

CONFESSIONS OF COOP CHEATERS—AND DIET COKE DRINKERS

February 18, 2025



February 18, 2025

By Liz Welch

My husband, Gideon, has been a member of the Park Slope Food Coop since 2006.

When we first started dating, he took me as his guest to the Coop one Sunday morning, and I remember thinking, what is this nirvana? Blood oranges? Medjool dates? Grumpy coffee? Plus bulk oatmeal... and oat milk before it became trendy? I wanted to sign up immediately.

“It’s a commitment,” he warned me.

We moved in together, got engaged, and that was when I finally joined, thrilled to be part of this community and happy to stock gorgeous fennel and pluots on a monthly basis. Gideon was correct: it was a commitment! But so worth it, as I loved the thoughtfully curated assortment of incredibly fresh and incredibly affordable food.

And then one day, I called my then-fiancé, and shared, “I just got the most gorgeous strawberries at the farmers’ market in Union Square.”

He grew quiet.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He said: “I just don’t understand.”

“Excuse me?” I said, confused.

“We work for our food,” he continued. “Why would you buy produce anywhere other than at the Coop?”

I laughed then, and we still laugh about it as he continues to be a more faithful Coop shopper than I am. I still occasionally buy produce at farmers’ markets—and have even, begrudgingly, bought marked-up apples or grapes at Union Market when the lines at the Coop can make a quick stop impossible. And glorious as our selection may be, it’s impossible to stock everything under the sun in our limited space.

GLORIOUS AS OUR SELECTION MAY BE, IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO STOCK EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN IN OUR LIMITED SPACE.

So when my *Linewaiters’ Gazette* editor asked me if I had “ever cheated” on the Coop, I said, “Hell yes!”

That led to this story:

I sent out an email blast to a few Coop friends that asked in the subject line, “Do you ever cheat on the Coop? Do you have a secret habit of buying bread or cheese or anything else anywhere else?”



Luise replied first:

“I go to Mozz Lab (502 Henry Street, Brooklyn) for mozzarella,” she wrote. “The Coop only sells tiny little pre-packaged ones, not the big juicy homemade Italian mozzarella that feeds an entire family!”

Maria, my Swedish friend, says she goes to Smor (437 East 12th Street, NY) for Danish bread, and Fabrique (348 W. 14th Street, NY) for other Swedish treats.

Linda likes Fei Long market in Brooklyn’s Chinatown (6301 8th Avenue). “It’s huge, so

less crowded than elbowing through the narrow aisles of the Coop. It is inexpensive, has lots of fresh produce, all kinds of seafood and interesting frozen Asian food options. You can sit and eat at the food court which is great for people watching and soaking in the culture. In warm weather, it's also fun to leave the Slope to walk through the area and hang out in a different part of Brooklyn."



Excited by all these new places to try, I decided to cast a wider net, and made a post on Facebook's Park Slope Together, which elicited more than 70 comments.

Some took my tongue-in-cheek request, "has anyone ever cheated on the Coop?" a little too seriously:

"Your premise is off!" Riva said. "We don't pledge allegiance to PSFC."

She was not alone in her feelings as seven other people liked her comment.

Shoshana got the joke, and made me laugh out loud with her comment: “It’s more that we are in an ethical non-monogamous relationship. When they had the Bell and Evans breaded chicken cutlets and nuggets, we were okay. But once they stopped stocking them, the substitute was not up to par! I like Key Foods’ (130 7th Ave.) fresh pierogies, the snacks and prices and variety at Trader Joe’s (130 Court St.), and the convenience of picking up something wherever I am and for whatever I need!”

More than a few people admitted to going to Trader Joe’s for a variety of things, including my pal Maria who gets “goat cheese, minced meat, ready-cooked bits of chicken and frozen meals” there.

Libby’s post really summed up the allure: “I go to Key Foods for my toxic food needs: Rice Krispies, marshmallows, Chex Mix, packaged cake mix, cheese balls, red hots and even distilled water. Why? Because Rice Krispie treats don’t work with healthy marshmallows (I’ve tried.) I have a Chex Mix lover in the family and sometimes I don’t have time to bake a cake from scratch and I don’t like the organic cake mix. Cheese balls are a special occasion (sleepover) item and I need red hots for my gingerbread people. Distilled water is for my iron. You can also buy a big container of toxic croissants for cheap and when you stick them in the oven, they are delicious.”

Her honest (and hilarious) post emboldened other Key Foods “cheaters” to admit they shop at the supermarket for sugary cereal, powdered donuts and Diet Coke!

Diana agreed with the Rice Krispies comment, and added she happily picks up a rotisserie chicken at Union Market, and buys cakes from Ladybird Bakery (252 Prospect Park W). “I never feel like I am cheating, just utilizing neighborhood resources properly.”

Kristen understands the nuance.

“My father is die-hard, pledge-allegiance to the Coop, and basically refuses to shop anywhere else, whereas my mother will opt for going to any farmers’ market first be-

fore going to the Coop.”

“SOMETIMES YOU NEED YOUR MALLOMARS.”

Alas! I am not alone! Though once our daughter came into the picture, Gideon eased up and would make allowances for last-minute runs to the Gowanus Whole Foods (214 3rd St.). (Another Diana shared that she particularly likes their frozen pizza selection, and Donna specifically shops there for Richard’s Sparking Rainwater “by the case because, it’s the best seltzer, in my opinion, and comes in glass bottles—no plastic!”)

Costco (976 3rd Ave.) got a shoutout for its competitive pricing—and, according to several commenters, its superior toilet paper. As did Mr. Lime (313 7th Ave.) for its cheap produce.

There were so many other wonderful suggestions, too many to include in one story, so I will wrap up with some highlights to consider:

Sahadis (187 Atlantic OR Pier 57 at Industry City) for the old-school Brooklyn experience as well as the Middle Eastern cornucopia, from dried Angelino plums to enormous glass jars of by-the-pound malt balls.

Japan Village (943 3rd Avenue) for all things Japanese, from a variety of furikake and onigiri to mochi.

Fish Tales (191A Court Street) for an incredible assortment of freshly caught fish and central-casting fishmongers.

Prospect Butcher Co. (665 Vanderbilt Avenue) got two shout outs for being an excellent source of high-quality meats. Its website also seems PSFC aligned, “Whole Ani-

mal, Worker Owned, Locally Sourced.”

All in, I have a whole new list of places to try, and a sense of relief that I’m not the only cheater out there. As one woman accurately summed up: “Sometimes, you need your Mallomars.”

Liz Welch is a journalist, memoirist and book collaborator.

COOKING THE ETHNIC AISLE

February 18, 2025



By Rahima Nasa

When I was a kid in the nineties, grocery shopping always meant going to two stores. The first was our local supermarket chain, such as Pathmark or C-Town, for American staples like Kix cereal, boxed cake mix and Oreos, while the second was for ingredients like curry leaves, mustard oil and other essentials needed for a proper South Asian meal.

My family immigrated to the U.S. in the 1990s with a wave of Bangladeshi immigrants. We settled in Queens and eventually moved to the Bronx, where a Bengali enclave was already thriving in Parkchester. This meant that there was already a proper South Asian grocery store with aisles brimming with spices, sacks of basmati rice and jars of ghee. At the time these stores were the only places my family could find the ingredients they needed so easily and cheaply. But as a kid, I couldn't care less. I was more interested in the Capri-Suns and string cheese sticks that I saw my friends eating in school.

As I moved farther away from my community, I stopped taking my Bengali grocery store for granted. When I was in college I was homesick one day so I decided to cook one of my favorite childhood staples: chana masala. I got most of what I needed at my local Wegmans and then as I was searching for garam masala I encountered an aisle where all items seemed to be from other places: masa flour, soba noodles, pre-packaged curries, and fish sauce. The food was categorized by place instead of the type of ingredient it was. Usually this type of aisle is labeled as "international foods" or simply "ethnic food." It didn't make a lot of sense to me, but I loved it.



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

Since my discovery as a college student, the ethnic food aisle quickly became my favorite part of my shopping trip. Not only because it was the only place to find ingredients that reminded me of home, but also because it was a place to discover new ingredients from other places. Kewpie mayo from Japan was an immediate hit.

The ethnic aisle started to appear in American grocery stores after World War II. Soldiers returning from countries like Italy, Germany and Japan wanted the foods they

had experienced while stationed abroad. Pasta eventually transitioned out of the aisle to dominate its own corner of the grocery store; now it seems that foods from mostly non-European countries dominate the ethnic aisle, and consumers have come to understand that. This is why brands like Brooklyn Delhi, which sells sauces inspired by Indian flavors, feel like they would have more success placing their products in this section of the store.

As I started to cook more of the foods I grew up with, the ethnic aisle started to feel more constraining. Why wasn't the grocery store organized like the one my family went to, where similar items were grouped together? Why weren't the cans of coconut milk next to the other canned items? Over the years critics like David Chang, owner of the Momofuku restaurant group, have pushed back on the ethnic aisle. Chang argues, it's the "last bastion of racism you can see in full daylight in retail America." I can see his point. Isolating products based on which country they're eaten in feels like another reminder of the fact that I'm different or not American enough because of what I eat.

When I became a member of the Coop in 2022, I was prepared to spend a lot of time in the ethnic aisle but was pleasantly surprised to find that there wasn't one. I don't have to go to two grocery stores to get what I need for dinner either. I can find curry leaves, bushels of rambutan, and lychee in the produce section. All the noodles (pasta and noodle-adjacent) are grouped together. I can find chutneys with the rest of the sauces.

The Coop doesn't treat the food I grew up with any differently than the boxed mac and cheese that lines its shelves. I'm just like every other shopper, and the Coop is unlike any other store.

Rahima Nasa enjoys writing for the Gazette because of all the members she's gotten to meet and because it allows her to learn about how the Coop works. When she's not writing for the Gazette, Rahima likes to experiment with new ingredients and is on a never-ending quest to make the perfect pie crust.

COOP REFLECTIONS ON 2021 HOLIDAY FOOD SALES TRENDS

February 18, 2025



By Marisa Bowe

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE



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

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

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

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

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

people,” Szladek said.

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

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

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

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

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



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

TURKEYS

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

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

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

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

CHEESE AND GIFTS

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

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

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

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

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

BULK AND SPECIALTY BUYER, YURI WEBER

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

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



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

PARTIES

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

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

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

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

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



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

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