

# WHAT'S ON THE PLANT-BASED THANKSGIVING TABLE THIS SEASON

November 7, 2023



*By Jess Powers*

As the Thanksgiving holiday approaches, the Park Slope Food Coop is gearing up for the considerable logistics of storing and distributing turkeys and high-volume sales overall. But what are Coop members who eat vegan or vegetarian diets planning to cook? And in what ways do they reclaim the holiday as plant-based eaters?

## **Why Do We Have Turkey on Thanksgiving Anyway?**

The origins of Thanksgiving, of course, trace back to 1620 when the indigenous Wampanoag people aided English Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, helping them to survive the winter. Despite myths of a shared harvest feast and friendly relations the following year, Governor Bradford was a colonist who later sent troops to

annihilate a Pequot village.

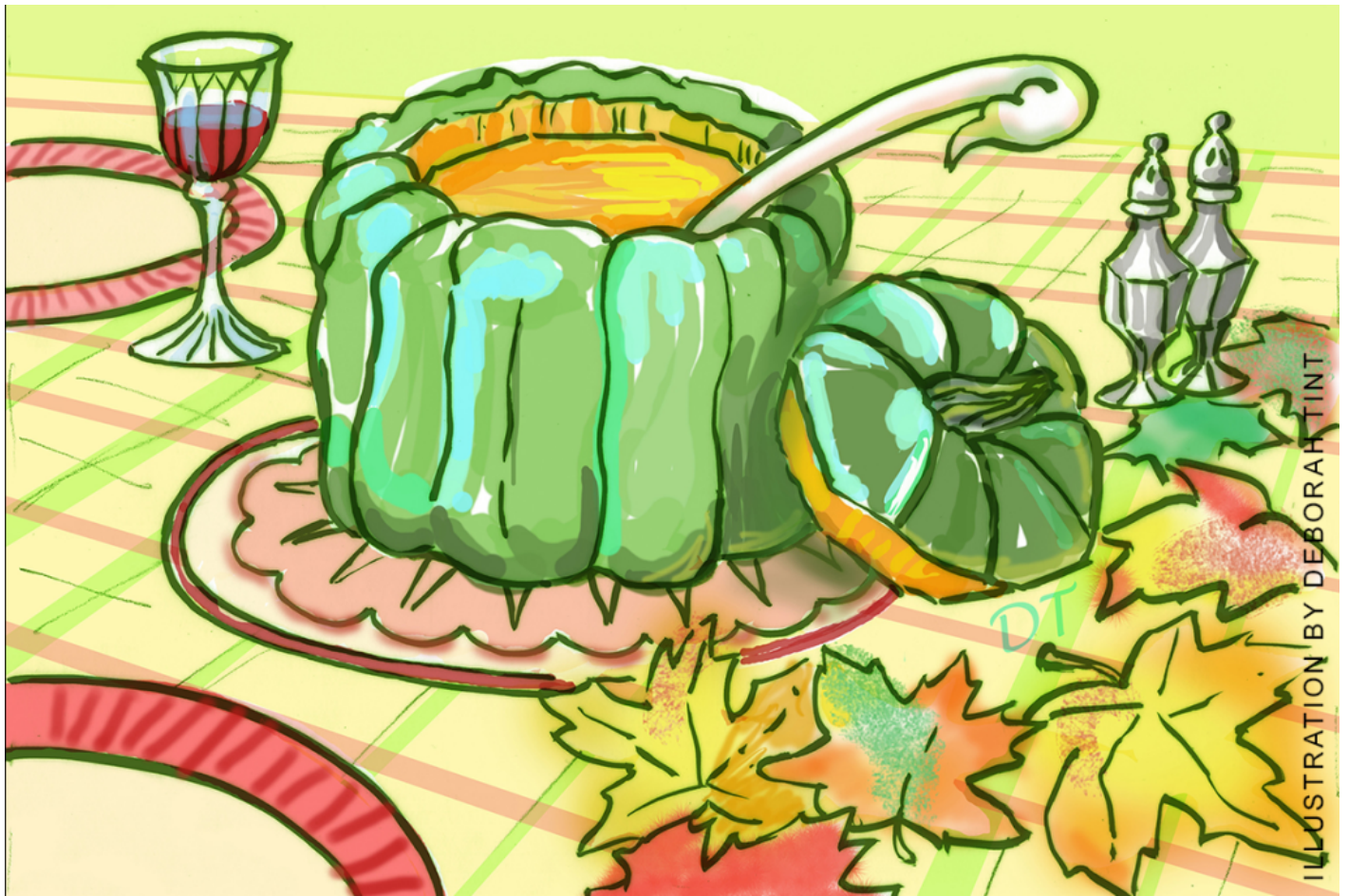
For Jana Cunningham, a Membership Coordinator and 30-year Coop member, Thanksgiving celebration has “been a journey. Not only because I was vegetarian or vegan, but because of the historical aspect for indigenous and African people here in regard to the holiday.”

Thanksgiving is one of the two most-celebrated secular holidays in the U.S.—the other is the Fourth of July—which many people spend with their families of origins (with all the complications that that can bring) and others celebrate with friends, either ahead of the holiday or on the day itself. The term “Friendsgiving” first started popping up around 2007.

Culinary historians point out that venison was likely the protein of choice for a large gathering in Colonial times. It was President Abraham Lincoln who proclaimed Thanksgiving an official federal holiday—roasted turkey became the centerpiece due to culinary trends of the time. The first presidential “pardon” of a turkey is attributed to President John F. Kennedy.

Turkey is so synonymous with Thanksgiving that some people refer to it as “Turkey Day.” There’s the Butterball Turkey Talk-Line helping people avoid cooking mishaps, the iconic Norman Rockwell painting “Freedom From Want,” and trends that come and go such as deep-fried turkey. A lot of fuss, it seems, for a dish that is often dry and induces a “turkey coma” from tryptophan. For vegans and vegetarians, traditions centered around meat can further complicate this already loaded celebration.

## **Thanksgivings Past as a Vegan or Vegetarian**



Megan Davidson, a member of the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC), recalls Thanksgiving being a “relatively significant battle” during her childhood. She had never enjoyed the taste or texture of meat. A chance encounter at age 10 with animal rights activists sharing materials about vegetarian lifestyles at the mall made her realize that a meatless diet was even a possibility. “Sign me up!” she laughs as she recalls the realization.

Jennifer Kupinse, also a member of the AWC, started working as a coat check at a local restaurant to avoid the holiday. She snuck anti-fur literature into fur coats. When the host got a call from a patron complaining about finding something in her coat pocket, she looked at teenage Kupinse, “shaking her head and laughing.” (Kupinse didn’t get in trouble.) Kupinse also recalls a mild-mannered aunt removing the innards from a turkey, directing her to learn how to prepare the bird if she wanted to be married. These days her brother and father are pescatarians, making her less of an outsider during the holiday.



“One year, all I could eat were the rolls,” recalled Membership Coordinator Jacquelyn Scaduto, a native of Texas. She resolved that was never going to happen again and decided to focus on creating a “luscious, delicious vegan meal.”

A shift came for Cunningham, who has long kept a plant-based diet after becoming a parent. She would celebrate with her family, but believed she had “a duty to educate [on the history] even as we participated in it.”

## **Re-Imagining the Holiday**

Suzannah Schneider, a Coop member and farmer in the Hudson Valley, feels “a lot less pressure to follow some script for a big meal to make.” Being vegan creates “less pressure around that holiday generally,” they add, and it’s an opportunity to prepare “a bunch of sides that happen to be seasonal.” Picking vegetables directly out of the soil only adds to the appeal.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN DIAZ



Plant-based Coop members describe lovingly preparing seasonal dishes for the holiday with careful attention to color and presentation. They make mashed potatoes with mushroom gravy, green bean casserole, sweet potatoes, roasted chestnuts, rolls and cranberry sauce. Brussels sprouts are popular, whether roasted with chile and honey or with pecans, cranberries, orange juice and orange peel.



Not just “brown foods,” Scaduto emphasizes: “I want it to be colorful and vibrant looking, but I also want comfort, Southern and hearty.” She uses the mushroom vegan gravy found at the endcaps of the aisles, adds cremini mushrooms, makes a roux with vegan butter, flour and whatever unsweetened non-milk she has on hand and enhances the flavor with cumin. This is the base of a vegan green bean casserole (many non-vegans use cream of mushroom soup); Scaduto adds blanched and shocked green beans, fried onions on top and bakes it in the oven.





Cunningham prepares dishes like wild rice stuffing, roasted chestnuts, cranberries, stuffed acorn squash, zucchini stuffed with quinoa, string beans almondine and collard greens.

Coop members share a sense of pride in creating dishes that impress their omnivore friends and family. During a mac-and-cheese competition at a Friendsgiving, Schneider's vegan version beat out her partner's vegetarian one. Scaduto makes stuffing, occasionally a cornbread version, and uses Imagine No Chicken broth. It gives the "yummiest, most pleasing result to the meat eater's mouth," she adds. Eaters didn't realize Cunningham's wheat gluten with peppers and onions wasn't steak.





“It’s really an excuse to make pie—a lot of pie,” Davidson says, “better than anyone’s store-bought pie.” Traditional options like pecan, pumpkin, and apple may be topped with vegan ice cream. “In a pinch,” Wholly Wholesome’s frozen apple pie is excellent, adds Scaduto. But chocolate or bourbon pecan pies evoke happy memories.

Cunningham brought fresh fruits to holiday celebrations for years. More recently, she roasts seasonal fruits, usually pears, with cloves and cinnamon and has picked up her mother’s tradition of baking. She makes olive oil cake with roasted figs and candied lemons. It’s gluten-free, made with almond flour and cassava.





## Holiday Options at the Coop

The nine-member AWC produces an annual guide to Thanksgiving options that provides details on both turkeys and turkey alternatives on offer at the Coop. Anyone who has tried Beyond Burgers knows that meat alternatives have vastly improved in flavor profile over the years. But many Coop members who eat plant-based diets don't eat highly processed foods often. Kimberly Curran, frozen goods and ice cream buyer for the Coop, shared that a couple dozen Tofurky holiday feasts were sold last year. The Field Roast Celebration Nugget with sage and garlic is carried regularly. There are a few newer veggie/vegan proteins available, such as Eat Meati mushroom root cutlets, Akua kelp burgers and Actual Veggies green burgers with kale.

Perhaps the greatest satisfaction for vegan and vegetarian Coop members is shifting people's perspectives about what the Thanksgiving meal can be: a gathering with people we care about, consciously celebrating, eating wholesome nourishing foods, challenging old traditions and, of course, creating new ones.

For more holiday vegan inspiration check out Isa Chandra Moskowitz's *The Superfun*



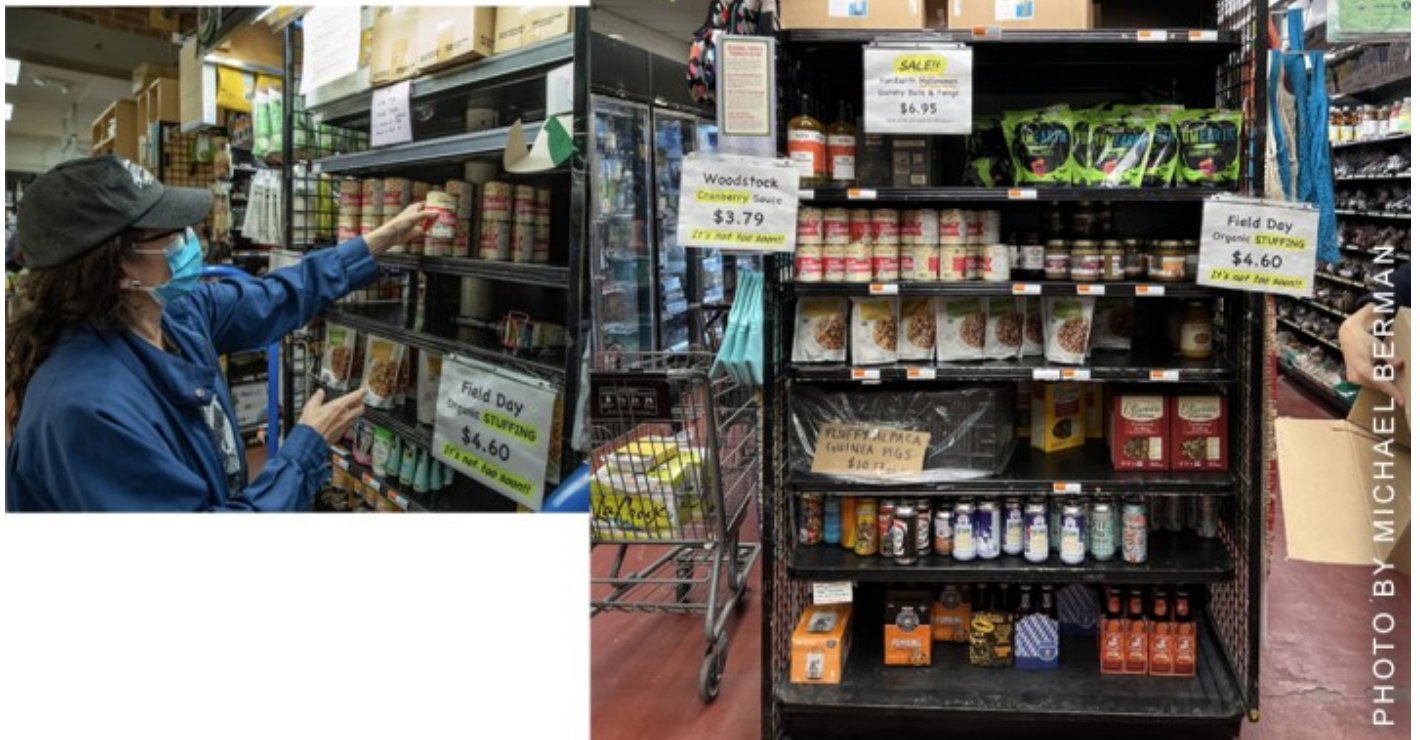
*Times Vegan Holiday Cookbook: Entertaining for Absolutely Every Occasion*, Timothy Pakron's *Mississippi Vegan* and our own Cunningham's baking on IG @lit\_vegan.nyc.



Jess Powers works in emergency management and enjoys adventures in nature and cooking. She's on IG @foodandfury.

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

November 7, 2023



*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 Szladdek 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 buy-



ers 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, Novem-



ber 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, Szladek noted, 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.*