

From Costco Samples to Shiva Spreads, Say Goodbye to Free Nosh

By Ellen Scolnic and Joyce Eisenberg Jun 26, 2020

We're not *shnorrers*, but we do love a free nosh. The sour pickle at the deli, the black and white cookie at the Jewish bakery, the Dixie-cup coffee sample at Trader Joe's. We don't go out of our way for a free taste, and we certainly don't linger beyond our welcome, but if it's offered, who are we to say no?

When Costco, the king of freebies, announced on March 6 that it was no longer serving free samples because of the coronavirus, we feared that the free nosh was not long for this world. Days later, our fears became true: Albertsons, Trader Joe's, and other food markets we frequent stopped their sampling. Next came the loss of the self-serve items: the gourmet olive bar at Wegmans; the scoop-it-yourself barrels of rice, lentils, and chocolate covered almonds at the health food store; the coffee station at the convenience store, where we mixed the hazelnut and dark roast exactly how we liked it. All gone.

But who are we to complain? Yes, we've had to forage for yeast, and we've spent countless hours trying to secure an Instacart delivery slot. But we're grateful that our families are well and our fridges are full — and we recognize the luxury of kvetching about the small stuff amidst a deadly pandemic.

Of course, we can live without the supermarket salad bar — but we really miss it. In our deepest heart of hearts, we've long known it wasn't germ-free. When we reached for the chips and salsa atop the deli counter, we'd hear George Costanza in our head accusing the guests of double dipping. Of course, the girl handing out sausage bites wore gloves, but she gazed at her phone in between customers, still wearing those gloves. How sanitary could they be? Intellectually, we had our doubts — but those didn't stop us from eating.



As Jews, we grew up noshing — at bubbe's house, at the kiddush after services, in the back seat while our parents schlepped us to activities. But members of the tribe weren't the only ones rattled by current free-nosh prohibitions. When Costco suspended its samples, *USAToday* reported that "consumers mourned the loss of the smorgasbord of free snacks." The Twitterverse went crazy: One man wondered, "Where am I supposed to get free lunch now?" A young woman wrote, "If I'm going to die at least let me live wild & go to the same sample stand 6 times."

As the pandemic drags on, we're shopping less and Zooming more. We realize how much we miss schmoozing with the deli guy, chatting with the supermarket check-out lady, and hanging with our co-workers. We also miss all the snacks we shared. We present this list of lost opportunities:

1. The free sample nosh: Getting free bites at various shops was a treasure hunt, and if we timed it right, we could graze enough to call it a meal. There was gnocchi in truffle sauce and guacamole with baby carrots in the supermarket. At the adjacent farmer's market, we'd try the cheese and crackers slathered with fig jam. And if it was our lucky day, the local fancy bakery *and* the Amish stand would both be offering samples of their chocolate chip cookies. Our kids grew up as members of the supermarket Cookie Club, and the bakery counter was our first stop. On each visit, a bakery employee in a hairnet would invite them to choose a cookie. What kid could say no? We liked the freebie because it was one less bribe for us to make.

2. The deli nosh: At our favorite deli, the guys behind the counter would hand out free samples — salami slices, toothpick-speared pickles — while we waited in line for our takeout order. If we dined in, we'd indulge in the all-you-can-eat, self-serve pickle bar. These days, with the deli offering curbside pickup only, we can only hope they remember to wrap up the pickle and tuck it into our bag.

3. The office nosh: It's always someone's birthday at the office, and there's always a cake. In the before times, we were easily lured out of our cubicles for meetings accompanied by breakfast pastries, mini-sandwiches, and free pizza Fridays! We are already looking back fondly on the days when we'd watch our co-worker touch every sandwich before deciding on the tuna for herself. Now "work meetings" mean we're in virtual boxes instead of real cubicles, and the convenience of wearing our PJs makes up for the lack of free coffee and danish.

4. The party nosh: Let's get real for a minute: Hors d'oeuvres are the highlight of any simcha. On the way to the party, we discuss our noshing hopes and dreams — pigs in the blanket, bite-sized knishes, and little latkes with a dab of sour cream top our lists. Our husbands wish for mini lamb chops and a good sushi platter. It's fun to balance a tiny plate and a cocktail as we walk around and shmooze. Now, when we log onto Zoom for a virtual Bat Mitzvah, we warm up some leftovers in time to join the service.

5. The shiva nosh: Food is consolation and comfort, and when we would make a shiva call, we knew that along with paying our respects, we'd be admiring the spread on the dining room table. We looked forward to the plate of rugelach and the fish tray — and our chances of enjoying those delicacies were pretty good. We usually bring a lovely fruit platter, or box from the bakery. With no more in-person shiva gatherings, sending the family a hand-delivered platter of food seems problematic; it just gives the mourners one more thing to worry about.

6. The salad bar: True, salad bars aren't *free*, but we couldn't leave them off this list because we miss them — and yes, we occasionally "sampled" from them — even though they're loaded with germs. We loved picking exactly what we wanted. No arugula; just spinach. Who wants pickled beets on their salad? We prefer croutons. But now, selection has left the building. Salads come premade in a hygienically sealed plastic container. If we want the salad but not the red onions, we've got to take the package home and scoop the onions out — and that's no fun.

7. The bulk bin: Much like the salad bar, we were regulars at the bulk bins, too. We used to fill our candy bag to the top with a scoop of Sour Patch Kids from the barrel — and we could pretend that we didn't know we were buying 24 ounces of candy. This is harder to do now that the candy comes in a factory-sealed package with the label (and weight) right on it.

In these unprecedented times, with an abundance of caution, we know we'll get through this together. That's why we have to be hopeful this will all end soon. And we're hopeful that right after they nail down the formula for a vaccine, science will come up with a way to save the free nosh.