WHAT THE COOP’S SUPPLEMENT AISLE TELLS US ABOUT HEALTH AND WELLNESS TRENDS

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PHOTO BY AZIKIWE ABOAGYE

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By Zach Schiffman

If you want to understand the American vitamins and supplements industry—its booms, busts, fads, fears and the quiet ways it reorganizes our anxieties—there may be no better vantage point than the Park Slope Food Coop's own supplement aisle. And there may be no better guide than Jessa Fisher, who has been overseeing and ordering the Coop's vitamins and supplements since 2016.

"I was a member and lived in Brooklyn for 10 years," Fisher said from Rochester, N.Y., where she now lives. "And then once COVID hit, I left New York City, but I kept ordering the vitamins and supplements remotely."

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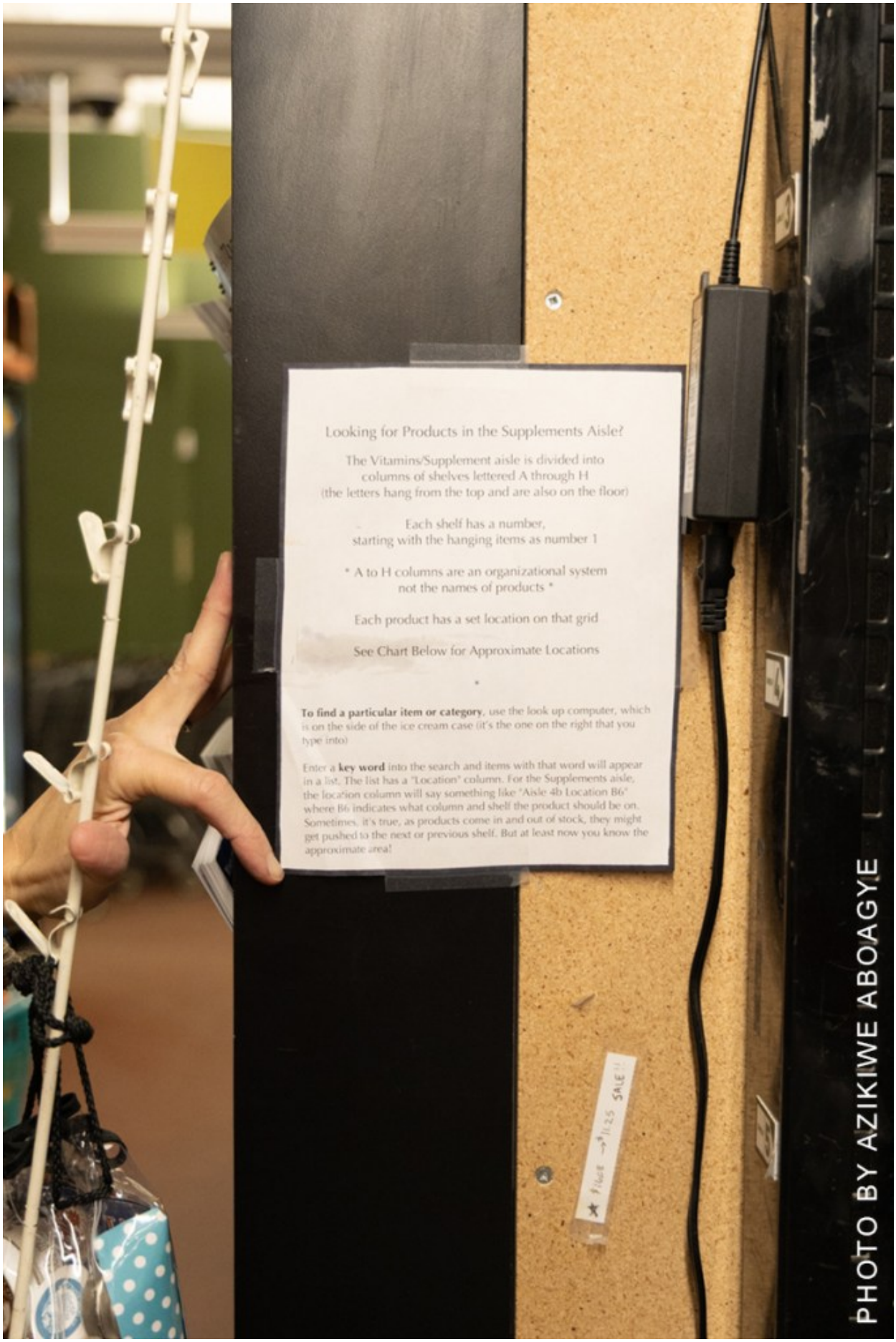
Fisher began her career at Willner Chemists, a store on Park Avenue in Manhattan that “only sold supplements and vitamins,” then worked at the herb shop Flower Power in the East Village.

At Willner, she helped people with their questions and their products. At Flower Power, she sold tinctures and herbs in a space where the whole point was explanation: *What is this? What does it do? Why would I take it?*

But the Coop is different. “We don’t do any of that at the Coop,” Fisher said. “All of it has to sell itself.” Other stores, she noted, “have displays, they’ll have information, they’ll have trainings, they’ll have all sorts of things. They’ll have samples.”



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But, Fisher said, “we don’t do any training or give out any information at the Coop, which is so crazy that it all just sells itself.”

Nationally, that’s where the industry has gone: away from hand-selling and toward self-directed consumer research. According to the Council for Responsible Nutrition, supplement use is at an all-time high, driven more by people reading articles and newsletters and watching TikToks than by staff in white coats behind a counter. If supplements once needed a person standing next to the shelf, now they mostly need a phone and a search bar. The Coop’s shelves—shrinking, expanding, rearranging, never quite containing what the membership suddenly wants—mirror those shifts.

When Fisher started, the aisle looked different.

“When I started, we had a really big presence with Solgar, and this up-and-coming company, Garden of Life,” she said, the latter of which exploded in popularity. “They were super popular, constantly coming out with so many new products. Then, at their height, they got bought out.”

Garden of Life was purchased by Nestlé in 2018. The arc she describes is now standard: small natural brand, explosive growth, then acquisition by a multinational and, at times, a more frustrating relationship on the purchasing end.

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According to Grand View Research, the global dietary supplements market, now close to $190 billion, is in exactly that phase of corporate consolidation. The aisle in the Coop feels those mergers as Fishers's reps and the minimums suddenly change, but it's the same story.

Present-day health trends are felt strongly in the health aisle. As Ozempic has surged in the last few years, the demand for supplements promising weight loss has waned. "When I first started, raspberry ketones were really popular," Fisher remembered. "Dr. Oz was touting it for weight loss—it was a big thing. And then probably people just realized, oh, this isn't working all that well."

(When Oz was nominated by President Trump to become head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, he was grilled in the U.S. Senate for his promotion of supplements as diet miracles.)

Right before Fisher left Brooklyn, CBD hit. "That was huge," she said. Getting CBD in-

to the Coop was a project in itself. “We were trying to figure out where the cabinet should go and then how to design the cabinet,” Fisher recalls. “And then because it had to be locked, there were tons of logistics with that.” It was, she said, “hot stuff.”

The more important long-term shift may be the rise of basics: melatonin, vitamin D, and magnesium. These are the things people talk about not as fads but as part of their daily lives: sleep, bones, stress.

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National surveys, including a 2022 study in *JAMA*, show U.S. melatonin use has roughly quadrupled over the past decade, particularly among young adults and parents. At the Coop, Fisher has noticed the form-factor creep as well, as melatonin gummies have surged in popularity. The Coop has some gummies scattered throughout the vitamin, kids', and herb sections, but she's wary. "You don't get as much of the medicine in the gummy," she said. Vitamin D is everywhere too, but Fisher doesn't fall for the hype. "A lot of people say that you really need really high doses," she said. "I don't carry those, like 50,000 IUs." (IU is a measure of vitamin potency.) "I just stick with the 10,000 in our aisle."

According to the NIH Office of Dietary Supplements, vitamin D deficiency is widespread in the U.S., and supplement sales jumped after pandemic-era studies linked low vitamin D levels with worse health outcomes, especially in colder climates.

"Magnesium has also exploded," she said. "It is out of control. Before, all you could get was magnesium citrate, but now it's magnesium glycinate, magnesium taurate, magnesium fizz."

Nationally, magnesium has become one of the fastest-growing supplements in the country. According to the Council for Responsible Nutrition's 2023 survey, usage has risen sharply, with many Americans taking magnesium specifically for sleep and stress—exactly what TikTok videos and clinicians now recommend.

What looks like an overstuffed section at the Coop is just following the national boom. "Even though we have 10 trillion magnesiums, it's hard to cut any of them because they all sell so well," Fisher said.

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Everyone also seems to be talking about protein. But the Coop tells a more local story.

“There’s been a backlash, too, because a story came out in the *New York Times* about how a lot of these protein powders have heavy metals in them,” Fisher said.

She was immediately alerted that one of the Coop’s products was cited in that story. “I took it off the shelf.” Another performance supplement, though, has clearly arrived.

“Creatine is pretty popular in the weightlifting world,” Fisher said. “I definitely have noticed a spike in that.” National sales data backs that up: creatine has quietly become a staple, driven by younger consumers who treat it as an everyday performance and recovery tool rather than a niche bodybuilder’s aid.

Just as Fisher rushes to add things to the aisle, she is also constantly evaluating what

should be cut.

“For the last five years, we could not keep enough elderberry in stock,” she says. “It is one of the herbs that has actually been proven to be antiviral.”

However, in the past year, Fisher has noticed elderberry sales waning as COVID immunity concerns have softened nationally. But space, not enthusiasm, is what kills most products.

“I just don’t have room to carry everything,” Fisher says. “I had to cut the tincture section, the essential oils, the flower essences and a bunch of homeopathic remedies.”

A lot of those items “sold only once a week—or once every two weeks,” she explains. “It really is based on sales volume.” Nationally, tinctures and essential oils peaked in the mid-2010s wellness boom and have since flattened, while mushrooms, minerals like magnesium and sleep aids have surged. The Coop’s aisle reflects the same transition—just with more members emailing about it.

“I have an attachment to every product I order, so it’s very hard for me to get rid of the products that don’t sell,” she said. “They’re all like my little babies.”

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