



Shopping in the Cloud

The pandemic pushed me—and many others—to rethink the ways I get my food, shifting from supermarkets to super-local farms and delivery services. Will it stick? **By Jessica Migala**

The grocery store was my happy place. I'd head there daily after dropping my kids off at daycare, picking up salmon for dinner, some fruit, a pint of ice cream. Then COVID-19 happened.

Weeks of panic buying, followed by months of empty shelves and long lines, made getting food an experience riddled with fear, anxiety and sadness. (We all avoid eye contact now!) As a result, many shoppers massively altered their buying habits—and that's exactly what I did.

Today, my produce comes from a local farm CSA, ButcherBox sends a monthly box of meat, Sitka Salmon Shares (a community supported fishery) delivers fish, and the Perfect Bars and Once Upon a Farm smoothies my kids love so much automatically arrive at my door every four weeks. For pantry staples, I order from Thrive Market. When I need other items, they're delivered from the local grocery store.

It's all an effort to make shopping a contactless experience, but it also gave me the push to step back and reexamine my choices: to purchase from companies and farmers that are doing good in their communities, stay mindful of the environment, and buy local, in-season food when possible. This high-tech, slow-food hybrid means that I get ingredients that are fresh and delicious, responsibly produced, but also—and this is tough to explain—*joyful*.

The Virtual Market

It wasn't just me who wanted to avoid the crowds. Between March and June, online grocery sales in the U.S. jumped 80%—from \$4 billion to \$7.2 billion—according to grocery analyst firm Brick Meets Click. By June, 22% of U.S. adults were ordering online for delivery or pickup. Subscription services saw the boom too. ButcherBox had a 75% increase in demand for new memberships beginning in mid-March, and organic produce delivery service Farm Fresh to You tripled deliveries, going from 30,000 boxes in February to 100,000 boxes of fruits and veggies in April and holding steady through August (press time). More producers, like small-scale farms and local growers, began connecting with consumers through e-commerce—functioning as virtual farmers' markets and, in some cases, selling food once destined for restaurants.

Of course, there are pros and cons of shopping this way. “The positive is that it

forces you to plan out meals and purchase the things you need in a more thoughtful way,” says Lisa Young, R.D.N., Ph.D., an adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University. (See ya, impulse buys.) I learned to embrace CSA produce that I normally don't cook with (garlic scapes!) and use whatever I have on hand.

The downside: Cost. It's not lost on me that it's an extremely privileged position to have grass-fed beef shipped to my doorstep. Or to be able to afford the extra delivery fees for grocery orders. For many, this luxury is not an option. Before the pandemic began, an estimated 1 in 9 Americans didn't have access to enough food on a regular basis. And that number has skyrocketed during the crisis. The nonprofit Feeding America has seen an unwavering 60% increase in demand at its food banks compared to last year, and 4 in 10 people served between March and June were new to food assistance.

Some subscription services do have charitable arms, like Thrive Market's Thrive Gives, which uses member donations to subsidize purchases for families in need. Federal nutrition programs—the first line of defense against food insecurity—such as SNAP, historically placed restrictions on online grocery shopping. But a SNAP online purchasing pilot program, launched in April 2019, is now offered in nearly all states. Retailers are limited, but it's a step toward making hands-off shopping more accessible to all.

Shopping in a Post-COVID-19 World

It's inevitable that there will be some return to normal when the pandemic is finally over. Demand for online and Slow-Food-style shopping will wane as some folks make frequent supermarket runs part of their routine again. And some farmers and purveyors will go back to supplying restaurants only and shutter their direct-to-consumer options. But many shoppers, like me, discovered that there's value in supporting smaller, often local businesses—for the food, sure, but also for the community.

Good Food, Delivered When deciding where to spend your grocery dollar, consider rewarding companies with a Slow Food mission and an eco-friendly mindset. Meaning: sustainably sourced fish and seafood, local produce or artisanal products. Five companies that are doing things right:

Wulf's Fish
(Select states)
wulfsfish.com

Imperfect Foods
(Select states)
imperfectfoods.com

Purple Carrot
(Nationwide)
purplecarrot.com

The Foodocracy
(Nationwide)
shopfoodocracy.com

Crowd Cow
(Contiguous U.S.)
crowdcow.com