

A CHECKOUT GAME AND A FIRST WIN

May 5, 2026



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By Leila Darabi

Earlier this month, a Coop member posted a missed connection on Reddit after finishing a shift:

Using a throwaway acct here, but was on my shift at the coop on Sunday morning (9:30-12:30) and got relieved by a really cute guy named Matt at around noon," the post read. "I would've stayed and chatted more but I was heading to see a movie... - Don't know if you're single, but if you are and you see this, would love to get a drink sometime!"

The post describes a brief exchange, the kind that happens often at the Coop and usually ends there.

A few weeks earlier, in February, a different moment at checkout turned into a story. For more than a decade, Coop member Simma Reingold has been asking shoppers in her line to guess the total cost of their groceries before the first item is scanned. “I play a game with folks that come in, and I tend to start with: Do you want to play a game today?” Reingold said.

Most people agree to take a guess.

“I probably play with maybe 70 to 80% of the people that come to my checkout line,” she estimated. “I tell them that today is a special day, and if they want to guess how much money all of the items in their cart come out to be, and they get within \$1 [of the correct amount], that the Coop will cover their bill for the day,” she explained. By “the Coop,” Reingold means herself—she’ll cover the grocery cost out of pocket.

REINGOLD HAS BEEN MORE HESITANT TO PLAY THE GAME AS THE COST OF GROCERIES HAS SURGED. “THERE CAN BE THIS DEPRESSING THING OF, LIKE, OH, MY GROCERIES COST THIS MUCH.”

People respond in different ways. Some guess right away. Others keep a running estimate as items are scanned. Some talk through their reasoning, item by item.

“People love to justify why they know or don’t know how much is in their basket. They love to tell you, ‘I buy this every week, and I never buy these, and this just raised in price.’” She elaborated, “It always leads to such a good conversation. Sometimes it’s like a cute thing across a couple to see how they estimate differently.”

Reingold has been more hesitant to play the game as the cost of groceries has

surged. “There can be this depressing thing of, like, oh, my groceries cost this much. And I don’t really want to draw attention to that,” she said. “But I’ve still been playing it, because it is so much fun.” Reingold has been asking shoppers to play the game since 2013. Over time, the number of attempts has added up, but the outcome has remained the same: “People don’t get close. I had never had a close call before,” she said.

That changed in February, when Tamu Favorite, a playwright and performer, agreed to try. As the items were scanned, Favorite made an initial guess, then revised it. “She first said it was going to be \$165... and then she was like, ‘No! \$160.’ I just had divine intervention.” There are no limits on how often someone can adjust their guess. What matters is where they land at the end. As the total approached that number, Reingold realized that, for the first time, she might actually have to pay for someone’s groceries.

“We were checking out, we were getting close... and she got within \$1 [I asked myself] am I actually going to honor this?” Reingold said. She said the answer was clear. “We didn’t shake hands, but we made an agreement,” she said. The total came to \$160.68 and Reingold gladly paid. Favorite reacted with disbelief.



Simma Reingold on the left and Tamu Favorite on the right just after Favorite's correct guess. Courtesy of Simma Reingold.

"When she realized she won, she's like: *No seriously?* And I'm like: *Yeah, seriously.* And she's like: *You can't do this!* And I'm like: *Of course I'm going to do this! This is the game!*," Reingold recounted. "I just knew it was going to bring me so much joy that someone finally won. And obviously bring her so much joy," she said.

The interaction drew in other people shopping and working checkout that day. "I think I tend to have a lot of engagement with my customers," observed Reingold. "So, the people doing checkout near me, we all get into a conversation together... It's kind of like when you're on a subway car and everyone starts talking."

“SHE TEXTED ME, AND SHE WAS LIKE, ‘SOMEONE WON MY GAME.’ AND I WAS JUST LIKE: ‘NO WAY!’ I COULDN’T BELIEVE IT,” SHE SAID. “IT’S KIND OF LIKE WINNING THE LOTTERY, RIGHT?”

Coop staff member Gillian Chi, a buyer and receiving coordinator, described the moment in an email: “Apparently they both cried with joy,” she wrote. “I personally found it to be a particularly special and moving story, something I could only imagine ever happening at the Coop.”

“It was this moment of celebration,” recalled Reingold. “I think both of us were just so smiley... It completely changed the trajectory of my day.” For the rest of her shift, despite having just shelled out \$160, Reingold continued to ask shoppers if they wanted to play the game. She had a similar reaction from friends as news of the first-ever correct guess traveled. “I started texting my friends, like: ‘Guess what? I’m at the Coop and someone won,’ and everyone freaked out,” she said.

Ashley Ellefson, a Coop member and friend of Reingold’s, said she had known about the practice for years. “She’s always played this game honestly since I’ve known her, over 10 years, and I’m always like, ‘Are you *really* going to pay for someone’s groceries?’” Ellefson recalled, sharing that she was thrilled to learn that someone had finally won. “She texted me, and she was like, ‘Someone won my game.’ And I was just like: ‘No way!’ I couldn’t believe it,” she said. “It’s kind of like winning the lottery, right? It’s both surprising and exciting.”

Ellefson said the interaction reflects what she loves about interactions between Coop members, and what she loves about Reingold: “Simma loves talking to people. She’s big on community... She’s always talking to people at the Coop,” she said.

Ellefson described taking a similar approach to her own shifts as a walker. “I always have an opening line: I ask them, ‘How is it going and what’s it like inside the Coop to-

day?’ But then I also like to ask people if they bought anything interesting,” she said. Those questions often lead to longer exchanges. “You meet some really interesting people. Today I met a dad and his daughter, and we were talking about how the Coop used to have daycare. I met a woman who was a nutritionist. You just get all these different conversations,” she said.

She also gets great recommendations for new items to try. “That’s how I learned when Harry’s Berries come to the Coop. And I learned about this Blondie brownie thing in the frozen aisle,” she said. Reingold similarly described discovering new Coop products through her guess-the-total game and conversations during her shift. “That’s my favorite part of checkout... I would have never found things otherwise,” she said. She also cited vegetable umami Yandu, a savory cooking sauce, as a favorite item she discovered through one of those conversations.

As Reingold put it, each checkout conversation is “kind of like this magical New York moment.”

“At the end of the day, that’s what the Coop is about—being able to have conversations with people,” she said, noting that those moments can feel less common as political tensions divide members. Some members who recognize her now try to end up in her line when checking out, she said. Whether they do is mostly a matter of luck.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients on Instagram (@persian_ish).

VALENTINES TO THE COOP

May 5, 2026



February 10, 2026

By Leila Darabi

On a snowy day not long before Valentine's Day, the Park Slope Food Coop felt especially intimate, with shoppers' winter coats crowding the aisles and the familiar rhythm of work and shopping carrying on. Shopping at the Coop has always meant taking part in something larger than a simple errand. The Coop asks something of people who walk through its doors. It asks for time, labor, patience, and participation. Working shifts, navigating crowds, and learning the rules require commitment and staying with the Coop over years or decades requires real affection for the place in all its idiosyncratic charm.

That commitment turns everyday shopping into something closer to a relationship. Through shared work and shared responsibility, the Coop becomes a collective love letter to community, written and

back. What follows is a collection of member Valentines:

THE THRILL OF TRYING SOMETHING NEW

Maura Hallisey has been a member for almost two years and works stocking produce. She joined after hearing about the Coop from friends.

“I had a lot of friends that were members, and they always talked it up,” she said.



Maura Hallisey

What keeps her excited is the constant possibility of discovery. “I love just finding new things to try. I was reading the makrut limes [label],” she said, pointing to the produce shelf. “I’d never heard of that, and I was like, oh, that sounds fun to try.” Makrut limes are also sometimes called kaffir or Thai limes.

Hallisey values both the range of ingredients and the people she works alongside. “Ev-

everybody's very friendly and nice," she said. "The shift coordinators have always been lovely to work with."

RELIABILITY AND SMALL RITUALS

Erica Heinz joined the Coop about 15 years ago, after moving closer to the store.

"I finally moved down to Prospect Heights, and I was like, oh my God, I can join," she said.

What she values most is consistency. "It's very reliable," she said. "It's the one place you feel like you can get whatever you want."



Erica Heinz

She also trusts the sourcing: “It’s all researched and good, good for you,” she said.

She also enjoys the social rituals that emerge around shopping. “My favorite is splitting watermelons in the summer,” she said. “Calling down and finding a watermelon partner.”

She recently discovered a favorite treat. “They’re these ginger biscuits, and they have black pepper in them,” she said. “They’re really buttery and really gingery.”

MISSING THE OLD MAGIC, STILL SHOWING UP

Mark worked his Coop shift for 45 years before earning his retirement. His relationship with the Coop reflects decades of memory and routine.

“In the last couple of years, I’m a little bit disappointed,” he said. “It’s gotten very commercial.”

Even with that complaint, Mark’s loyalty remains. “It’s a neighborhood place,” he said. “I like neighborhood hopping. I don’t like big places.”

He shops several times a week, deciding what to cook based on the day. “Today I woke up and I want to do a stir fry,” he said. “So, I’m buying for stir fry.”

FALLING IN LOVE THROUGH SOMEONE ELSE

Katie Deray joined the Coop through her partner and has been a member for under a year.

“Through love,” she said. “It was my partner who had been a part of it, and he wanted me to have better life habits.”



Katie Deray

She works flex shifts and enjoys the pace and energy of the work. “I love the mentality,” she said. “That fast-paced customer service level.”

She gravitates toward condiments and specialty items. “Banana ketchup is something that I can’t find other places, but I can find here,” she said.

She appreciates being able to take chances. “You have to be able to discover or take a chance on something,” she said. “Here, you can take a little bit more of a gamble.”

A LIFE SHAPED IN THE AISLES

Ulisse Narici-Porter is 21 and has been coming to the Coop since childhood. His par-

ents began shopping here in 2004, and he has had his own membership card for about five years. Although members under 22 are not required to work shifts, he chose to take on his own membership and responsibilities.

“I have a bunch of memories of coming in as a little baby and sitting on the chair here,” he said, indicating the seat of his shopping cart. “Watching my mom and dad go around shopping, asking for cookies.”



Ulisse Narici-Porter

Some tastes have stayed the same. “I really like the apples,” he said. “When I went off to college and got apples from regular supermarkets, they just weren’t as good.”

He also feels attached to the space itself. “We’re a huge Coop,” he said. “But we’re so tightly packed into this little place. It

On the day of the conversation, he was shopping for a surprise party for his father, who had just become a citizen after 35 years in the country. He mentioned picking up beer, crackers, and cheese to mark the occasion.

ACTS OF SERVICE AS A LOVE LANGUAGE

Marlen Tapia Jimenez is a receiving coordinator who became a Coop member before joining the staff.

“I came with a big pride of becoming a member,” she said. “It took me about two months to get the orientation.”



Marlen Tapia Jimenez

That pride grew once she joined the staff. “It just expanded that feeling,” she said.

She described the work as something done for everyone. “When we stock something,

it's for you," she said. "Five minutes later, you find what you need."

For Marlen, the Coop feels personal. "It's doing this thing for ourselves," she said. "It's like being in your own kitchen."

SEEING THE STORE FROM THE CHECKOUT LINE

Barbara Lee joined the Coop in 2015, after being diagnosed with cancer and encouraged by friends to change how she ate.

"My friends said, you got to start eating better," she said. "They said, join the Coop."



Barbara Lee

She works office shifts and sometimes checkout. “I thought I was going to be scared to death to do checkout,” Barbara said. “But I love it.”

Checkout gives her a view of the store’s variety. “I get fixed on certain things,” she said. “Then somebody comes up with all this different stuff, and it’s like, oh, I didn’t know that was there. I gotta try that.”

That day, she was buying soap, body butter, and snacks. “Who’s going to treat you better than yourself?” she said.

LAUGHING AT OURSELVES

Sue Ragheb learned about the Coop through an article before moving to the neighborhood.

“It was that *New Yorker* article kind of mocking the culture of the Coop,” she said, referring to a piece by Coop member Alexandra Schwartz. “I thought it was really funny.”



Suzi Ragheb

Ragheb has been a member for about three-and-a-half years and appreciates the humor built into the place. “I think the PA system being open to everyone is hilarious,” she said.

One announcement stood out. “Someone got on there once being concerned about a chihuahua that seemed stressed out,” she said.

She also enjoys the *Gazette*. “The letters to the editor are very entertaining,” she said.

THE CHAOS OF THE BULK AISLE

Mike Zappitello joined the Coop in 2019 and is drawn to its “kookiness and weird

vibe.”

“The crowdedness of the bulk aisle,” he said. “That aisle always cracks me up.”



Before the pandemic, he worked a cleaning shift that no longer exists. “It was one of the most fun jobs ever,” he said. “We would go through every corner of the building.”



Colin Hooker-Haring

He valued the continuity. “It was the same people four times a year,” he said. “You’d be like, how you doing this season? I haven’t seen you in so long.”

Now, he works stocking shifts. “I just schedule it whenever I can,” he said.

WHY THE LOVE ENDURES

Taken together, these conversations show many ways of loving the Park Slope Food Coop. That love manifests in habit and memory, in labor and care, and in the willing-

ness to keep showing up for a place that asks for something in return—a beautiful equilibrium of give and take.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients on Instagram (@persian_ish).

GROWING UP IN THE COOP'S AISLES: MEMORIES OF LIFELONG MEMBERS

May 5, 2026



By Juliet Kleber

This year the Coop celebrates its 50th anniversary. In its half-century, the Coop has grown and evolved, and so has its membership—and not only in numbers. The chil-

dren who grew up shopping alongside their parents (or waiting for them in the Coop's childcare room) in the early days are now grown, and many are members in their own right.

As part of its 50th-anniversary coverage, the *Gazette* interviewed some of those children of the Coop—whose families joined when they were children or even before they were born. They spoke to the *Gazette* about their memories, their favorite childhood treats and the place the Coop has had and continues to have in their lives.

The following interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity and concision.

Bryce Komaroff, 34

When did your family join the Coop?

My mom is one of the early members from the 1970s. She wasn't a part of the original team, but she was in the second wave of people that turned it from the smaller space into what it really is now.

She learned more about food by going to the Coop; she made friends; she learned stuff about gardening. It became a community for her.

My dad became a member when they got married in 1982. They've been members long enough that they're both retired now. But my mom still comes once a year to help with inventory.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

I've always been a child of the Coop; I don't remember a time when I didn't go there. My mom was a squad leader for many years, and I remember going to the childcare

area when my mom would shop, when the bulk room was still the childcare room. I believe she even donated some of our old PlayPlace stuff.

Sometimes I would be annoyed about being contained to that one room, but I thought it was so fun that we could play in there.



PHOTO BY B KAMAROFF

I've always been a child of the Coop. I don't remember a time when I didn't go there.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

Cinnamon raisin bagels.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I left when I went away to college. So I didn't go to the Coop from the time I was around 18 until I was 26, since I wasn't living in New York.

I moved back to New York in 2016 and rejoined in 2017. I moved home with my parents and got a very stern reminder that anyone who lives in the house should contribute to the Coop. But also my mom really believes in the mission of the Coop (not that I don't too!).

I love the consistency of knowing that our foods are higher quality, that the prices are better and I can get everything I need. I see how much of an impact it has on the bottom line that the majority of the work is volunteer, so they're able to keep prices low.

How has the Coop changed over the years?

It's gotten less crowded, which I love. Because my number one issue with shopping before the pandemic was that you just couldn't fit anywhere. But I always felt like I was in the way when I would do receiving. Some people enjoyed that because they'd get to see lots of people they know. But now that things are a little more regulated, I feel like it's a better shopping experience.

I love the work system being online now. I definitely think that it's helpful that people can sign up for shifts and look at what's available. And not only do you have your recurring squad, but you can also do random shifts if you want.

I like the carrot system too, because I know there are shifts that people tend not to

want, like early mornings or maintenance. And the unofficial app so you don't have to worry about taking your card everywhere. I love that they've introduced those things and come along a bit more to the technological age.

I always found that the people who worked for the Coop are very good about making tools and systems that are clear. When you have so many workers who are just volunteering—this might not be their regular shift, or this might be the first time they're ever doing certain things—it really builds confidence for people.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

I definitely think I internalized the messages about knowing where your food comes from and trying to eat as much organic food as possible. I don't always stick to that. I'm also a millennial, so I like convenience; I'll have food delivered sometimes. But when I look at my friends or my husband who didn't grow up like that I see that they have a different perspective. I didn't know what fast food was until I was a teenager—which is very different from most of my American friends.

I am a healthy person. And I wonder if that foundation helped to get there.

How do you imagine your future relationship to the Coop?

Working in the office now I learn a lot about other parts of the Coop that I never would have known about otherwise. There's a PowerPoint that they have up on the screen for people to learn more about the shift schedules and all those things. And one of the slides is about the retirement process. I was looking at that and thinking, "Okay, 30 more years and I can retire as well."

As long as I stay in Brooklyn (and after living outside of New York for nine years, I definitely never want to leave again), I plan to be a member of the Coop. If I have children in the future I would also want them to grow up in the Coop. I definitely see it as a part of my family's life.



PHOTO BY B. KAMAROFF

I didn't know what fast food was until I was like a teenager.

Nathaniel Parrott, 28

When did your family join the Coop?

I grew up in Park Slope and my parents have been members since as long as I can remember, maybe before I was born (in 1994).



Nate Parrott remembers that his parents were perpetually being suspended.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

I remember that my parents were perpetually suspended. My mom would work at the daycare and I would go there with her. I would be dragged there to shop and I was not a huge fan, because I was a kid, and I didn't like being dragged anywhere. Sometimes we'd go to the General Meetings and I would be really bored.

When I was a teenager, I would occasionally work a shift with my dad in the dairy cool-

er, which was fun.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

My sister recently reminded me of a chocolate bar we always got. I'm not sure if they still have it. It was very Coop-y: not super creamy. It was a brown rectangle.

And the huge bagels they would give us at daycare.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I went away for college and I wasn't involved with the Coop for a long time, from when I was 18 until 28. I moved back to New York, then back to Brooklyn and finally back to Park Slope. And my parents were telling me, "You gotta join the Coop."

My girlfriend, who I live with now, was very down for it because, of course, my parents talked it up a lot.

Intellectually, I knew the idea that the Coop was cheaper, it was better produce. But that didn't really settle in until I was an adult and I had left and come back. I would go to Key Food and try to get an avocado and they would just be horrible. I realized why my parents were willing to work the shifts and put up with the incredible crowds.

My girlfriend and I both work jobs on the computer all day, so for my shift, I'm excited to have a job that's not on the computer but is still useful.



When Nate Parrott moved back to New York his parents insisted that he and his girlfriend join the Coop.

I also think there's a bit of nostalgia. It just seems nice to be part of the community.

We finally joined about two or three weeks ago, because it took a while to get an appointment for orientation. My first shift was this past Tuesday.



Nate Parrott seen here working in the basement. He's currently doing freelance shifts.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

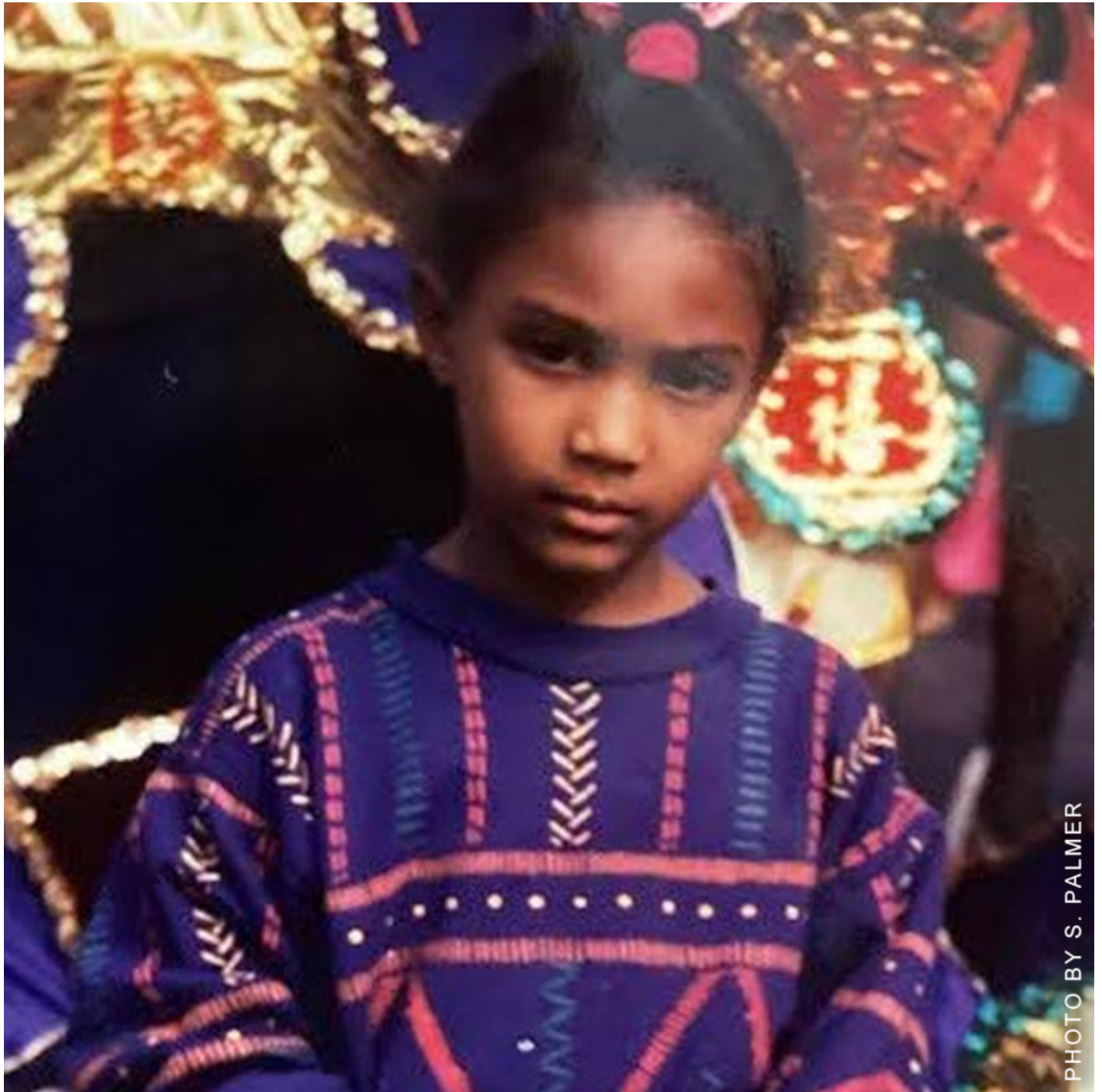
We were always eating the Coop brand stuff, and I'd go over to my friends' houses and they'd have Kraft Mac & Cheese and I would think, "This is the coolest thing in the world." We had the Coop, they had Key Food. It was a little bit of a culture differ-

ence. As a kid, I resented it. If we went on vacation and got Kraft Mac & Cheese, I would be the happiest kid in the world. Of course, now as an adult, I appreciate that [the Coop's is] better stuff.

Soraya Palmer, 38

When did your family join the Coop?

It would have been in the early nineties. I'm not exactly sure what year, but I was in elementary school.



Soraya Palmer's parents were very into food and that has influenced her relationship with what she eats.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

My dad used to be on the Entertainment Committee so he would DJ for parties, which I thought was really cool.

It was an interesting place. It wasn't really like other supermarkets. It was always

very crowded, and you would always see your neighbors and people you knew—teachers from my school, other people I grew up with who also grew up in the Coop.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

I'm not vegetarian anymore, but I was for a while. And they had a lot of different vegetarian stuff. I remember when Amy's first came out—now it's everywhere, but then it was a big novelty. It was exciting.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I went out of state for college. When I moved back to New York in 2016, I was living with family friends who were members, so I had to rejoin. Then I left again when my life was just very busy.

I only recently rejoined a few months ago. Eventually, I missed some of the things they have at the Coop that they don't have everywhere else—certain sauces and seasonings, loose teas, certain vegetables; they have so many different kinds of mushrooms. A lot of different Caribbean and other ethnic ingredients.

You probably can get them somewhere else, but you would have to go to multiple places. It's nice that it's in one place.

How has the Coop changed?

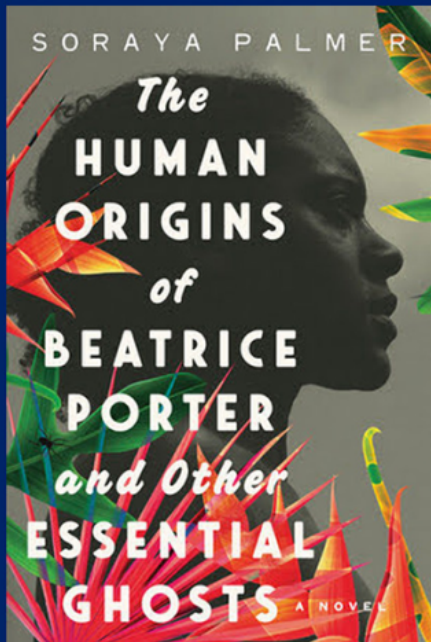
I feel like things have mostly changed since the pandemic. But since I was a kid, I think it's just mostly gotten bigger.

I don't think I necessarily always understood it as a kid, why would they go all the way to Park Slope to buy things because there are so many grocery stores in our neighborhood (Lefferts Gardens). I get that more now.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

My parents are very into food, so I think the combination of the two did. They have always been into buying organic, local and buying things when they're in season. My mom is macrobiotic. Those things felt important, and they would talk a lot about the Coop and why it was so great. I remember there were things my parents wouldn't want to buy at other places because they would be better quality and more affordable at the Coop.

Food is so expensive now. It's hard to find healthy food at a good price. The Coop is definitely really helpful for that. I eat meat now, and they find more humanely--sourced meat.



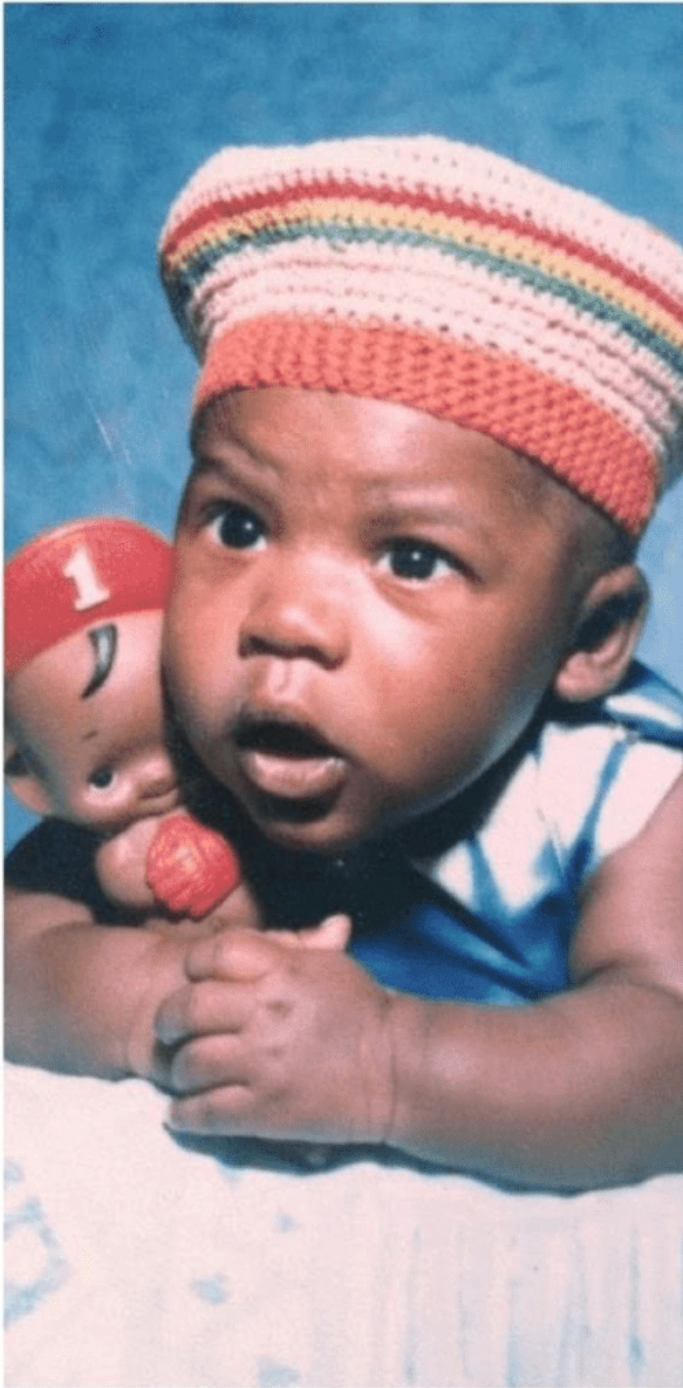
the sauces, seasonings, loose teas, and certain vegetables.

And in my book (*The Human Origins of Beatrice Porter and Other Essential Ghosts*), one of the chapters is in a grocery store that's semi-based on the Coop.

Hemamset Angaza, 34

When did your family join the Coop?

I've been a Coop lifer. My parents have been members since before I was born. My mom probably has the biggest relationship to it, she's been on the Diversity Committee for years, maybe a decade now.



Hemamset has never known a time when he or his family have not been a members of the Coop.

What do you remember about the Coop from your childhood?

I was always tagging along with my mom, and sometimes I would stay in the daycare while she would shop. I don't remember too many details, but I remember that I always looked forward to it. The time would go by really quickly; I could be in there for

two hours without realizing it.

I also remember loving being there when my mom would do the shift where they'd count the money. I was probably eight, and I'd never seen that much money in my life before.

When I got old enough, I started working as a walker.

My favorite moment was a makeup shift I did. I was in my early-mid 20s. I was kind of dreading waking up to do it—I'm a late riser, so usually I do afternoon shifts. They signed me up to work CHiPS, the soup kitchen. We got to take food from the Coop's leftovers and donations, and we cooked whatever we could make.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Hemamset's Coop shift is taking donations and damaged but eatable food to CHiPS who run the soup kitchen on 4th Avenue.

I had never done any kind of volunteer work like that in my past. A few of us hadn't been there before. It was just a nice vibe, and it was really rewarding to be able to serve the food at the end.

Favorite childhood Coop item?

I was very consistent about a few snacks. I really liked these brown rice chips that they used to have. If I left the Coop without a bag of those, it was a wasted day. They were amazing—crunchy but very light. They also had this thing called a “Cashew Butter Krinkle.” I don't think the company makes them anymore, but those were just absolutely delicious.

I've been a vegan my whole life. My parents have been vegan for probably 40 years. So we had a very specific set of things that we ate. We really did them to death. And when they stopped making them it felt kind of like a betrayal.

Now my go-to snack is probably the raw cashews combined with the golden raisins.

Did the Coop influence your relationship to food and groceries?

The fact that the food is affordable is something that you definitely take for granted until you're not shopping there. They have a price point and atmosphere that encourages me to try new things.

At other places you go shopping with a specific budget, and you look down at the end and realize you might not even be able to get all of it with the money you had allotted. But at the Coop, I can usually look at it more like a playground, “This looks good. I'm gonna try this. Let me try that.”

Not everything is going to hit the right spot. But I've tried more things from the Coop

than I've probably tried at any other supermarket.

Did you ever leave the Coop? If so, why did you join again?

I've always been a member in one way or another. I've been suspended probably too many times. But I've always been a member, just maybe not the best member...

How has the Coop changed?

I'm not sure if it's a change in the Coop or a change in me, but I think it's become more rigid. There's an atmosphere where it feels like some people are kind of watching what you do, if you're performing as an appropriate member of the Coop society. I've gone in and had members chastise me for things and we're both doing the same thing here, just trying to get some groceries.

That was never something I used to worry about. But that might be because I'm an adult and I see more now. When I was a kid that could have been the same, I just didn't notice that.

I definitely miss the bulletin board. Sometimes people would get jobs from there. As a kid, I loved looking at it just because I was curious. But as an adult, I think that's an important part of what we can do for each other.

How do you imagine your future relationship to the Coop?

I still live with my folks, and my family is definitely invested. My mom is routinely in meetings with the Diversity Committee, talking about what they can do to make the Coop a better place for people who are members. She's very ingrained in the culture of the Coop.

So I'm always gonna have that connection. And just going there my entire life, we know a lot of members who are friends of my family, who are in the same social cir-

cle, who are also vegans. It's not unusual for me to go to the Coop and see three or four people I know. I'll see a familiar face—somebody I haven't seen in a while—we'll catch up there for a little bit, and maybe they'll offer me a ride home.

I definitely want to keep that as long as I live in New York, at least, and if I have kids. It's not just about food and shopping, it's about being a part of something that you can fall back on as you grow.

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

BUILDING COMMUNITY BY COOKING TOGETHER: COOP COOKING CLASSES MAKE A COMEBACK

May 5, 2026



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

By Frank Haberle

Brooklyn is undoubtedly one of the world's great culinary capitals. According to the New York City Department of Health, there are 6,646 restaurants lining the avenues of our borough, representing almost every cuisine and culture in the world; with food trucks, markets and other venues, every conceivable dish is at our fingertips. Among the Park Slope Food Coop membership, we are blessed with a multitude of professional chefs as well as talented home cooks who have remarkable knowledge of the many ingredients we hold on our shelves, and of how to prepare delicious meals for our families. The Coop's cooking classes—a series of events organized and presented by a committed working group of our members—offer a remarkable opportunity to learn how to prepare a fantastic range of dishes, using the products available at the Coop.

As the Coop continues its steady progress toward pre-Covid normalcy, one of the most important aspects of this effort is bringing back the programs and activities that helped to strengthen the sense of community that defines our membership. In this effort, the return and rising popularity of Coop cooking classes has been a key ingredient.

“THERE WAS A COMMUNAL SENSE TO THE IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS WITH A GREAT DEAL OF INTERACTION AND HANDS-ON LEARNING BETWEEN THE MEMBERS AND PRESENTERS...”

MANDIRA GHAI, COOKING CLASS CO-CHAIR

The cooking classes that were hosted on-site in the upstairs meeting room for years before Covid-19 were a popular mainstay of the community. The classes brought chefs and home cooks from the widest possible range of cultures and cuisines to share their knowledge and love of great food with members. The classes were always popular events, drawing a core group of “regulars,” both new and long-standing members. With Covid restrictions during the spring of 2020, the cooking classes, like all workshops hosted by the Coop, had to be paused.

Today, under the leadership of co-chairs Mandira Ghai and Jeff Bonar and squad members Sophia Li, Tritia Denaro, Nina Fattahi, Amanda McCleod, Jeffrey M. and Elana Siggall, cooking classes have returned to the Coop in a virtual format—a big change from the pre-Covid, in-person workshops, necessary due to the meeting room being repurposed. Ghai, a Coop member since 2016, remembers that “prior to the pandemic, classes were packed between first-time attendees and regulars who participated each and every month. The interactive, hands-on approach of the in-person sessions, especially the prepared meal everyone shared at the end of the class, really reinforced the communal nature of the Coop.”

When classes had to be canceled due to Covid, the core group of organizers voluntarily continued to meet and plan how to bring back the workshop series. “The team saw a unique opportunity at the beginning of lockdown to translate classes into an online social activity that offered ideas and inspiration, especially during a period when people were overwhelmed by how much more cooking they were doing at home,” Ghai said. “It was a nice feeling of camaraderie for us to keep going in the midst of chaos, and a reminder of how much I enjoy collaborating with the talented, affable people in our squad.” Another initiative by the Food Class Squad was cooking for the Coop’s hard-working staff during the pandemic, preparing meals for nearly 60 essential workers.

“WE WANT THE CLASSES TO FEEL WELCOMING FOR EVERYONE—FROM GATHERING INGREDIENTS TO ENCOUNTERING MOMENTS OF UNCERTAINTY AND HAVING A PERSON THERE TO GUIDE YOU.”

SOPHIA LI, MEMBER

Open to members and non-members, Coop cooking classes offer wide-ranging options for member cooks. This summer, classes have included recipes for summer squash, presented by Jeffrey Mason, and a workshop on blueberry pie hosted by Elana Segall. In all cases, there is a great deal of flexibility in the structure of the workshops, which allows the leaders to be creative. Cooking classes are designed to be accessible to people at all levels as cooks, with presenters walking the group through preparation of dishes, step by step, with plenty of time for Q&A.

Sophia Li, a new Coop member who worked in stocking and checkout before joining the Cooking Class Squad very recently, spoke of how impressive it is to see how the classes contribute to a strong sense of community. “I know a lot of people who have joined the Coop since the pandemic, ranging from professional chefs to people who only eat Ritz crackers. Regardless of your cooking level—from gathering ingredients

to encountering moments of uncertainty and having a person there who can guide you, to hearing other people's questions during the class and discussing together—we are seeking to facilitate a space for learning together," Li said.



D. Tint

ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

“It is a priority that our classes reflect the diversity of the products, producers, and people found at the Coop,” Ghai added. “Anyone with a perspective on food and cooking is encouraged to propose a virtual session. We also want to ensure that what we are sharing is useful, especially given the level of fatigue sustained by online meetings, so community requests and general feedback is extremely valuable as we continue redefining the class.”

“When we shop at the Coop we are surrounded by members representing every food tradition on the planet,” said squad co-chair and professional chef Jeff Bonar. “I am honored to be on the squad that celebrates that bounty! If you have some special food or cooking expertise and want to share it with other members, let us know.”

To learn more about upcoming Coop cooking classes and how to get involved—including doing a presentation—please visit the cooking class website. You can also check Instagram for updates and previous class photos. If you are looking for recipes and past presentations, please visit the YouTube channel or contact the squad directly at info@foodcoopcooks.org.

Frank Haberle is a 30-year Coop member, a professional grant writer, and the author of two novels about 1980s drifters—Shufflers, and the upcoming Downlanders—both published by Flexible Press in Minneapolis.

SHAPESHIFTER LAB IS MORE THAN A MUSIC VENUE

May 5, 2026



By Leila Darabi

The Coop is getting a new neighbor. Across the street at 837 Union St., in the space once occupied by the Tea Lounge, the performance venue and music nonprofit ShapeShifter Lab will open later this year. The two-story complex will house a cafe and performance space on the ground floor, as well as an upstairs workshop area and offices in what was last used as a yoga studio.

THE ORIGIN STORY

ShapeShifter Lab's co-founders, Matthew Garrison and Fortuna Sung (both Coop members, Garrison for more than 20 years), first met at an international high school in Rome in the 1980s. They came from artistic families that had relocated to Italy: Garrison's father played bass with John Coltrane, and his modern dancer mother taught and choreographed; Sung's father produced and directed films in Hong Kong, and her actor mother worked with Bruce Lee.

After high school, Garrison went on to study at the Berklee College of Music and began touring as an electric bass player. Sung went to college in San Francisco and returned to her native Hong Kong. The friends lost touch until 2010, when they reconnected on Facebook and later met up in Tokyo while Garrison performed as part of Whitney Houston's band.

"I was working in Hong Kong and looking for what to do next," Sung said. "Hong Kong didn't have many opportunities for artists." She wanted to apply her business skills to something creative and independent. "I was done working for other people."

"WE DISCOURAGE MUSICIANS FROM COMING TO OUR SPACE TO PLAY A 'GIG.' WE WANT YOU TO COME TO PRESENT AN EVENT, TO PRESENT YOUR WORK. AND WE'RE GOING TO BE THERE TO FACILITATE THAT AS MUCH AS HUMANLY POSSIBLE."

SHAPESHIFTER CO-FOUNDER MATTHEW GARRISON

Garrison, meanwhile, had put down roots in Brooklyn while traveling as a sought-after touring musician. He played with jazz greats including Herbie Hancock, Steve Coleman and John McLaughlin and, in addition to Whitney Houston, popular artists ranging from Paul Simon to Joni Mitchell. In Brooklyn, he founded a record label and put out several records, the second of which he titled *ShapeShifter* in reference to his genre-crossing musical interests.

During a visit in Brooklyn, he and Sung decided to join forces to create an experimental musical startup that would provide artists not only with a space to perform but a platform to promote their work.

"For us to start up a music-type business made sense. It was easy, given all the people we knew," Garrison said. Explaining the full range of the business plan proved

slightly harder, given the pair's wide-ranging interests and passions. "It was hard to get people to understand what we were trying to do in that first phase," Garrison said. "People kept asking, 'Is it a studio?'"

For Garrison and Sung, ShapeShifter goes beyond performance space and recording studio, though they offer both. "It's for you to perform and present your art, and we will make sure to facilitate that," Garrison clarified. Eventually the concept caught on, and crowds wrapped around the block of their former venue near the Gowanus Whole Foods. "It kind of blew up all of a sudden, and almost every musician in New York came through."

As a musician, Garrison believes strongly in ShapeShifter supporting musical artists beyond a single performance. "We discourage musicians from coming to our space to play a 'gig.' We want you to come to present an event, to present your work. And we're going to be there to facilitate that as much as humanly possible."



Matt Garrison and Fortuna Sung in the new location of their music venue, Shapeshifter Lab, across from the Food Coop on Union Street.

NOT A VENUE, BUT A COMPLEX

Today, the ShapeShifter multiverse includes ShapeShifter Lab, the music venue; ShapeShifter+, a nonprofit entity; and ShapeShifter Lab Productions, a music label.

Garrison and Sung registered ShapeShifter+ in 2014 but didn't start nonprofit programs until they were forced to shut down their in-person events in March 2020. Having operated out of a space in Gowanus for several years, they found themselves in the middle of a pandemic saddled with a competitive Brooklyn rent and no revenue from ticket sales. "We just couldn't keep pulling out of our own pockets. It became completely unsustainable," Garrison said.

"NEW YORK CITY CONCERT PRICES ARE VERY EXPENSIVE. IT'S UNREAL. WE'RE HOPING [THE NONPROFIT] HELPS US MAKE THAT EASIER FOR EVERYONE."

SHAPESHIFTER CO-FOUNDER FORTUNA SUNG

The nonprofit model provided tax incentives for investors. With the new venue in Park Slope, they intend to fundraise to offset performance prices with the goal of making entertainment more accessible to people of all economic backgrounds. "New York City concert prices are very expensive. It's unreal. We're hoping [the nonprofit] helps us make that easier for everyone," Sung explained. "Having a nonprofit helps for future fundraising," she added.

ShapeShifter+ also collaborates with other nonprofits. Garrison serves as a mentor to young musicians through community programs. In addition, when the space opens in a few months, they will offer a home to the Fat Cats, a youth ensemble organized by

the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance (ALJA). Fat Cats' Sunday workshops and rehearsals will be open to the public on the ground floor.

Sung, the operations and logistics lead, has designed a café space for the ground floor and plans to include yoga in the programming for the upstairs workshop space. She herself attended yoga at the studio that shut down during the pandemic, which was part of the appeal of this site for the new incarnation of ShapeShifter Lab. She and Garrison both liked the former Tea Lounge space, but didn't think their concept would work on the ground floor with another business just above it.

"I almost gave up the idea of the space, because the upper space was occupied," she recounted. When businesses began to reopen after pandemic shutdowns, Sung sought out her former yoga studio but saw it had shut down. While she missed the classes, she saw an opportunity in the building.

A DIGITAL LAB

Beyond the walls of the Union Street venue, Garrison and Sung plan robust digital programming. They had already invested in the latest live streaming functionality at their original venue, and those live streaming skills came in handy during the pandemic.

Garrison has also spent considerable time learning to code and has created two iOS apps. His first, the self-titled Matt Garrison app, allows him to release his own music on his own terms as well as share lessons and chord charts. He hopes to expand the technology to support other musicians in taking the same innovative approach to releasing new work.

Garrison gained skills in app design from his friend and fellow bass player Massimo Biolcati. He first asked Biolcati to build him an app. When his friend declined, Garrison proposed he teach him how to do it himself instead. "Because we're bass players, we would get together, play bass and then we would code," he said, laughing.

ACCORDING TO GARRISON, THEIR LANDLORDS, THE DIXONS, TURNED DOWN OTHER OFFERS FOR THE SPACE, INCLUDING A BID FROM SHAKE SHACK. “COULD YOU IMAGINE A SHAKE SHACK ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE COOP?”

Garrison—and ShapeShifter Labs’—latest project, TuneBend, takes his vision to the next level. “It’s basically the app that allows anyone to collaborate and build pieces of music together,” Garrison said. He received support from Apple’s Racial Justice and Equity Initiative to create it.

“I can’t even explain how much they’ve done for us. Not monetarily, just in terms of pushing a message, connecting us with their engineers, helping us make decisions on how to build the software. Just really serious stuff—and it’s not over.”



Matt Garrison

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Both Garrison and Sung have effusive praise for their new landlords, the Dixon family. Proprietors of Dixon's Bike Shop, a few doors down from the Coop, and owners of property around the neighborhood, the Dixon family originally hail from Jamaica. Marie Dixon, the family's matriarch, is a long-time Coop member.

Garrison, whose parents are Black and Jewish, and Sung, whose family is Chinese, expressed special gratitude for the trust bestowed to them by a Black-owned business in taking them on as tenants. According to Garrison, the Dixons turned down other offers for the space, including a bid from Shake Shack. "Could you imagine a Shake Shack across the street from the Coop?"

Instead of fast food, they will offer healthy food options at their café, which Sung plans to keep open for business during regular hours and not just while performances take place. Coop member and veteran caterer Kim Pistone is advising on the menu.

ShapeShifter Lab will open as soon as the Department of Buildings permits clear, Sung said. Coop members can expect updates in future *Linewaiters' Gazette* articles, and Sung hopes to provide a venue for Coop events once open.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram.

FLASH OF INSPIRATION OR IRRITATION? NEW 'NEXT MEMBER' LED SIGN

SPARKS CONFUSION

May 5, 2026



By Sara Ivry

There it is, flashing in green neon, affixed to the glass just inside the Coop's vestibule. To some, it is reminiscent of neon signs advertising beer at all-night groceries, beckoning thirsty customers who may or may not notice it or even need it as a reminder.

The sign, of course, is not for drinkers or smokers or those in search of Girls! Girls! Girls! It's for Food Coop members. And it reads "NEXT MEMBER," to nudge would-be shoppers waiting in the entrance line that their time has finally, at long last, come.

Maybe you've noticed it only upon walking through the automatic door on

HOW IS A PERSON WAITING IN LINE TO DETERMINE THE INTENTIONALITY OF THE FLASHING? IS IT MEANT FOR THEM, OR LEFT OVER FROM A SUMMONS INTENDED FOR THE PERSON BEFORE THEM?

“I really love it,” LaMond said. “I’ve been a member since ’01, so forever, and in the pandemic we were all really freaked out. I’ve admired the Coop’s diligence in holding to safety protocols and mask wearing and the line outside—it was necessary,” she said alluding to the blocks-long queue members waited in during the pandemic’s earliest months.

At that time “we were all learning together, and it was challenging, anxiety provoking, so I really like the new member sign because it allows you to know, ‘Come in.’ It takes the guess work out, and it’s not on the entrance person to wave their hand.”

Others, however, are less charmed by the addition. Some question its utility, as well as its expense.

But at \$150, the cost of the sign is negligible, said Membership Coordinator Jason Weiner. He is the one who alit upon the idea for the innovation in early May. “I was trying to think of ways that we could capture members’ attention quicker if they’re at the front of the line,” he explained.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLEN

Like fellow membership coordinators, Weiner said he is “down on the floor all the time, and what I noticed with the entrance desk was the worker was often having an issue of letting the member know they can come inside, sometimes because [the member] couldn’t see through the doors. Sometimes the member was on the phone, not paying attention.”

So, Weiner found SpellBrite, an Elmhurst, Ill.-based company that makes custom LED signs that plug in to regular electrical outlets. He fashioned a hard-wire switch for entrance desk workers to turn the sign on and off at will. When switched on, the light flashes incessantly. If the entrance desk worker neglects to turn it off, the non-stop flashing is at risk of becoming little more than the visual equivalent of ambient noise.

“SOMETIMES I PLAY WITH IT, AND I TURN IT OFF TO SEE IF ANYONE NOTICES. NOBODY NOTICES.”

MICHAEL RING, ENTRANCE WORKER

That was how it struck this shopper on a recent visit. If the sign flashes non-stop even as the line to enter advances, how is a person to determine the intentionality of the flashing? Is it meant for them, or left over from a summons intended for the person before them, or simply evidence of entrance worker forgetfulness?

“The worker has the power to control it,” Weiner said, “so what happens is if there aren’t a lot of people in line, they leave it on. It just flashes.”

In Weiner’s experience, the reception to the sign has been generally positive.

“The amount of times the entrance worker hears people say ‘I love that sign,’ it happens constantly,” he said. “People get excited for new innovations—a nice welcoming sign for the members.”

Michael Ring, an entrance worker who works his own shift as well as that of his wife, agreed that in the first few weeks of the sign's presence, shoppers commented on it. They thought it was cute, he said. But soon it became part of the scenery. They stopped mentioning it.

"Sometimes I play with it, and I turn it off to see if anyone notices," Ring said. "Nobody notices. It's big and gaudy, but nobody notices. It needs to be outside, not inside. People get to the front of the line and they look at their phones. They need a poke with a stick, a honk. An audio announcement of 'Step in' would work better. We need a sign that says, 'Have your card ready and your mask on when you get to the front of the line.' Dude, there's people behind you that want to shop."

Karen Fuller, a member since 2004 who sometimes does entrance desk work as part of her work commitment, seconds Ring's observation that the lure of the phone screen preoccupies members, frequently rendering the sign useless.

"They're not looking up. And you keep flicking the light, or making a motion," but it doesn't register, she said. Moreover, "it's used inconsistently, because people in line, not to mention the entry workers, don't know when to use the sign....and you still have the 'NEXT' board, and you can pick that up. Sometimes you just hand gesture to people and wave them in." She is hopeful perhaps winter's onset will make a difference in the sign's impact. "Maybe it will be better in the darker months," she said. "The sign's light will be more prominent."



Sara Ivry is a freelance writer, editor, and podcaster. A long-time member of the Food Coop, she lives in Clinton Hill.