

HOW EQUAL EXCHANGE CONNECTS FARMER COOPS TO OUR COOP

July 15, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

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By Dan Bergsagel

Coop members can learn about the source of their food from labels or from the produce and bulk information on the Coop website. However, we only occasionally hear about intermediaries—the distributors who buy food from farms and sell it to the Coop. They come to our attention when something new happens, such as the expansion of Field Day products on our shelves, or when something goes wrong, including the June 2025 cyberattack on UNFI, which led to temporary shortages on the Coop’s shelves, as UNFI accounts for 32 percent of the Coop’s purchasing.

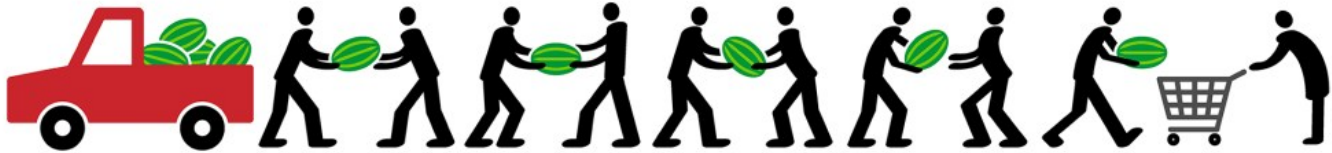


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Intermediaries are the unsung heroes of the Coop's supply chain. They make it possible for the Coop to sell a wide range of produce. "Distributors are extremely important," said Britt Henriksson, one of two receiving coordinators and buyers for bulk and specialty foods at the Coop. "Working directly with suppliers is not common, as each supplier has an invoice and the paperwork can quickly add up to take a lot of a buyer's time. More distributors also means more deliveries to be coordinated."

Many of these important distributors are fellow travelers—cooperative organizations themselves with clear mission statements, guiding principles and a parallel trajectory which complements the Coop's. Equal Exchange is one of the most important and closely aligned with the Coop.

You may recognize Equal Exchange's logo—two red arrows joined together—on labels on your bananas or bulk coffee. What does not fit on their label is their mission statement:

"...to build long-term trade partnerships that are economically just and environmentally sound, to foster mutually beneficial relationships between farmers and consumers

and to demonstrate, through our success, the contribution of worker co-operatives and Fair Trade to a more equitable, democratic and sustainable world."

Equal Exchange was founded in Massachusetts in 1986, importing coffee from Nicaragua in defiance of a Reagan administration trade embargo. Equal Exchange later expanded to sourcing coffee from farmer groups across Latin America and Africa, and tea from India, Sri Lanka and South Africa. Today, it distributes chocolate, bananas, nuts, dried fruits and olive oils, all sourced from small farmer cooperatives.

The groups and cooperatives all view themselves as democratically organized.

Leah Madsen, sales manager at Equal Exchange, explained: "We have set up governance and capital structures to mitigate some of the most oppressive forces of capitalism. We're trying to feed people, support people who produce food and support ourselves. We prioritize people over profit."

Equal Exchange and the Coop go back a long way. "Back in the 1980s, we were excited about the founding of Equal Exchange. I am certain that we were buying their products in their first year," said Joe Holtz, one of the founding members of the Coop, who just stepped down as general manager.

Since then, Equal Exchange has grown to become one of the Coop's most important distributors. Madsen said the Coop is equally important to Equal Exchange. "PSFC is our largest single-store revenue partner for bulk coffee. Coffee represents more than half of our sales and an even higher percentage of our gross margin," she remarked.

According to Madsen, over the past year the Coop sold 44,879 pounds of Equal Exchange coffee. (This is equivalent to covering the entire ground floor of the Coop with coffee beans two inches deep). The second largest mover of bulk coffee for Equal Exchange was a six-store chain that purchased 41,690 pounds of coffee. After that chain, the next largest single store sold less than half of the Coop's annual volume.

This relationship holds sway beyond the hard numbers. “I love working with Park Slope,” Madsen said. “At an organizational level, the food coops we sell to are very important for Equal Exchange, and the Park Slope Food Coop is an important leader within the national food coop scene. PSFC is the only member labor cooperative still going, and it is a valuable example of anti-capitalism. It is valuable to have an ideological and philosophical partner.”

Equal Exchange and the Coop can have a real impact on small-scale farmers’ livelihoods. The bulk coffee bought by Coop members in the last year is approximately equivalent to the total coffee output of 22 family farms. The 729,520 bananas that Coop members purchased in 2024 paid \$125,660 directly to small-scale banana farmers in Ecuador and Peru.

There are also other, less tangible effects, Madsen explained. “There is so much global upheaval—state violence, militias, civil war, genocide—that we can support farmers operating in these areas to have some economic and social platform through trade and solidarity by bringing them resources. Money flows in, but the organizational impact of allied neighbors as part of civil society is also important.”



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

“Coops can be more of a positive organizational force than the state in some cases and have been a vehicle for peasant farmers to build political power,” she added. “Farmer cooperatives can use the dollars earned through fair trade premiums. The money we spend with our growers is used to build things like roads and health clinics. We provide access to capital that helps them avoid predatory interest rates.”

In 1994, Equal Exchange became a worker-owned cooperative. Today, each of the 110 to 120 worker-owners has an equal voting share and equal profit share, whether they work in senior management or at entry-level.

While the worker-owners can vote equally, not all decisions are voted on. Madsen explained that “much of the governance and general decision-making is delegated to management or different working groups and committees. Worker-owner votes primarily focus on board elections, bylaw changes, charitable contributions and major changes to operations.”

Equal Exchange initially focused on promoting fair trade in the global south through coffee, and the mission and guiding principles were easily interpreted. In many cases, this trade supports the transition from a commodities trade rooted in colonial histories, and seeks to increase solidarity and transparency when connecting producers and consumers.

Fair trade does not encompass products sourced from the U.S., yet conventional agricultural trade practices here can also be problematic, and small-scale farmers that implement best-practice growing procedures, such as almond farmers in California, need support.

As a result, Equal Exchange management now says that its mission is supporting “fair trade in the global south, and alternative trade in the global north.”

Decisions are not always universally popular. Equal Exchange went through a period of selling single-serve coffee pods (like the ubiquitous K-cup). There was debate among worker-owners about the quality and environmental impact, yet the decision was made by one of the sales teams to proceed. The team had autonomy to make that decision within the guiding principles, on the basis that if people insist on drinking single-serve coffee, then it would be best to drink fair trade higher-quality single-serve coffee.

While the guiding principles of Equal Exchange are often motivated to mitigate the impacts of broader societal challenges, the procurement strategy is much more granular and individualized. Equal Exchange visits its growers, building its network by vetting a farm’s structure and ability to reduce the negative impact of agriculture on the planet.

Equal Exchange sources olive oil from the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC) in the West Bank and from Sindyanina of Galilee in Northern Israel. The suppliers of these oils were chosen not based on their political geography but for their alignment with democratic fair trade practices.

PARC promotes the sustainable economic development of 41 farmer cooperatives, improves water supply and critical infrastructure and provides social services for women, children and families in the West Bank. Sindyanna of Galilee is “a female-led non-profit that actively promotes the concepts of ‘business for peace’ and fair trade in Israel. The organization sells olive oil from Arab small farmers and then channels all of the profits back into Arab women’s education and other economic activities.” Both olive oils are sold at the Coop.

Closer to home, the Coop has sold pecans from New Communities Inc., a Black-owned small farmer collective in southern Georgia that operates a land trust which developed from the Civil Rights movement. Yet Coop members don’t always buy these high-quality products from mission-aligned organizations.

“We love their story and what they’re about,” recalled Receiving Coordinator Henriksen. “The problem here at the Coop is shelf space, and member dollar spends really dominate that. I loved the product, but the members weren’t buying enough of them.”

This suggests an information gap. “I wish members knew more about what is going on behind the scenes at this lovely grocery store,” Henriksson said. That may be the next challenge: offering the Coop’s buyers a way to share the motivating stories of where the food comes from with members in the aisles.

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.

CATCHING UP WITH FISH SALES AT THE COOP: WHAT’S NEW AND WHY

July 15, 2025



By Jess Powers

July 23, 2024

If you've noticed more fish and seafood options at the Coop lately, you're not alone. Interestingly, seafood consumption rose across the U.S. during the pandemic, as people sought out healthy protein options to prepare at home; sales dipped in 2023 due to inflation but remained higher than before the pandemic. Fresh-fish, frozen-fish and canned-fish buyers at the Coop have responded to the consumer demand by expanding our vendor list and accommodating member requests for new products.

New Fresh Fish at the Coop

Masha Bezlepkina, who was born in Ukraine and grew up in Moscow, joined the meat, fresh and frozen-fish buying team at the Coop in September 2022; she became the sole buyer in the spring of 2024. As a vegetarian, she doesn't consume what she

sources for us, but her appreciation of the purchasing standards and of vendors who are passionate about their products is apparent.

THERE ARE PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS TO THE INVENTORY THE COOP CAN CARRY...
“IT’S NOT POSSIBLE TO CARRY LIVE CRAB,” BEZLEPKINA NOTES.

Hudson Valley Fisheries is one of two main suppliers of fresh fish to the Coop. They raise steelhead trout in a Recirculating Aquaculture System (RAS) and the sashimi grade trout are delivered shortly after harvesting. This closed, controlled land-based system reuses 95% of its water and upcycles waste into fertilizer, according to Hudson Valley Fisheries’ website. Notably, they are committed to environmental stewardship, humane harvesting, and research and education.

Bezlepkinina recalls visiting the facility and being struck by how innovative its practices are. On her visit, the growers mentioned “sometimes [having] tiny fish and wondering what to do with them.” They decided to make dog chews and introduced the new product line within a year—they are now also available at the Coop.

The other main supplier of fresh fish to the Coop is Pierless Fish Corporation, a long-time wholesaler to NYC restaurants that was acquired by Baldor Specialty Foods in 2020. Newer items at the Coop, such as sashimi and poke, feature three rotating types of fish that change based on season and freshness. Pierless delivers daily: fish arrives at the Brooklyn Army Terminal, is processed that night and delivered in the morning.

There are practical limitations to the inventory the Coop can carry due to the size of the refrigerated case and how much space we have in general. “It’s not possible to carry live crab,” Bezlepkinina notes.

That said, Bezlepkinina closely follows developments within the industry, recently intro-

ducing King Scottish salmon with good farming practices. She also listens to member input and requests. Recently, a member asked for tuna and swordfish steaks to be cut thicker so they work better on the grill. The request was accommodated and has received positive feedback (and sales) from other members.

Canned Fish and Supply-Chain Issues



There are many tinned-fish varieties from suppliers available at the Coop.

Canned (or tinned) fish is a staple in many households, offering quick protein options that are shelf stable. Depending on the harvest method and location, small fish like anchovies, sardines and other forage fish can be sustainable choices. (Check Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch for specific recommendations.)

Britt Henriksson and Gillian Chi are responsible for canned-fish buying at the Coop. Chi explains that the Coop sells an impressive 3,000 units of canned fish per week. This figure doesn't include the gourmet items located at the end cap. The everyday brands in Aisle 6 are mostly sourced from United Natural Foods (UNFI), and include Field Day, Henry & Lisa, Safe Catch, Scout, Ortiz, Season's, Tonnino, Matiz, Patagonia, Wild Planet, Natural Sea and Fishwife. Not surprisingly, tuna is the biggest seller; sardines, anchovies and mackerel are the next-most-popular canned-fish proteins of choice.



Whether you enjoy sardines with preserved lemon on toast or use wild cockles in sea salt brine to make a quick spaghetti and clams, there is certainly something for everyone. The gourmet brands such as Fishwife, Minnow, Porto Muinos, La Brujula, Jose Gourmet, Siesta, Rizzoli and Iasa are sourced from Faire or A Priori. Minnow products are connected to the local restaurants Hart's, Cervo's and The Fly.

HENRIKSSON SAYS PRODUCTS FROM NEW BRANDS LIKE MINNOW AND FISHWIFE "FLY OFF THE SHELF."

In all, Henriksson and co-buyer Yuri Weber manage vendor relationships for about 45 different companies, with multiple deliveries a week from some of them, and all of the paperwork involved. Here, too, space and popularity are considerations that affect what to stock.

Henriksson recounts that during the pandemic, there were crop shortages and supply-chain issues that impacted the ability to source rolled oats. This led the team to pursue new distributor relationships, as we now do with fish suppliers. She says products from new brands like Minnow and Fishwife “fly off the shelf.” Minnow’s stark, retro-reminiscent, jewel-tone-and-black labels are striking, as are Fishwife’s psychedelic, colorful graphics. Fishwife, founded in 2020 by two women who aim to produce ethically sourced and delicious tinned seafood, sells smoked salmon with Fly by Jing chili crisp, slow-smoked mackerel with chili flakes, and smoked rainbow trout.



Henriksson doesn't eat canned fish herself. "I OD'd on tuna in college," she jokes. "I'm not into the smell." But she is dedicated to satisfying members' demand for it. Recently the Coop received samples from a French sardine company. "People thought they were yummy," she shares. "Now we have to see if it's at a good price point."

New products, meanwhile, often emerge from member requests. A member recently requested that the Coop carry cod liver. Henriksson found it available from an online

ordering platform, Faire, that the Coop uses. (Another Coop member works at the company.) Minnow describes this product, sustainably sourced from wild cod originating in Iceland's Westfjord region, as "butter of the sea," much like uni.



Jess Powers enjoys good food and works in emergency management.

COOP SHOPPERS AND BUYERS FEEL IMPACT OF SURGING FOOD PRICES

July 15, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY CATY BARTHOLOMEW

By Leila Darabi

On a recent Tuesday evening in August, Coop member Sabrina Ramos stood in front of the cereal shelves in aisle seven, comparing her granola options. Any other week she might have made her own, but in 95-degree weather, she had dropped by the Coop to avoid turning on the oven at home. After careful consideration, Ramos selected a favorite variety of Early Bird brand granola, noting that the price, while still high-

er than pre-pandemic, seemed to have dropped from an all-time spike of around \$10 to just over \$8 per bag.

“MY SHOPPING BILL IS RIDICULOUS EVERY TIME I SHOP. I KEEP TRYING TO BE CONSCIOUS TO JUST DO TWO BASKETS, BUT I CAN’T GET OUT OF HERE UNDER \$250 A WEEK.”

COOP MEMBER SABRINA RAMOS

A lifelong Coop member whose parents joined in the 1970s, Ramos now shops for her own family of three and finds herself far more conscious of price tags in the past year. Like many Americans, Ramos has noticed a dramatic spike in food costs recently. The Consumer Price Index Report put out by the US Department of Labor recorded a 10.4 percent increase in overall food costs between June 2021 and June 2022, with more dramatic hikes in specific categories of food.

“My shopping bill is ridiculous every time I shop. I keep trying to be conscious to just do two baskets [instead of a full cart], but I can’t get out of here under \$250 a week,” Ramos said. “When I do come in below \$220, I feel somehow victorious.”

COOP BUYERS SEEK DEALS

Reflected in the ebb and flow of granola prices are a range of national and geopolitical issues, from supply chain interruptions to surging fuel prices to global conflict. As previously reported in the *Gazette*, the Coop buyers are the heroes keeping wholesome, affordable food on the shelves despite these intersecting challenges.

“WHEN THE SUPPLY-CHAIN ISSUES STARTED, IT HIT US RIGHT AWAY. ALL OF A SUDDEN OUR DELIVERY TRUCKS WERE NOT SHOWING UP. IT WAS ACROSS THE

BOARD, AND IT WAS DRAMATIC.”

RECEIVING COORDINATOR GILLIAN CHI

Gillian Chi, the receiving coordinator and buyer for many of the store’s shelf-stable items, recently crunched the numbers for the *Gazette*. They illustrate a startling trend in the costs of household staples:

- Cascadian Farm cereal is up 42%, from \$4.05 to \$5.75 a box
- King Arthur Baking Company flour is up 20%–30%, depending on the size of the bag
- Some varieties of Natural Sea tuna are up as much as 42%
- Bionaturae pasta is up 33%
- Rao’s pasta sauce is up 25%
- Murray’s Chicken is up 25%–30%, depending on the cut
- Slope Farms ground beef is up 12%
- Natural by Nature whole milk half-gallons are up 11%, from \$4.84 to \$5.39
- Grindstone eggs are up 7%
- Cabot unsalted butter is up 19%

A notable outlier, said Chi, are Alderfer’s Omega eggs, the Coop’s top sellers, which dropped by 6% thanks to the sharp negotiation skills of Chi’s colleague, Receiving Coordinator Glorina Phillip.

A number of factors contribute to rising food prices, Chi explained.

“When the supply-chain issues started, it hit us right away,” Chi said. “A few weeks before it was in the news, we were feeling it. All of a sudden our delivery trucks were not showing up. It was across the board, and it was dramatic.”

The scramble to find a steady supply of food meant buyers looked less at the price tags and more at the availability of food staples. Now, with fewer stockouts, Coop buy-

ers are refocusing their attention on negotiating deals.

“The first thing is to compare prices across distributors,” Chi said. “A year ago, I would buy from whoever has [a given product]. Now it’s probably back in stock across three companies.” This availability frees her up to comparison-shop and negotiate discounted prices.

A COOPERATIVE OF COOPERATIVES

To keep costs down, Coop buyers rely on membership in the National Cooperative Grocers (NCG), a relationship that allows member coops across the country to collaborate on bulk purchases and buy into negotiated prices. By representing approximately 160 food coops of various sizes, NCG can bargain and lock in prices with the influence of a large national supermarket chain.

“DOMESTIC CHEESE HAS GONE UP CONSIDERABLY, BECAUSE THE PRICE OF SHIPPING AND MOVING THINGS AROUND FROM POINT A TO POINT B HAS GONE UP, AND THE PRICE OF MILK HAS GONE UP.”

COORDINATING RECEIVER YURI WEBER

The NGC relationship allows the Coop to purchase goods at lower prices through UNFI, a major wholesale distributor and, as previously reported in the *Gazette*, the Coop’s largest shelf-stable food supplier. These relationships help, but have not shielded the Coop from supply-chain stockouts and other price increases.

“NCG negotiates a great price, but UNFI doesn’t always have what we need, and if they don’t we have to find other options,” Coordinating Receiver Yuri Weber said.

Weber is responsible for buying for the bulk aisle, including grains, pulses, rice, nuts

and dried fruit. He also buys the Coop's imported cheeses, a category that was hit hard by Trump administration tariffs in 2019 but has remained fairly stable over the past year. Weber attributes this flat pricing to the strength of the dollar against the euro, which balances out any cost increase.

"Domestic cheese has gone up considerably, because the price of shipping and moving things around from point A to point B has gone up, and the price of milk has gone up," Weber said.

His colleague Lisa Hidem has similarly seen the rising cost of ingredients drive up the price of fresh-baked goods.

"In a lot of the very local stuff, we're seeing price increases. And we try to get bread [from suppliers] as local as we can," Hidem said. "I've seen bread prices go up anywhere from 5 percent to on average at least 15 percent. One went up 45 percent." She attributes the rising cost of bread and pastries to the Coop's supplier's commitment to locally sourced grains and the increased cost of butter, flour and milk.

Both Weber and Hidem noted that suppliers have started to add fuel surcharges as the price of gas has gone up. Makers of prepackaged foods, which Hidem also buys for the store, have seen increased expenses in packaging, driving higher prices. "A lot of [food packaging] is plastic; that's a petroleum product. And we all know the price of gas has gone up."

MEMBERS FEEL THE DIFFERENCE

"I've been amazed by how dramatically prices have risen," Coop member Clara Goetz said. "Not just by 30 or 40 cents, but by very significant amounts. My favorite bread, Runner and Stone buckwheat baguette, was \$3.84 (or something close to that) and is now \$4.49."

A member for 18 years, Goetz said the increased cost has affected her shopping. "In

the past, I would get one if I had bread at home or not. Now I'll pass it up if I don't really need it. Now I hesitate before buying what I consider inessentials. No chocolate-covered almonds, which are now over \$15 a pound. I just can't imagine how people on fixed incomes are managing."

Member Hilda Cohen has also felt the cost increase when shopping for her family of four. "I was just saying this to my kids, I feel like my Coop bill has increased about 20-25 percent," Cohen said. "It does affect the way I shop, but more that I am particularly sensitive to wasting anything, so I am simply getting less and we run out quicker."

FUTURE PREDICTIONS

Coop buyers predict further price increases before the bubble bursts. Citing recent articles on a chickpea shortage, Hidem notes that the premade hummus she buys for the Coop could soon become more expensive.

Weber acknowledges that prices of dried fruits and nuts have remained stable, but that could be because the current supplies may not yet reflect the increased costs of this year's crops. As he updates stock in the store, he anticipates having to pay more.

"I'm super-convinced that we're going to see [more price increases] once the new crop comes in that factors in some of the higher food prices and the shipping," Weber said.

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.

COOP BUYERS: SUPPLY CHAIN SUPERHEROES

July 15, 2025



Meat buyer Margie Lempert is seeing trucking delays and higher prices for everything.

By Marisa Bowe

We've all read about supply chain snarls—including in the last issue of the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. For the Coop's buying team, those snarls have become the new normal.

BULK GOODS AND GROCERIES



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Cheese, bulk and specialty buyer Yuri Weber is encouraging smaller distributors to meet the Coop's shortfall.

"We're just mad scrambling for things," said cheese, bulk and specialty foods buyer, Yuri Weber. "Playing this whack-a-mole game of trying to find who has food, and switching the distributor every week to try to find it. Our stress level is very high."



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Gillian Chi, groceries buyer, sees a shortage of supply across the whole store.

"My job is totally different now," said groceries buyer Gillian Chi. "I used to spend maybe an hour-and-a-half a day ordering. Now I spend four hours a day. There isn't really one particular item [in short supply]," she explained. "The problem for us is that it's across the whole store, and the out-of-stocks keep shifting."



PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

Keeping a huge seller like black beans in stock has been a major challenge.

“We sell a ton of canned black beans . . . All of a sudden I’m not getting any black beans delivered. And then I realize we’re going to run out if I don’t scramble and find a different brand or a different distributor. So I scramble and I find a replacement, and then before I finish dealing with that, it’s pasta. All of a sudden I can’t get La Molisana, a popular brand of pasta. It won’t just be one distributor; it’ll be that nobody has it,” said Chi.

“It’s this waiting game. Do I wait a few more days and see if it comes back in stock, or do I find a substitute? Then I find a substitute, I get a bunch of it in. I put it on the shelf, and then maybe the La Molisana comes back. And then”—with limited storage—“what do you do?” wondered Chi.

This scenario is playing out over dozens of items. “I’ll have a list every day of like 50, 60 different items that are now out of stock,” Chi said. Adding to the difficulties, UNFI, the Coop’s biggest distributor, has been rationing and cutting orders, adding a new word to the buyers’ vocabulary: “smoothing.” Smoothing, said Weber, “is just a euphemism for not sending us what we want.”

“We never used to have limits before,” said Chi. “We could order as much as we wanted,” but now there are limits to the amounts buyers may purchase. “Some days we would order 1,000 cases and get five cases. Some days we would order 1,000 cases and get 300 cases. It was really bad. It was very stressful,” recalled Chi.

It now takes Chi at least twice as long to compile the buyers’ orders each day. “I have to do it on a spreadsheet, add them all up, make sure they don’t go over the case count for that day. And if they do, I have to start making adjustments. It’s very tedious,” she said.



“The reason we order from UNFI,” Weber explained, “is that they’re huge. We sell a ridiculous amount of food for the size of the store that we are.” When the smoothing started, he said, “we were kind of scrambling to find replacements using our pre-existing distributors,” but there’s just one problem. “We clean them out because they’re just not equipped to deal with the kind of volume that we do,” said Weber.

“We’re trying to encourage these more local, smaller distributors to step up their game a little bit,” Weber said. “It’s probably about 40 distributors that we work with that sell cheese and pantry items and things that UNFI doesn’t sell. We had a good meeting with them a couple of weeks ago to try to make that happen. We’re also trying to find places that are kind of close because of the trucking problem.”

“We’re still trying,” he said, “to figure out long term how this is going to work.”

MEAT

Margie Lempert, meat buyer for the Coop, said some of her meat comes from afar, and she's seeing higher delays than usual because of trucking issues at various distribution sites. She has also noticed that local suppliers are affected, too, with the result being the same for both. "We've gotten cost increases across the board," Lempert said. "Chicken, pork, everything, really."

"We did have price increases from Aberdeen Hill not that long ago," she said. "And we did see some increases from McDonald, who's a local farmer we buy pork and lamb from. I asked Aberdeen about the cost increases, and he said everything has gone up: fuel, insurances, feed supplements, seed, repair parts, etc. The price of piglets has gone up almost 40%. There's increased cost to trucking and butchering, and processing fees, as well."

Hudson Harvest, a Germantown, New York, distributor, sells sausages and other meat products to the Coop. "We just found out they're shutting the processing plant down for two to three weeks because they can't get enough labor in to keep the ball rolling," Lempert said.

In an effort to get members the meat they desire, Lempert has come with a solution: "What I arrived at is ordering much more than we need and asking the distributor to freeze some of it so we can pull it later as a frozen product, and then we'll defrost it. It's not going to affect the quality."

PRODUCE



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

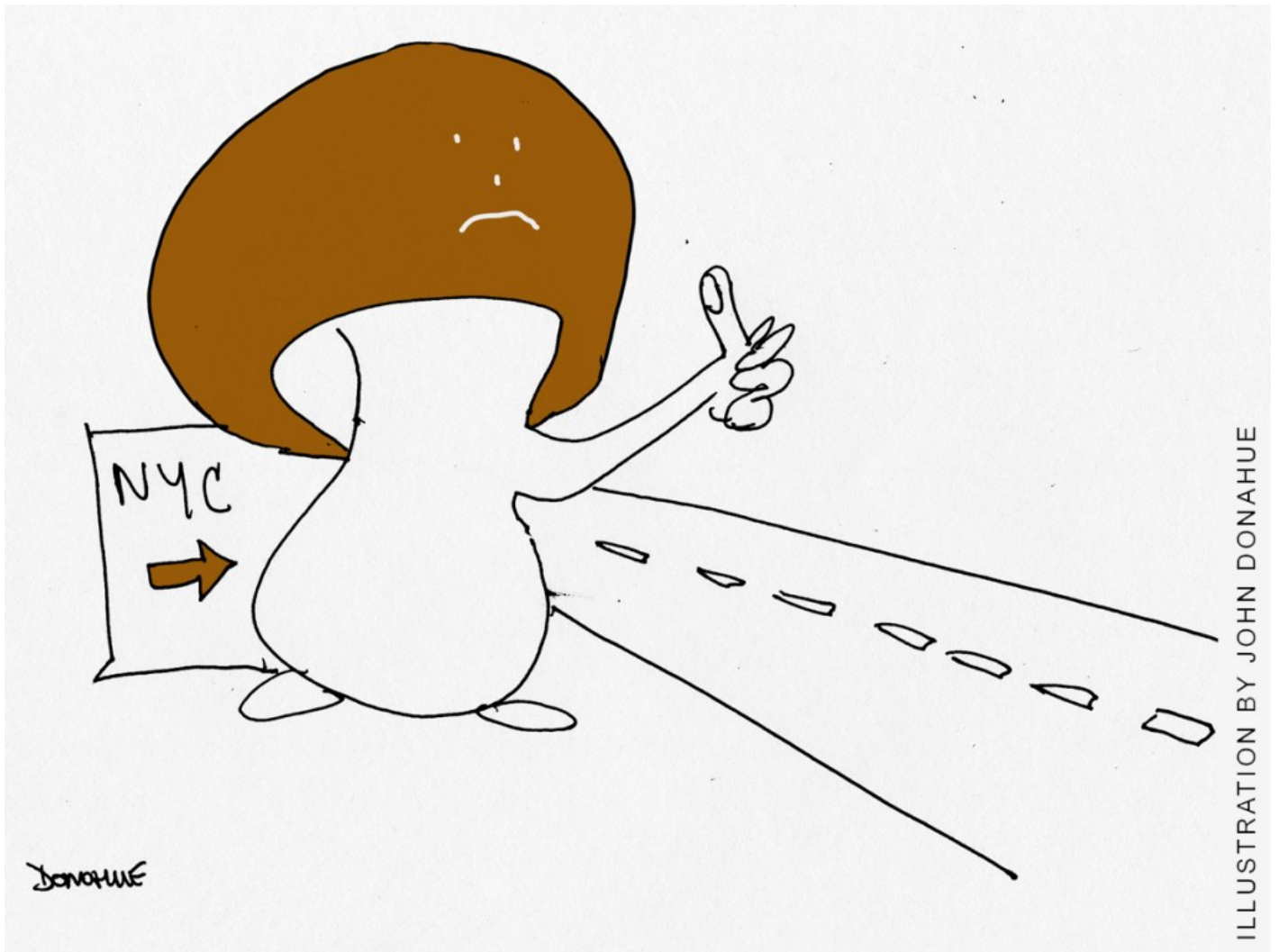
Cecelia Rembert, produce buyer, keeping a close eye on those hard-to-get mushrooms.

“We always scramble somewhat,” said produce buyer Cecelia Rembert, “because produce is always riding waves. Crops fail all the time. That’s just the nature of weather. One of the things that we pride ourselves on is hoping that the Coop membership never notices.”

This year has been different. “Through the summer and fall...from talking to our various suppliers, whether small-scale or large-scale, they had the produce in plenitude,” she said, but “they didn’t have the workers they needed to pack the pallets and drive the trucks.

“Delivery schedules became much more erratic, and there were many more of what we call ‘mispicks’—the wrong item was sent because the person working was new.”

“But,” Rembert said, “we have been recently seeing real genuine produce outages now as well. We get substitutions that we didn’t ask for—like we’d ordered five green kale, and instead we get five celery.”



"The only thing that kind of hurts my heart is not having the creminis," lamented Rembert. "Mushrooms are very hard to get. We tried to order 50 cases of cremini mushrooms, and one of our suppliers wrote back that they're rationing everybody to three cases each. They don't have the people to grow them and pack them. So it's likely we won't have enough creminis for all of our members, which sucks. We really try hard for that not to happen," she said.