

THE FUN COMMITTEE: BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH GATHERINGS AND JOY

April 22, 2025



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By Liora Fishman

If you've been to a Coop cabaret, danced at a Coop-sponsored prom in a church basement, or made puppets with fellow members, you've probably experienced the work of the Fun Committee. These joyful events don't happen by accident—they're the product of a long Coop tradition, where member-driven activities have been part of the culture since the early days.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Thomas Oesau and Gabriella Di Piazza having fun in the Coop.

Returning once more after a COVID-prompted hiatus, the Coop's Fun Committee is responsible for organizing activities that strengthen community and keep members engaged beyond work shifts. While its current focus is on social gatherings and cultural events, the committee actually began with a straightforward mission: to help the Coop pay its rent. Originally called the "Fund-Raising Committee," it organized events like auctions to raise money during the Coop's early years.

One of the committee's early members, Martha Siegel, joined the Coop in 1973 and began contributing to community-building in 1983. "I started wanting to create a community through my passion: music," explained Siegel. Her passion quickly became a driving force behind the Fun Committee's evolution.

Siegel recalled that the then-Fund-Raising Committee was already active when she and Steve Browman launched the first Annual Food Coop Music Festival in 1984. "So we joined forces with that planning committee," she said, to plan a festival that could both raise funds and foster a greater sense of community through art and song. The festival was a major success, featuring over 100 musicians and drawing a crowd of 1,000 people—and continuing for several years. "I still have the programs from the first two years," Siegel said.

The Fun Committee through the years

Over time, the committee's role evolved to focus more on building community. Some past activities have included anniversary parties, rummage sales, Halloween gatherings and potluck suppers. There were music festivals modeled after Pete Seeger's Great Hudson River Revival, chamber music concerts, coffeehouse performances and even camping trips that drew up to 70 people.

Today, the Fun Committee continues that tradition by hosting events designed to bring Coop members together in ways that are joyful, inclusive and low-pressure.

The Fun Committee's next event is the 2nd Annual Potluck Picnic, on Saturday, June

14, in Prospect Park. All Coop members and their families are invited to bring a dish, a blanket and a spirit of sharing to this laid-back afternoon of food and connection. In case of rain, the event will be held the following Friday, June 21.

Thomas Oesau, a longtime Fun Committee member, said the committee is about more than fulfilling responsibilities. “Sometimes people think of the Coop as a place of rules and duties,” he said, “but there’s also this incredible creative spirit here. The Fun Committee exists to bring that out—to help members see each other as whole people, not just fellow workers or shoppers.”

He emphasized the continuity provided by longtime members. “It was great to have such a legacy of membership and tradition of activities,” Oesau said. “We had 16 annual Kids Variety Shows, lots of craft-based activities in the old community room and events at Old First Church and the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture.”

Siegel explained that the music festivals eventually evolved into annual Variety Shows. “We alternated years for audiences of adults and kids. Eventually, we only continued the Kids Variety Show because it attracted way more people,” she said. “They continued until Covid and even through it—in 2021 and 2022 we did them on Zoom. We also did a fun Trivia Night on Zoom.” Siegel retired from the committee in 2023.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

Thomas Oesau and Gabriella Di Piazza having fun the Coop.

Committee member Gabriella Di Piazza highlighted the vibrant energy of pre-Covid open mic nights, especially those held at the Old Stone House. “A particular highlight from pre-Covid days was seeing the range of talent and creativity on display within the Coop community,” she said. One performance that stayed with her was “a rap and tap combo performed by Sarah Safford, accompanied by Martha Siegel on cello and set to Run DMC’s instrumental of ‘You Be Illin.’ Good times!”

Fellow committee member Fadwa Abbas shared her appreciation for events that brought together different generations. She recalled a cardboard game afternoon where an eight-year-old girl outplayed everyone at Dixit—a favorite board game Abbas brought in. “She’d never played the game before but ended up being better at it than all of us,” Abbas said.

Events have varied in tone and format over the years. A spring cabaret featured performances by Coop members; a Coop Prom invited people to dress up and dance in a local church basement. Puppet-making workshops, trivia nights, movie screenings and seasonal gatherings all serve the same basic purpose: giving members a reason to slow down and connect with the Coop community.



Spreading joy with positive messages at the interactive 50th anniversary exhibition. Because the Coop's own members—musicians, artists, sound technicians and cooks—are featured, the events are accessible and showcase the depth of talent in the community.

"A party might seem trivial, but it can be transformative," Oesau said. "You strike up a conversation on the dance floor, and suddenly you know someone you've only ever passed in the cereal aisle. It builds trust. It builds warmth."

Abbas believes the events create space for friendships and shared experiences. "The events we organize help people get to know each other beyond shopping and shift work," she said.

The committee meets regularly to plan, organize, promote and run events. Though

it's part of the standard labor system at the Coop, members say the work is especially rewarding. "We're doing labor, just like any other shift," said Oesau, "but it feels different. You're collaborating to make something delightful happen."

"Before the pandemic, many of our events happened in the lounge upstairs in the Coop," Abbas said. "It made organizing events like card-making or pumpkin-decorating easy. I think losing the lounge space forced us to think more creatively about organizing events in terms of both location and types of events."

Oesau described how the committee adapted during the pandemic by hosting virtual events like trivia and an online open mic. They also partnered with the Diversity and Equality Committee on "Black Voices: Showcasing Black Creativity at the Coop" and created a 50th Anniversary exhibition in the Coop lobby. "All of that expanded our model," he said. "Now, collaboration is central. We work with outside spaces and members who want to help lead programs."

Newer members like Rob Price have brought fresh energy. "After meeting the team and learning about the community work that the team does, I thought that my background and skills could add value to the Fun Committee," he said. "Once I joined, I realized how the Coop community has so many shared values, and that there truly is a need to foster this by making space for the members to come together outside of shopping or shifts."

For Di Piazza, working on the 50th anniversary exhibition was a turning point. "Joining the committee became an avenue for me to engage with members beyond the shopping floor," she said. "One highlight was working on the 50th anniversary exhibition and diving into the Coop's archives, which helped me connect with the deeper history and perspectives of our membership."

"We have been trying to be thoughtful about representation, inclusiveness and access," said Oesau, "with our engagements a reflection of the Coop's principles and goals overall. Recent iteration and experimentation has opened up new opportunities

and events, while preserving some level of tradition so that people can return for events they enjoy.”

“We have a wonderful resource in the members themselves—lots of wisdom, talent and skill,” Abbas said. “So all we have to do is create opportunities for people to get to know one another in a social or creative setting.”

To reach out to the Fun Committee and get involved, send an email to psfcfun@gmail.com. You can also follow along with upcoming events and behind-the-scenes planning on Instagram at [@psfc_fun_committee](https://www.instagram.com/psfc_fun_committee).

Liora Fishman joined the Coop in December 2021. She lives in Prospect Heights and has a wonderful dog, Ollie, whom she loves very much.

Editors’ note: Two quotes that were originally incorrectly attributed to a Fun Committee member have been removed from this article.

PLANNING A PICNIC? MEMBERS OFFER TOP PICKS FROM THE COOP’S BOUNTY

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PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

By Liora Fishman



Watermelon salad with lime and mint is a vegan picnic go-to.

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What better way to celebrate summer than with a picnic! Of course, the bountiful choices at the Coop can sometimes feel like a curse; where to begin?

I spoke to Coop members and staff to find out what they're bringing to their picnics this summer, and what products Coop members should look for.

Brett Krasner, who lives in Prospect Lefferts Garden and has been a Coop member for three years, suggests eliminating choice paralysis by planning a menu in advance. Krasner prefers shelf-stable options and easily portable perishables alike: "Tinned fish is an easy, portable protein for any sandwich. Layered between sliced cucumbers, micro greens and spicy mayo—you can never go wrong."



PHOTO BY JOHN MIDDLEY

Tinned fish is a protein that travels well.

Coop cheeses travel especially well. Krasner recommends pairing cheese with Firehook crackers and Amaro cherries. “I use Amaro cherries the same way anyone would use jam—it’s just a bit of a twist on a classic pairing,” he said. “My favorite is Le Secret de Lys Soft Ripened Cow’s Milk cheese.”

Yuri Weber, the Coop’s buyer for cheese, shared that sales for burrata, fresh mozzarella and feta “almost double in the warmer months.”



Cheese paired with fruit or jam is another popular picnic choice.

Weber also recommended cheeses from Moser, in Switzerland, of which the Coop typically stocks about three or four varieties, including Aux Noix (with hazelnuts), Riesling x Sylvaner (washed with wine), and Charmant (triple cream). The Coop also stocks miniature-size versions of those cheeses.

Receiving Coordinator Lisa Hidem suggested picking up “any of [the Coop’s] delicious breads to go with that cheese. And for vegans there’s hummus or baba ghanoush.”



No pairing more classic than bread and cheese.

For vegan Coop members like Tamar Lindenbaum, another simple but no less refreshing option is a staple at picnics: “Limes, mint and watermelon, baby! No better snack to stay cool and share with friends at the park,” Lindenbaum said. “Cutting the watermelon is the toughest part—beyond that, it’s a simple snack that requires all of five minutes to prepare and is a crowd pleaser.”

Sabina Tilevitz, a Crown Heights resident and Coop member for two years, echoed Lindenbaum’s sentiments and added: “I love the Mi Niña ‘Pico de Gallo’ flavored chips. I’ll often bring those to the park with a jar of salsa and an avocado or two.”

Weber suggests a simple, grain-based salad: “I always bring orzo salad to picnics. Kalamata olives, ricotta salata, cherry tomatoes and fresh herbs—basil and mint.”



PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

The Coop’s fresh herbs can punch up a grain salad.

Beverages are also a crucial consideration in your picnic planning, and Coop members have no shortage to choose from. “I love to bring some Basque cider to the park—it’s light and the bubbles are refreshing,” Krasner recommended. “Although, if you prefer a more involved option, you could consider bringing a thermos of a favorite summer cocktail to share with folks.”

And if you’d like to end your meal on a sweeter note, Hidem recommends checking out the personal-size Noble pies, in flavors like apple, blueberry, cherry and other rotating seasonal flavors.

When preparing for a picnic, Coop members ought to also consider essentials that will make them more comfortable at their picnic, like a large picnic blanket and foldable chairs.

The Coop carries Baggu products that often can be used for picnicking, including wa-

terproof picnic blankets, insulated lunch boxes and reusable bags. I most recently bought a green gingham Baggu picnic blanket from the Coop that I've been sporting all summer when I head to the park after work.

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