

Grabbing for Groceries

Grocery shopping is a regular activity in nearly everyone's life. Most US residents are able to go into a grocery store at most hours of the day and night and find what they need. While money may be a restriction, access to food and a plethora of food and non-food such as cleaning supplies is not restricted. So grocery shopping pre-pandemic was a relatively easy and boring task.

Many of us eat out quite often so don't do much home cooking and don't stockpile food supplies at home. We can just run out to the local grocery or convenience store, often located just down the street from us, and get what we want. We don't need to stockpile, to plan, to prepare for emergencies. It's as if there's just a magic place to get food, divorced from any indication of where the food comes from.

With the pandemic came restaurant closures and restrictions, and people started eating at home more often. People started buying greater quantities of food and other grocery items (particularly toilet paper!), which led to shortages and quotas on the purchase of particular items. My visits to the grocery store after the pandemic were fraught with fear and anger instead of boredom and lack of mindfulness. Would that person come too close to me for my comfort? Why isn't that person adhering to the one-way directional signs in the aisles? Why isn't that person putting their mask over their nose? Why is that person taking a whole grocery cart full of toilet paper when the person next to them is left standing there without being able to get one roll? Why aren't people sharing? Are my fellow community members really that selfish and ignorant? Or maybe they're just scared?

It felt like a combat zone instead of a friendly neighborhood gathering place where food was plentiful and I didn't have to worry about finding something I wanted. It became for me a place where many people were battling each other for food, complaining about not finding something, taking large quantities of items, and pushing aside others to get to something they wanted. No one seemed to be aware that meatpacking plants were the source of the sausage they were grabbing large numbers of packages of and that some of these plants were closing down because of COVID-19, so this food would not be available to someone behind them in line. Perhaps less sausage would be good and more vegetables could take their place so we all could have some sausages.

Now that the distribution channels have adjusted to the pandemic, at least in part, food restrictions are less common. The hoarding is less intense although I still see it when the infection rate or hospitalization rate spikes in this community. Hopefully, others have learned to spread out their purchases so they are prepared with a food supply to face these spikes and possible quarantine.

The entire grocery shopping experience has changed for most individuals, and this change reflects a major shift in how society views, acquires, and shares its food. It also reflects how complacent and spoiled many US residents are when it comes to food, as most did not deeply consider their food supply before the pandemic. I believe this shift will continue after the pandemic, with home cooking remaining popular (although many will return to restaurants), with people growing their own food, and with people making plans for emergency food and non-food provisions. I hope it also leads to a shift to a more communal approach to grocery shopping as people realize that taking all the toilet paper leaves their neighbors with none. I have a friend who lived during The Great Depression of the 1930s, and one of his stories that always stuck with me was how if you were walking along the road and found a piece of bread, you would share it with everyone around you, as most people were hungry. He remarked, ten years ago during the recession of 2008/2009, that now if someone would find a piece of bread on the side of the road, they would quickly put it in their pocket and walk right by others who were hungry. It would be nice if that cultural shift, from the 1930s to the 2000s, went the other way as people review their behavior when going to the grocery store.