

7 Ways the Pandemic Has Changed How We Shop for Food

Oranges and frozen foods are being snapped up. Shelves have fewer choices. And customers are steering their carts in surprising new directions.



By Kim Severson

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When the coronavirus hit, even the most enthusiastic cooks had to adjust to a new, more complicated relationship with their kitchens.

For the first time in a generation, Americans began spending more money at the supermarket than at places where someone else made the food. Grocers saw eight years of projected sales growth packed into one month. Shopping trends that were in their infancy were turbocharged.

The six-month shift has been a behavioral scientist's dream. Shoppers began by building bomb-shelter pantries. Then came a nostalgia phase, with bowls of Lucky Charms and boxes of Little Debbie's offering throwback comfort. Soon, days were defined by elaborate culinary stunts, sourdough starter and kombucha clubs.

Although kitchen fatigue is setting in for many, a new set of kitchen habits have been set.

"People are moving on to more complex cooking, and we don't see that going away," said Rodney McMullen, the chairman and chief executive of Kroger, where sales rose 30 percent at the onset of the pandemic, including big jumps in the pasta aisles, the beer and wine department and baking supplies, including a 600 percent jump in sales of yeast.

He and others in the business say the Covid-driven return to the kitchen could change grocery shopping forever.

"This is a pivotal time in our history," said Anna Nagurney, a professor in the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts who studies supply chains. "Not all of what we've seen will stick, but a lot of it will."

Here are seven ways the pandemic has already changed the way Americans shop for food:

1. Trips Are Fewer, Lists Are Better

The need to avoid infection has taught people how to get by on fewer trips to the store, and to make good shopping lists.

"People now go to the store with purpose," said John Owen, the associate director for food and retail with Mintel, the market analysis group. "The number of trips went way down, and the size of the basket went way up in April. We have eased back on that, but not by much."

Before the coronavirus, 19 percent of Americans shopped for food more than three times a week, according to a study by the management firm McKinsey & Company. That number had dropped to 10 percent by June.



The pandemic has made Lizzie Bowman focus on stores that have good safety protocols and emphasize locally grown food, like her co-op in Minneapolis. Nina Robinson for The New York Times

“My typical grocery shopping before the pandemic was very much ‘I am going to decide today what I feel like making for dinner tonight, and stop on the way home and get what I need,’” said Lizzie Bowman, 39, a marketing director at American Public Media who lives in Minneapolis.

She has streamlined her shopping to once a week. “It’s more of a stock-up, but not a crazy kind of hoarding stock-up.”

She won’t go to stores that don’t set good health protocols, and leans into those that offer more local and regional food. Her regular rotation includes a food co-op, Trader Joe’s and the regional chain Lunds & Byerlys.

“It has made me a better planner and more aware of what I like to buy where,” she said. “I am so much more purposeful about where I choose to shop.”

2. Online Aisles Are Bustling

A year ago, 81 percent of shoppers surveyed by Gallup said they never turned to the internet for groceries. Online shopping was lolling at around 3 percent of all grocery sales, or about \$1.2 billion, according to a survey by Brick Meets Click/Mercatus.

But in June, online grocery sales in the United States hit \$7.2 billion.

“Even my parents are getting increasingly used to using their iPad,” said Mr. McMullen, 60, the Kroger chairman. “There are millions of people who have gotten used to cooking. They’ve found out they enjoyed it, and they’ve gotten used to tech and are understanding the benefits.”

The race for their dollars is on. In a challenge to Amazon Prime, Walmart last week announced a new \$98-a-year subscription service that offers same-day delivery on 160,000 items. Instacart is more than doubling its work force, and new services like Rosie are popping up.

Curbside pickup, delivery’s sibling, has also exploded. Stores are converting parking lots to better handle traffic from shoppers who drive by to pick up orders. Companies including Kroger and Whole Foods Market are opening what are becoming known as “dark stores,” designed solely for picking up or delivering orders placed online.

Farmers have found their way onto the internet, too. Online orders are up more than 10 times over last year for farms that use Barn2Door, an e-commerce site for farmers, said James Maiocco, the site’s chief operating officer.



Kathy Moore, left, and Roxanne Wyss, center, are new converts to online grocery shopping. Jessica Medina, an Instacart driver, dropped off an order at Mrs. Wyss's home in Overland Park, Kan. Christopher (KS) Smith for The New York Times

Roxanne Wyss and her work partner Kathy Moore, professional cooks in their 60s who live about 25 miles apart in the Kansas City area, are two unlikely converts to online food shopping. They met 38 years ago in the test kitchen at the Rival Company, which invented the Crock-Pot, and have been teaching and writing cookbooks together ever since.

With recipes for two cookbooks to test and no desire to risk infection, they began to shop online in the spring. Neither dreamed that it would be three and a half months until they stepped back into a supermarket.

They have found ways to work the angles online. Developing a texting relationship with whoever picks out their groceries helps assure they get the quality they expect. Some stores deliver more reliably than others. Curbside pickup lets them avoid the extra costs that come with delivery from services like Instacart.

Now they're back in the store, where they enjoy browsing for new products and communing with other shoppers. And, of course, it's always better to pick your own produce.

Still, they consider themselves permanent converts to online shopping. "If there is a surge in the virus, we will return to ordering everything online," Mrs. Moore said. "And it will be wonderful to turn to online when the weather is treacherous."



Oranges were one of the surprise breakouts this year, and sales remain strong. Andrew Spear for The New York Times

3. Orange Is the New Snack

Produce sales have been riding high since March, and are still up 11 percent from a year earlier, said Joe Watson, a vice president at the Produce Marketing Association. But one item is a real outlier: oranges.



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In May, grocers sold 73 percent more oranges than during the same month in 2019. Even into July, sales remained 52 percent higher than a year before.

“Oranges were a surprise, but they are popular from an immunity standpoint,” Mr. Watson said. They also last longer than some other fruit, which matters when people are going to the store less often, he said.

Sales in the category that grocers call “natural products” were growing before the pandemic, but they blew up when it arrived. By mid-March, they were up 78 percent over the year before, according to the market research firm IRI.

“Consumers are very cognizant about doing what it takes to stay healthy,” said Shelley Balanko, a senior vice president at the Hartman Group, a consumer research company. “We think the trend is going to stick around because people just really can’t afford to get sick, on a variety of levels.”

4. Redrawing the Store

Pandemic shopping has ushered in wider aisles, new methods of sanitation and less-crowded stores. And shoppers want these changes to stay.

“It became clear to me pretty early on which stores were being thoughtful and which were not,” said Ms. Bowman, the Minneapolis shopper, who spent almost 10 years working in the marketing department of General Mills. “I look at everything. I am a real nerd in the grocery store, so store optics matter a lot to me.”



Several grocery chains (including Kroger, here) have used the shift in pandemic shopping habits to install more self-serve kiosks and explore other touchless checkout methods. Andrew Spear for The New York Times

Health concerns have also accelerated the growth in payment apps and self-checkout. Walmart is testing a new system that replaces traditional checkout lines with an open plaza ringed by 34 terminals. Shoppers can scan their purchases, or wave down an employee to do the scanning for them.

Kroger intends to double down on customer choice, offering an array of options including self-checkout stations and an app that allows consumers to scan and pay as they shop, as well as traditional cashiers.

“The infrastructure of the grocery store will continue to improve, and service will continue to get better,” said John Owen, the associate director for food and retail at Mintel. “And it’s only a matter of time before stores will be much bigger to accommodate the increase in traffic.”

Still, some physical changes are fading. Publix, the 1,250-store chain based in Florida, recently ended its enforcement of one-way traffic in aisles, after customers complained.

5. Choices Are Shrinking

After decades in which American supermarkets expanded to offer a dizzying selection of products and brands, they are pulling back on variety.

There are no more free samples (a health risk) and fewer specialty promotions. Shoppers, intent on getting in and out quickly, are sticking to items they already know. Online shoppers, guided by algorithms and autofill, are less likely to make impulse purchases.

Grocers have found that they can still do a brisk business with fewer choices. Displays at the end of aisles are more likely to hold bulk packages of staples than new products looking to break into the market. Instead of offering both conventional and organic leeks, for example, a store may stock only the organic, Mr. Watson said. By reducing choices, stores can more easily surf the ups and downs of the supply chain, which are also limiting what’s available.

Shoppers are being more economical. Retailers report more interest in house brands. In a July study by the Food Industry Association, three in 10 shoppers said they were buying more store brands than before the pandemic, a quirk that grocery analysts say will likely become a habit, especially if the economy worsens.



Beans, the darling of the early days of the pandemic, are still selling well. Andrew Spear for The New York Times

Dried beans may be another economic indicator. They were the unexpected darling in the early days of pandemic shopping, lifted by the embrace of heirloom varieties and recipe-sharing on Instagram. Normally, sales drop in the summer, but not this year.

“We are still seeing a surprisingly strong demand for dried beans,” said Vince Hayward, a member of the third generation to lead the Camellia brand, whose red kidney beans are the staple of the New Orleans table. He likes to think that demand is steady because people fell in love with beans, but he realizes that economic insecurity could be driving sales.

“I feel like we’ve experienced the earthquake, and now the tsunami’s on the way,” he said.

6. The Freezer Is Hot

Frozen food is another surprise breakout. Sales initially jumped by 94 percent in March from a year earlier, according to the American Frozen Food Institute. That initial rush abated, but even in August, sales remained up almost 18 percent. Costco, whose sales are up 15 percent over August a year ago, attributes some of the growth to strong frozen food sales.

Initially, shoppers were loading their freezers in what some in the grocery business politely refer to as “the initial pantry filling.” For some consumers, frozen fruit and vegetables became a less expensive and more reliable alternative to fresh. And then there was a simple reality: Some days it is just easier to pull a meal from the freezer.

Once shoppers started exploring the freezer case, they found tastier new options.

“Frozen had a lot of momentum coming into the pandemic,” said Mr. Owen from Mintel. “A lot of the growth is coming from small brands that have healthier, clean labels or vegetarian lines. People are discovering that product quality and taste has improved.”

7. ‘Local’ Is a Bigger Lure

The fragility of the supply chain, concerns over health and safety and an appreciation of community have buoyed the movement toward food that is raised or produced locally.

Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Wyss both began ordering deliveries of eggs and milk from a local dairy, and they split a quarter of beef. There are waiting lists for community-supported agriculture subscriptions. Struggling restaurants have turned into provisioners. Grocers are teaming up with chefs to sell meal kits. Locally grown produce is selling out quickly.

It's all part of a greater awareness about healthy eating, food waste and climate change, as well as a desire to keep money in the neighborhood.



The director and screenwriter Sean Gullette has developed a deeper appreciation for the work of people like Ehab Jawad, whose family co-owns the Foodtown in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn — Mr. Gullette's neighborhood store. Jose A. Alvarado Jr. for The New York Times

"I'll be damned if I'm buying a pear from Australia right now," said Sean Gullette, 52, a filmmaker, writer and actor who feeds his family of four mostly from Foodtown, an independently run store across the street from his home in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, that is part of a three-state grocery cooperative.

During the difficult, early days of the pandemic, Mr. Gullette watched the store staff scramble to find creative ways to get staples like bread on the shelves and deliver groceries to people who couldn't get to the store.

He had already been friendly with the family that owns it, but now he sees them in a new light.

"I love my Foodtown brothers," he said. "You realize what a crucial link of the chain these guys are. There are a bunch of people creating this thing that we are deeply dependent on for something so intimate, for what we put in our bodies. It has completely changed how I think about grocery shopping."

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