop members applauded the Committee's efforts and supported the proposal. One member stated that a new plant in the Northeast would help with jobs and would purchase from local farmers. "Perhaps we could find other ways that would help workers but ensure that the plant can open?" The Labor Committee will return in a few months to present their full proposal at a General Meeting.

Frank Haberle has been a Coop member since 1994 and a Gazette Reporter since 2006. Frank is the author of two novels, Shufflers and the upcoming Downlanders. He works at New Settlement in the Bronx.