

PREPARING FOR THE THANKSGIVING SHOPPING SURGE: A CONVERSATION WITH A COOP BUYER

November 16, 2022



By Leila Darabi

While Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is one of the biggest shopping days of the year for most retailers across the country, for Coop staff, it's the week before that requires intense planning.

“The big picture is we shift from very diversified purchasing, where members are making a variety of meals throughout their week—breakfast, lunch, dinner—to everybody basically making the same meal,” General Coordinator Joe Szladek explained. “That’s basically what happens. Everybody has different ways that they’re used to shopping and cooking, whether it’s pasta or tacos. But then, with Thanksgiving, everyone switches together to the same meal, and that requires a big shift in our workflow in

the run-up to the holiday.”

To avoid long lines and cranky shoppers, Coop staff must kick into gear to account for the rigor of a single demanding week followed by a distinct lull.

“What happens on Thanksgiving is that the six- or seven-day run-up to the holiday is very busy. The Friday and Saturday directly after are very slow, as most are recovering from a food coma, but then sales pick up again quickly the following week,” Szladek said. “We all kind of brace ourselves and plan as much as we can.”



PANDEMIC IMPACT

Since 2020, ordering for Thanksgiving has required more trial, error and speculation. Pre-pandemic, the Coop routinely sold more than 1,000 turkeys each Thanksgiving season. Prior to 2020, membership topped out at more than 17,000 members. During

the height of COVID-19 lockdowns, that number dipped to around 11,750 members.

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GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK

“The past couple of years were harder to order for than usual,” Szladek recounted. “Last year, 2021, was a little easier. But 2020 was especially difficult. It was the first Thanksgiving of the COVID era, and though many members certainly wanted turkeys, there were less gatherings because of social distancing. And if there were gatherings, they were smaller and members wanted smaller turkeys, which aren’t always easy to get.”

Today, membership has inched back up to around 14,400, and buyers must approximate purchasing to allow anyone who wants to host a holiday meal to be able to source key ingredients at the Coop.

“That started to shift last year. Things were getting more normal in terms of shopping,” Szladek said. “People were celebrating in larger groups, and I think this year we are well on our way to back to how people used to celebrate. We’re seeing pre-pandemic patterns start to return.”

While food costs have risen broadly, Szladek noted that increased prices have not yet impacted Thanksgiving buying. Rising costs have “become a reality of life across the board,” he explained, adding that if members stopped buying specific items, the buyers would listen to the numbers and stop stocking them.



Surveying the pumpkin puree

WHERE TO PUT THE BIRDS

Turkeys present the first operational challenge staff must address. This year, Coop buyers will procure around 900 turkeys, including nearly 800 whole birds plus additional turkey parts.

"Turkeys take up a lot of room, so there's a challenging operational component to that," Szladek said. "We have to stagger their arrival times so we can fit them all in our coolers."

The extra birds begin to arrive about ten days before Thanksgiving, with the majority of sales taking place from the Thursday before Thanksgiving through the following week.

“Ideally our last turkey is sold the morning of Thanksgiving Day,” Szladek said. “We do try to err on the side of having slightly more than we think we’ll need, so that rather than members coming the Wednesday before Thanksgiving to find we’re out of turkeys, we still have options for them. Sometimes that translates into 30-50 extra turkeys left after the holiday, which we’ll often then put on sale.”



Uboats at the ready

SEASONAL STOCKING

Major coordination also goes into stocking for once-per-year surges in demand for Thanksgiving-specific ingredients. In addition to stocking turkeys, sourcing pie, pie shells and the ingredients for homemade pies constitutes a major operation. In reviewing the Coop’s pie deliveries from Wednesday, November 17 to Saturday, November 27, 2021, the store received 1,157 pies. That included 25 varieties from seven vendors, ranging from Four & Twenty Blackbirds to Steve’s Authentic Key Lime Pie.

Flavors included four kinds of pecan (gluten free, brown butter, classic and bourbon) as well as pumpkin, butternut squash and sweet potato pies.

Szladdek pointed out, not surprisingly, that canned pumpkin sales spike each year over this period, as do sales of canned cranberry sauce. In the produce aisle, the buyers plan ahead to make sure bins of brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes and fresh cranberries remain full.



Getting ready for stuffing

STAFFING TO AVOID CHAOS

To prevent long lines, prolonged shopping time and cranky customers, Coop staff also devote significant planning into member-labor staffing for the Thanksgiving rush.

Thanks to the new online Member Services feature on the Coop website, Szladdek not-

ed, allocating member labor for high-volume shopping days has become much easier. Staff add stocking and receiving workslots, as well as additional walker shifts, in anticipation of the rush.

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GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE SZLADEK

“We’re always analyzing what our needs are. And we can be more nimble now because of the new system. If we feel like, hey, today we were really understaffed for the Thanksgiving rush, we can go ahead and quickly add shifts for the next day and, more often than not, they’ll get filled on short notice. There’s greater flexibility than we’ve ever had with the new Member Services system. It’s very efficient and useful.”

Each year the Coop implements a special seasonal shift: turkey runners.

“These are folks who stand in front of the meat case and talk to members about turkeys.” Szladek elaborated, “A member might say, hey, I need a 12-pound, not an 18-pound, of this kind of bird, and the turkey runner will get it from the basement if we have it. They are totally key to making sure we move as many turkeys as possible. Sometimes they wear turkey hats!”

This limited-time run includes one member in particular who fulfills nearly all of his annual required work shifts during the week leading up to Thanksgiving.

PSA TO MEMBERS: DON'T WAIT TO SHOP

Asked what advice he has to navigate the Thanksgiving rush, Szladek urged members to “Shop early! If it’s November 5, and you know you’re making pumpkin pie or a dessert that needs condensed milk or stuffing, buy the ingredients you need then. If you see it, buy it.”

He clarifies, “It helps smooth out the process for everyone. The more you buy earlier, the less time you and other members will spend shopping during the Coop’s busiest days of the Thanksgiving rush—the Friday through Wednesday before Thanksgiving Day.”

Leila Darabi often posts photos of the food she makes with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram; she also cohosts Cringewatchers, a podcast about representations of sexuality on popular TV.

SECOND LOCATION STUDY COMMITTEE REPORT

November 16, 2022



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

UPDATE AND CALL FOR NEW MEMBERS

By Jonathan Farber

The Park Slope Food Coop is unique in all our lives. It is also a very different type of business in the wider economy. For nearly fifty years we have been bucking the system and showing the world how we provide good food at low prices for working members. Our model challenges the status quo. To bring about positive change in our food and farming systems you would be hard pressed to find a more effective vehicle than the Park Slope Food Coop.

The Coop is also very successful. We are emerging from the pandemic battered but not diminished. Thanks to committed members and staff and to an infusion of millions of dollars by the federal government, we are still here. In fact, once the IRS pays us for the tax credits to which we are entitled, we will have more cash than when the

pandemic started. And, with folks returning to work their shifts and the Coop once again admitting new households at a rapid clip, there is every reason to believe we will rebuild our membership and sales.

Which leads us to the Park Slope Food Coop Second Location Study Committee (SLSC) and the upcoming release of our Draft Report and Recommendations. Approved by the General Meeting in 2016, we have been busy exploring whether we should open a new store in addition to the location on Union Street. The Coop members on the committee and the general manager of the Coop think it is now time to have a robust discussion about this important topic.

The SLSC is recruiting new members. Committee members receive PSFC shift credits for their work. This is an exciting venture and an opportunity to join a diverse team studying the next expansion of the Coop. We are especially looking for members with professional experience in community organizing, public relations, real estate, planning, business management, finance and marketing. PSFC members interested in joining the committee may contact us at secondlocation@psfc.coop.

SAFE FOOD COMMITTEE REPORT

November 16, 2022



PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: *OUR FOOD CHAIN*

By Adam Rabiner

As the parent of two high school students who came up through the public school system, I know firsthand that school lunch in New York City is not that great. In elementary school they could occasionally be coaxed by the promise of chicken nuggets or pizza Fridays. Once they hit middle school, though, they went cold turkey and either packed something from home or discovered every deli, diner, or take-out restaurant within a two-block radius of their school. Though this has been hard on the family wallet, it is difficult to blame them. The average cost of a school lunch is about \$1.30, and it is extremely hard to make a tasty meal on that tight of a budget.

Yet, somehow the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) found a way, without an infusion of cash, to transform its school lunch program, making it healthier and

tastier at the same time. While New York City public schools served roughly 90 million meals during the pandemic as of February 2021, LAUSD has served more than 100 million, even though its student population is about 600,000, just over half the size of New York City's. The documentary *Our Food Chain*, Plow to Plate's screening from earlier this month, tells the story of how they made it happen and provides a useful blueprint for other school districts seeking to make similar changes.

A lot of factors came together to turn the system around. Leaders at the top wanted to make the change, introducing salad bars, breads and pastries made with whole grain flour, more fresh fruits and vegetables and fewer processed foods. But it was also necessary to get buy-in from the bottom. Teachers and even principals were enlisted to teach about healthy eating habits. Parents were also involved in the conversations around health and nutrition.

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Crucially, students were brought in, for example, through school gardens. Kids of all ages who planted, tended, watered and then harvested their own produce really liked eating it. They also liked salad bars that provided lots of à la carte choices or dishes that were familiar to many of them, like rice and beans or other Latino foods. Nutrition was incorporated into the language arts and history curricula, and some high schools instituted preprofessional culinary education courses and formed teams to compete against one another in a "Cooking up Change" challenge to create a typical school lunch. The winners of one of these competitions even had their recipes recreated at a UCLA cafeteria and served to students there.

LAUSD also partnered with local farmers and other businesses like packing houses, warehouses, manufacturing and distribution centers. One farmer, Bob Knight of Old Grove Orange, whose oranges were too small to be commercially viable, was a per-

fect fit for the district because students liked the smaller and sweeter oranges, and there were more of them by weight to distribute to the schools. These partnerships with suppliers and companies involved with product development, equipment and packaging eventually led the district to source more than 50 percent of its ingredients locally, benefitting not just the students but also the local economy. It also resulted in typical unappealing and unaesthetic school food being transformed into meals that looked like those one might find in any local supermarket, healthy but appetizing.

The results of all these changes were broader access to healthier food for students, parents and communities; a decline in obesity and hunger; improved attention, energy levels and academic performance; and a lot less food waste.

Here in New York City, Mayor Eric Adams is a big advocate for healthy foods. In 2016, he woke up blind one morning and learned from his doctor that he had diabetes. He made some radical changes to his diet by committing to a healthy, plant-based diet and was able to reverse the diagnosis. In September, he hired Rachel Ray and a small group of other celebrity chefs—known as the Chefs Council—to develop, with input from students and parents, more than 100 better-tasting vegan school lunches.

In soliciting input from all the stakeholders involved and testing the results in the five boroughs, it appears that the LA School district's inclusive model, demonstrated in *Our Food Chain*, is providing some useful guidance to New York City. Hopefully the city's Vegan Fridays, which debuted with bagged chips and burritos with non-vegan cheese, has a tastier future in store.

AGENDA COMMITTEE REPORT

November 16, 2022

By Kate Spota

The Agenda Committee compiles and finalizes General Meeting agendas using items submitted by members. A list of the items scheduled by the Committee in 2022 so far is below. The committee makes every effort to place items on the GM agenda in the order in which they are received. An item may be placed ahead of those submitted earlier if the item requires more immediate attention or its timely consideration at the GM is beneficial to the efficient running of the Coop, e.g., election of members to Coop committees. Read a complete discussion of the Agenda Committee's guidelines.

If you have an idea, a suggestion or a plan that you believe would make the Coop a better place, please submit an agenda item to the Agenda Committee! Feel free to download the GM Agenda Item Submission Form (PDF).

AGENDA ITEMS IN 2022

January

- Committee Requirements—Committee Oversight Committee

February

- Election: Hearing Administration Committee
- Discussion: Allow one member of a two-adult member household with school age children to leave membership

March

- Election: Interim Agenda Committee
- Election: Dispute Resolution Committee
- Presentation of candidates for the Board of Directors

April

- Election: Interim Agenda Committee
- Election: Dispute Resolution Committee
- Committee Oversight Committee presentation

May

- Election: Annual Revolving Loan Committee
- Discussion: Preparing for the return of squad leaders

June

- Proposal: Renewing the services of the auditor
- Election: Officers of the Corporation—President, Vice President, Treasurer and Secretary

July

- Election: Committee Oversight Committee
- Discussion: Current requirement to wear a mask

August

- Collecting member input on GM agenda
- Returning childcare for member workers and shoppers

September

- Reinstate Joe Holtz as GM/Treasurer

REVIEW THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

November 16, 2022

Letters to the Editor



ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIEL WILLOW

Dear PSFC members,

It is time to rethink the structure of the Personnel Committee: Five members who were elected by uncontested vote are clearly not qualified to wield this much power. Perhaps a professional moderator or two could be added. An overarching perspective was absent in the brutal punishment delivered to Joe Holtz for his error in judgment. The disciplinary measures enacted were heavy-handed and did not benefit the PS-

FC or its members.

Withholding Holtz's salary was unjust and requires full review; it is hard to imagine that any member of PSFC would fail to recognize the generosity and forgiveness he has embodied for decades while leading the Coop to success. PSFC's leaders give incalculable hours of extra effort from their hearts; this is what has made the Coop great! A one-week suspension with pay would have been sufficient to alert everyone to the risks to others in guessing if we have COVID-19 or not. The decision was painfully unfair to a man who has given his all.

During the last General Meeting, the Personnel Committee directive was described as "to hire, fire and discipline top staff, in consultation with the general coordinators." I would like to know which General Coordinators were consulted before this too-harsh penalty was finalized. Amends must be made where harm has been done: I support a full disclosure of the Disciplinary Committee's process and reasoning, a review of the structure and function of this committee, and immediate actions to restore Holtz's salary.

Please be kind,

Claudia Joseph