Drowning in Plenty: Bulk, Waste and Countercultural Revival in the Anthropocene

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Drowning in Plenty: Bulk, Waste and Countercultural Revival in the Anthropocene

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Abstract

This senior project examines the potential for the bulk food section in American food stores to reduce both food and packaging waste. I chose to analyze the American supermarket because of its immense influence it has on consumer purchases and its role in society as a place of resource to acquire foodstuffs therefore becoming a necessity for the twenty-first century consumer. The type of bulk my research examines as one solution to these problems is not the bulk buys from big box stores like Costco or Wal-Mart, which retain prepackaged marketing, but rather from the aisles in supermarkets and grocery stores which offer bulk bins of various non-perishables items such as grains, nuts, dried beans, candy and dried fruit. First, I analyze the bulk experience from the consumer side, examining how consumers currently interact with the bulk section in the supermarket and how that interaction might be changed to improve the general acceptance of bulk shopping. Second, through a bulk lens I explore the ways in which supermarkets hold significant power to influence patterns of food production and consumption towards a more sustainable and little-to-no waste system. The purpose of this research is to see if a bulk infrastructure and re-use model could become standardized and successful in major U.S. supermarkets. To address this question, I conducted four case studies, each focusing on a different type of food store. These include Adams Fairacre Farms, Red Hook Natural Foods, Honest Weight, and Whole Foods. I selected these stores because they offer perspectives on handling bulk from both a large scale (Honest Weight and Whole Foods) and from a small scale (Red Hook Natural Foods, Adam’s).
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Preface

On the Upper East Side of Manhattan there has existed for many years an upscale, multi-thousand square foot food store that is outfitted from floor to ceiling with bulk shopping infrastructure. Contrary to the difficulties that other food stores throughout the city, and indeed the nation, have experienced in getting consumers to accept bulk as a viable and desirable method of shopping, this store not only provides extensive bulk shopping, but features it as the centerpiece of its marketing strategy. Customers go out of their way to go to Dylan’s Candy Bar, where the economic and environmental advantages of bulk shopping are not only enthusiastically embraced, but the process is considered essential to the shopping experience.

I was fortunate enough to be exposed to bulk infrastructure here at a very young age. The experience of pulling down on self-serve scoop and pull down bins became an essential part of obtaining food, a joy in and of itself, almost addicting in its own way. The direct connection to what I was going to eat, of the decision about quantity and the process of judging quality, all contributed to the experience of an alternative way of shopping which stayed with me, albeit subliminally, and ultimately changed my perception of food shopping as an adult. The aesthetic, design, product, and atmosphere of the store, moreover, further enhanced the intimacy of the experience. I accepted without question the obvious success of the method of distribution and in fact it became, for me, a vicariously thrilling way to obtain and enjoy food.

Dylan’s, of course, is a candy store. A very successful one. And while it might be tempting to dismiss the proven success of bulk shopping at a place like Dylan's as simply due to the youth of its clientele, the entertainment component of its shopping experience or the limited nature of its product line, the degree of rampant pollution generated by mainstream commercial supermarkets in the United States today mandates a closer look at the potential for bulk shopping
to address two of the most serious environmental issues facing the world today: packaging waste and food waste in the modern food supply chain.

Dylan’s Candy Bar demonstrates a successful use of the modern day bulk section, providing the public with another form of shopping for foodstuffs, which in the end turns out to be cheaper and more sustainable. Why is it, then, that shopping in the bulk food section of a modern American supermarket for such nutritious staples as grains, beans, pastas is considered inconvenient and inefficient? In search for an answer, I began my research by looking at the current state of bulk food sections in American supermarkets and grocery stores. What exists now and how has it worked? I then looked back and forward, at the history of bulk shopping and its future in the American marketplace, ending with some predictions and recommendation of what bulk shopping can become and what it will look like in the coming decades.
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Introduction

This senior project examines the potential for the bulk food section in American food stores to reduce both food and packaging waste. For the purpose of my research I approach food waste as a moral crime when a great portion of the world lacks adequate access to sufficient healthy food. One in six people in the U.S. does not have a secure supply of food (Gunders, 2012), while the cost to the average American household of four from food waste translates into an estimated $1,350-$2,275 in annual income losses (Gunders, 2012). This wasted food not only creates monetary burdens, but it also raises environmental concerns. Worldwide, unconsumed food generates 3.3 billion metric tons (Smith, 2015) in global emissions, while food packaging alone contributes over 23% of materials reaching landfills in the U.S annually (EPA, 2015).

The type of bulk my research examines as one solution to these problems is not the bulk buys from big box stores like Costco or Walmart, which retain prepackaged marketing, but rather from the aisles in supermarkets and grocery stores which offer bulk bins of various non-perishables items such as grains, nuts, dried beans, candy and dried fruit. Bulk foods are foods that are sold unpackaged from a self-service container or dispenser (Johnson, 1984). Bulk food sections can often be found in health food stores, co-ops, and regional supermarkets. Common food items in bulk aisles consist of: dried bean and legumes, nuts and seeds, cereals, flours, baking staples, whole grains, herbs and spices, nut butters, pastas, sweeteners, teas and coffee, and a variety of candy and snacks (Muse, 2012). Moreover, some of the bulk food items will have certification labels such as organic or fair-trade. Rather than using pre-packaged containers, the bulk food shopping method at best requires the consumer to use containers that are reusable and refillable, such as mason jars and cloth bags, or at least to cut back on packaging and food waste while keeping price and quantity of the food item under direct consumer control.
The purpose of this research is to see if a bulk infrastructure and re-use model could become standardized and successful in major U.S. supermarkets. I chose to analyze the American supermarket because of its immense influence it has on consumer purchases and its role in society as a place of resource to acquire foodstuffs therefore becoming a necessity for the twenty-first century consumer. To address this question, I conducted four case studies, each focusing on a different type of food store. These include Adams Fairacre Farms, Red Hook Natural Foods, Honest Weight, and Whole Foods. I selected these stores because they offer perspectives on handling bulk from both a large scale (Honest Weight and Whole Foods) and from a small scale (Red Hook Natural Foods, Adam’s). I examine bulk in two primary ways. First, I analyze the bulk experience from the consumer side, examining how consumers currently interact with the bulk section in the supermarket and how that interaction might be changed to improve the general acceptance of bulk shopping. Second, through a bulk lens I explore the ways in which supermarkets hold significant power to influence patterns of food production and consumption towards a more sustainable and little-to-no waste system.

For the past two years, I have been collecting data for this research. In the summer of my sophomore year of college, I attempted to adopt a Zero Waste Lifestyle (ZWL). I was living in the small town of Tivoli, a seven-minute drive from Bard College. Inspired by the actions of bloggers and activists who had adopted this lifestyle, I sought to test my own ability to sustain this lifestyle and to carefully study the difficulties involved. As I gained more knowledge on the topic of waste and food waste in particular, I was intrigued by the ways in which this lifestyle could significantly reduce food and packaging waste by shopping in bulk. However, The goal was to produce minimal to no waste at all. I decided to use photographs as a way to document my progress. I collected all of my reusable shopping bags, mason jars, and purchased linen.
produce bags. I kept a big bowl in my freezer for the compost, and discarded it in the nearby community garden compost (see Appendix D).

My goal to create as little unnecessary trash as possible by grocery shopping with reusable bags, mason jars, and making DIY cleaning supplies and bath and body products did not go as planned. In fact, it failed completely. Gradually, however, it became evident that the failure was by no means my fault alone. I was trying to operate in an environment that was not conducive to a waste free, bulk shopping, reusable culture I was trying to adopt. Therefore, I decided to try to extend this ethos into the Bard community as a way to open this alternative way of living to the student body. I developed a way in which incoming Bard students could develop or enhance environmentally conscious behaviors by assembling reusable products into a sustainability kits that are given to them on move-in day. These kits included a canvas tote; glass Mason jar, Tupperware, utensils, and Mason jar accessories for versatility. This kit was also meant to work in conjunction with the on-campus grocery store, The Green Onion, where I installed bulk infrastructure to support bulk food shopping and the sustainability kits.

Figure 1. Chocolate covered pretzels, yogurt covered pretzels, raisins and M&M’s in scoop bins in the Green Onion.
Figure 2. AquaViTea Kombucha on tap in the Green Onion

Figure 3. Almonds, granola, and sunflower seeds in gravity bins in the Green Onion.
In addition to the sustainability kits and Green Onion bulk renovations I attempted to set an example by actively demonstrating my dedication to this ethos of low waste and sustainable living. I assumed after a week or two I would get the hang of it, however this was not the case. Although, it was fully rewarding when a daily task, such as grocery shopping, was completed with the production of no waste, I was able to fully shop waste free only a handful of times. Even with the privilege of time, resources and dedication, it was difficult for me, acting in isolation, to adopt this lifestyle in full. There would be days where I would be completely zero waste, and then others where I simply did not have the time or patience to properly follow zero waste guidelines. It was a frustrating and disappointing experience, which led me to the birth of my senior thesis.
The vision of grocery shopping with reusable and no packaging is the realization of what it is like to shop with a net “zero waste” consequence. The ways in which America manages its waste is careless and unsustainable, the modes of disposal we have created, such as burning, burying, and discarding into the sea are short-term solutions. I argue that bulk food shopping is one way in which wasteful societies can substantially reduce their waste output and, at the same time, contribute in a limited but significant way to the slowing down of the ever-accelerating pace of modern, post-industrial life. My research analyzes not just the nuts and bolts of bulk shopping but also the role of the bulk food section in American food stores from the standpoint of the culture it creates, or could create.

I believe reusables exemplify one of the most productive solutions to the throwaway culture. In 2013, Bea Johnson, leader of the ZWL movement published a book on how to seamlessly adopt this lifestyle, while at the same time popularizing a reusable culture which responded to a rising demand from some consumers for find alternative options to the extensive and environmental damaging use of plastics. As an active member of the ZWL and shopping in bulk, Johnson acknowledges, “quality food does not come cheap, but in the long run is better for us and the environment and is an investment I am willing to make for the health of our family and the planet” (Johnson, 2013).

I argue that in order for the bulk food section to be successful in reducing food and packaging waste, however, it must be significantly represented and prominent in mainstream supermarkets and grocery stores. Although there a few stores, usually smaller, that consciously seek to enable the consumer buy in bulk and reduce packing and waste such as Package Free (Singer, 2018), are stores that are only accessible to a small and often wealthy audience. Therefore, in order for a move towards reducing waste to make a broader impact, it needs to be
mainstreamed into grocery chains like Stop and Shop, Wal-Mart, and Costco. The efforts to adopt bulk as a consumer is difficult due to the lack of large stores accommodating to this new wave of living. Customers who frequent these mainstream stores represent a wider demographic than the consumer who is privileged and able to shop certified and waste free. Engaging these consumers by offering an attractive and cost conscious bulk section in the mainstream stores could potentially serve as a way to broaden access to a more environmentally sustainable pattern of shopping.

**Bulk Culture**

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, bulk shopping gained popularity with the rise of health food stores and food cooperatives, but with the tailing off of the broader countercultural movement, it plateaued, experiencing a mild resurgence in the early 2000s. I believe one of the reasons why bulk has existed throughout the years, but has yet to gain popularity in the mainstream like other environmental shopping techniques such as banning the plastic bag in favor of reusable shopping bags, is due to its inability to present itself as convenient or intuitive to the consumer. From the results I found in my case studies, I realize it is a constant struggle to advertise and engage customers in bulk food shopping. Resistance or lack of interest on the part of consumers stems from a set of factors, from a lack of planning to perceptions that, bulk is not convenient and lacks variety. Another problem for bulk managers is managing customers who are not respectful or not aware of the need for of the hygiene required that is to be followed when handling bulk. Customers often reach into bulk bins with their bare hands to try the product or do so out of careless thinking. Consequently, there is liability for the stores when providing bulk food options, due to the spread of germs and bacteria through direct contact of hands to food
product. Often the challenge is monitoring the section without making customers feel supervised, while maintaining a clean and hygienic environment. These issues pose a puzzle about why stores nowadays maintain a bulk section at all.

The research for this project shows me that my experience reflects many of the challenges of shopping bulk on a larger scale. This project uncovered a tension that although bulk holds great promise as a practical remedy for a society that is inundating itself with the by-products of its consumption, is not fair to impose eco-friendly methods when the option to do so is exclusive and expensive. To my surprise in order for the bulk section to survive in our current society it is necessary to have conventional-packaged alternatives within the supermarket in order to account for the economic losses if a supermarket was to rely solely on the bulk section for key items. The initial assumptions towards bulk was that each store had an intentional and purposeful reason for maintaining and sustaining its bulk section, however I found that the bulk section exists primarily through the demand of the consumer and a focus on the environment is secondary to most consumers in comparison to the monetary benefits of bulk. Based on my findings, I argue that the bulk food section in contemporary supermarkets has lost the cutting edge economic and social value that led to its emergence in the second half of the twentieth century. It survives primarily on sentimentality. Its quaint but largely invisible existence in the modern day food store raises the question of whether there is a role for bulk food in a sustainable anthropocene. It is my hope that the research I have conducted over the past two years will contribute to the wider conversation of ways to address the issues that arise from food waste and to new modes of sustainable grocery shopping which were practical and accessible. Through my research I show the benefits, challenges, and possibility of transforming bulk grocery shopping into an efficient and popular mechanism to reduce food and packaging waste. With bulk seeming
more as a burden then benefit, I question the purpose and reason for its persistent existence in the
everyday supermarket if majority of bulk managers I spoke to were ambivalent and passive in
regards to the future and potential development of bulk.

I found that regardless of the size, that in both large-scale supermarkets and small-scale
grocery stores, it is almost impossible for a bulk section to solely sustain a store without the
support of other department sales. There are, however, certain cases where all-bulk food stores
exists and prosper, although, I believe the success of those stores are conditional to the
environment and population. The stores that sell niche bulk options such as candy, nuts, and
spices receive positive responses from customers, unlike stores that sell staples in bulk such as
flour, pasta, and rice. As much as I hoped to find that bulk had a bigger role in the supermarket
and in the homes of consumers, it unfortunately did not meet that expectation. Yet it persists in
stores nonetheless. I found that the bulk section in the stores I studied survives primarily through
consumers and their demand for this method of food shopping. In addition, environmental
movements such as the ZWL have sustained the existence of bulk. As noted above, the methods
for this project include semi-structured interviews, a comparative case study method, participant
observation and a mix of primary and secondary literature, such as websites, and YouTube.
Through participant observation, I took photos of each store’s bulk section, along with time spent
examining within the aisles and how consumers interact with the bulk section.

The project is organized as follows. Chapter one provides an overview and history
of American supermarket industry, along with the rise of a new environmental movement and
the concurrent demand for clean and healthy food followed by the emergence of ‘ethical
consumerism’ and the benefits and challenges associated with shopping in bulk. Chapter two
discusses the literature surrounding bulk and the different movements and counterculture
lifestyles involved with promoting bulk. Chapter three comparatively analyzes four case studies (Honest Weight, Whole Foods, Adam’s Fairacre Farms, and Red Hook Natural Foods) to demonstrate different bulk models in the twenty-first century supermarket.
Chapter 1: Origins of the American Supermarket

The Secret Life of American Supermarkets

This chapter discusses the evolution and structure of the supermarket industry in the United States. By the twenty-first century, the industrialization of the food system is reflected in the power of retailers to influence the way people shop. Conversely, there has emerged a critique of this system and the rise of niche commodities and new norms held by consumers for social and environmentally friendly products that press corporate stores to respond. I briefly review the rise of ethical consumerism and the benefits and limitations of consumer pressure to change the mainstream grocery store model as well as analyze the pros and cons for stores in making room for certified and sustainable products and the additional challenges that bulk products pose for stores and for consumers.

Strategy and Design of the Supermarket:

In twenty-first century large supermarkets with automatic sliding doors welcome the customer with open arms inviting their wallets and senses to feel at home in this strategically organized space. The abundance of fresh produce and fully stocked shelves of purposefully placed packaged goods provide the shopper with many choices, which at times may feel overwhelming. This is a feeling, however, that supermarket designers purposefully try to evoke because it creates more impulse purchases. If not prepared beforehand with a definite grocery list, consumers are more likely to buy more items than originally planned for (Koch, 2012 and Notre Dame College, 2013).

Nationwide, store managers try and maximize the customer’s time spent in the store by making them travel down as many aisles as possible with an floor plan that keeps shoppers moving through the entire store. This ‘passive strolling is found to promote increased and
impulse based buying. Supermarkets use a standard layout composed of design principles that create a general flow to their stores to keep efficient mobility of the consumer throughout the aisles. For example, the reason for regularly bought food items such as meat, eggs, dairy and bread to always be found in the back of any supermarket forces the shopper to walk past every aisle in order to get to their desired staples. The result of these design strategies is to manipulate the shopper into believing they are making their own choice when it comes to picking out food products. The design and layout of grocery stores are all intentional and based on consumer reactions and habits in order to flush out as much profit from the shopper. In some stores, a one stop service system is implemented which provides catering centers along the perimeter of the store such as, deli’s, banks, coffee shops and pharmacies. This encourages shoppers to come back for these services along with their groceries (Koch, 2012).

Store sales are purposely designed as well. The top shelf usually houses local, gourmet and smaller brands, while the middle shelf also known as the “bull’s eye zone” is in perfect line of sight for the shopper and leading brands and best selling products are likely to be placed there. The bottom shelf tends to hold store brands, other generic brands and bulk items, shoppers who want to save money will search for a deal anyway, so there is no need to waste valuable shelf space on these products. The center aisles of the grocery store are where general goods are placed in order to get the shopper to buy costly named brand goods, where these products are placed on the shelf also influence the shopper’s purchasing habits (Notre Dame College, 2013). Manufacturers will usually pay an extra fee to have their products placed at the end of aisles, which produce more revenue due to their placement and influence the customer of the importance and value of that item. Supermarkets also appeal to children due to their influence
they have on their parent’s purchases, therefore the kid’s shelf is in direct line of sight of children (Notre Dame College, 2013).

**Pioneers - The First Self-Serve American Supermarket**

The modern version of a supermarket and the strategic-revenue enhanced design and layout is a 20th century innovation, standing in contrast to the store models that dominated in urban and rural America in the 19th century. Before World War I, grocery stores in urban settings were small, specialized, and independent with market clerks who would be the retriever of foodstuffs instead of the shopper. Shoppers would wait in line at the grocer and present their orders to the clerks or would phone in an order and later have their goods delivered to their home (Vileisis, 2008). However this method of distribution of groceries changed forever with the innovation of Clarence Saunders’ system of “cash-and-carry self-service grocery store” (Vileisis, 2008). Saunders a Virginia native, salesman and business consultant opened the first American self-service grocery store, Piggly Wiggly, in 1916 on a busy commercial stretch in Memphis, Tennessee (Vileisis, 2008). Saunders recognized the inefficiency of the clerk based grocery shopping method which wasted time and was expense due to labor costs. This prompted him to create the self-serve system. His model revolutionized the entire grocery industry (Piggly Wiggly, 2011). As shoppers entered a Piggly Wiggly, they walked into brightly lit store with four aisle rows stacked with more than a thousand products such as, canned vegetables, cornflakes, bags of pre-weighed flours, jar preserves and more (Wells, 2016). National brands such as Campbell’s soup, attractively packaged, were showcased on these revolutionary shelves. Shoppers were excited and eager to be a part of one of the first self-serve supermarkets in the U.S. the positive atmosphere surrounding opening day is due in part to the support of big brands such as Campbell’s soup and their support for Saunders (Wells, 2016).
The sensation caused by Piggly Wiggly was due to many factors, first, prior to the ‘big reveal’ of the first Piggly Wiggly and a new store model, billboards and newspaper ads were placed all over Memphis. Second, the store drew consumer attention due to its funny name and the promised allure of a completely new shopping experience (Wells, 2016). Third, the atmosphere surrounding the store opening was festive and welcoming. A beauty contest was held while a brass band performed, and strategically dressed employees gave out flowers to ladies and balloons to children (Wells, 2016). For the first time shoppers could pick their own produce and weigh their products themselves. Saunders made sure to appeal to the masses by linking his self-serve concept to blue collar values and American self-sufficiency, one of his ads reads “Piggly Wiggly will be born in a few days...not with a silver spoon in his mouth but with a work shirt on his back” (Wells, 2016).

The multiple innovations in Saunders' plan created the building blocks of the modern supermarket and grocery store layout. Shopping baskets replaced clerks, items were priced for comparison, refrigeration sections were implemented, nationally advertised brands were displayed, a printed receipt was provided to the consumer, and employees were dressed in appropriate uniforms specific to their position and role in the grocery store (Piggly Wiggly, 2011). The radically different store model caught the attention of newspapers and an ad posted read “a nation-wide vogue in shopping that leaves women free to choose for themselves,” by targeting women as the backbone of the household and identifying them as the primary grocery shopper, opened a window for women to acquire agency as housewives. In addition, the store not only increased efficiency for consumers, but it provided lower prices, cleaner and high quality goods compared to their competitors.
This style of ‘empowered consumer’ was the first time that shoppers, could shop at their own pace, pick up and evaluate colorful food packages and compare them with another (Vileisis, 2008). Along the same vein, the innovation in making food become more convenient for the consumer, also relies heavily on the packaging that surrounds the food product. The Piggly Wiggly model continues to inform contemporary stores, with significant additions. Nowadays, the sweet smell of freshly baked goods waters the palette, a cluster of green plants and flowers stimulate the eyes, nostalgic songs quietly play in the background and colorful lush displays of different shades of red and yellow produce, seduces the shopper all culminating into a euphoric American food shopping experience.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

American supermarkets that provide a bulk section prompt me to question the purpose of bulk in the first place. Why bulk, when packaged goods appear to be cheaper and convenient? Its obscurity and enigmatic nature also leads me to think: could bulk food shopping become a widespread organized system of undermining food waste in America especially through the supermarket? Unfortunately, there is no literature directly addressing the bulk section in American supermarkets, there is however, an extensive literature on counterculture activism, ethical consumerism (EC), supermarket design, food waste, consumer and producer relationships, environmentalism, the Zero Waste Movement (ZWM), and the Zero Waste Lifestyle (ZWL). Because the literature on bulk is not extensive, this review focuses on key concepts and debates about the purpose and potential for bulk and, more broadly, about its role in supporting sustainable consumption. In addition, an important component of this project is the relationship of bulk to different cultural movements among consumers that stores then respond to. Initial interest in bulk was linked to both the counterculture and environmental movements of the 1960s (Belasco, 2007), the latter stemming from a critique of industrialized food, and a desire for organic and other certifications that reflected both nutritional and social concerns. More recently, a focus on reducing packaging and food waste has been added to the movement. Drawing from these literatures, this chapter creates a theoretical framework for the case studies I conducted in order to place them within the larger conversation of environmentalism.

The bulk movement emerged in the 1960s and enjoyed its heyday through the 1980s. It tapered off for the next two decades before undergoing a revival beginning in the early 2000s with the rise of EC For the purposes of my research, I define EC as a way in which the consumers are able to vote with their dollar by purchasing products that align with their beliefs
and values (Belasco, 2007). Some of these certifications may include fair-trade, rainforest alliance or organic and this rise of certification shopping is in part, a resulting critique of the industrialized American food system. Drawing on the relevant literature, I argue that bulk itself is a method of food shopping which could potentially reduce unnecessary food and packaging waste. Second, I discuss the relationship between corporation and consumer; supermarket strategy and layout and a slow food movement that has arisen as an antidote to the ubiquity of fast food. All are factors involved in the creation of an interpretive framework for my case studies. Finally, these same points are linked to the burgeoning focus on the ZWL, which I personally tried to live, but did not achieve.

The ZWL (Johnson, 2013) grew out the Zero Waste Movement (ZWIA, 2002) spearheaded by the Zero Waste International Alliance (ZWIA). For some, bulk is an important component of promoting the ZWL. The ZWL is cost-effective, sustainable, efficient, and responsible and promotes the reuse of items (Johnson, 2013). The concept of a waste-free modern supermarket is the commercial incarnation of an old-fashioned grocery store. The increasing popularity of environmental movements like the ZWL and earlier, the reversion to a “slow food” movement (Petrini, 2005), is in large part reflected by the increase of sales within the organic food sector. From 2007 to 2016, total U.S. organic sales doubled from $20 billion to $40 billion, organic food now produces more than five percent of the nation’s total food sales. The organic food movement began earlier than is generally acknowledged. Recognition of the dangers of pesticides and chemicals coming in contact with the food we eat was acknowledged in 1947 by J.I. Rodale, editor of the magazine, Organic Gardening, he stated, “the revolution has begun,” in reference to the organic farming and gardening movement which was becoming
popular amongst consumers even at that early (O’Sullivan, 2015). That awareness would explode with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, discussed below.

*Environmentalism and Counterculture Activism*

Starting in the 1960s, environmentalism and bulk foods came onto the cultural radar in the US. I call proponents of both countercultural environmentalists, defined as consumers who seek a lifestyle in harmony with nature and against conventional U.S. agriculture methods (O’Sullivan, 2015). From the 1960s through the 80s, counterculture environmentalists presented an alternative to the mainstream consumers by supporting, a range of environmentally friendly lifestyle practices and beliefs such as conservation of resources, awareness of the human impact on the environment, and organic farming.

Linking food, agriculture and the environment, the movement was in part spurred by Rachel Carson’s 1962 groundbreaking book, *Silent Spring*, that had informed the public about the dangers of the chemical DDT. The resulting controversy had sparked the initial environmental movement among a public outraged over the deception by corporations and the complicity of the government over the safety of a range of chemicals and industrial pollutants Carson’s book resurrected the fledgling interest in organics that had itself been around since 1947, and the result was that by the mid-60s consumers finally began to question the conventional agricultural system in earnest. Counterculture activists began to join buying clubs and form co-ops as direct pushback to the conventional U.S. food system. When the co-ops moved into storefronts and later former supermarkets, bulk was a major part of their operation and philosophy.
Coops, Communes and Countercuisine

From 1965 to 1970, co-ops became the local outlets for those engaged in a “countercuisine” movement which encouraged both healthy nutrition and eating styles and heightened awareness of the short-comings and inequities of the U.S. food distribution system. In the early 1970’s co-ops boomed and became a space where shoppers were able to demystify the food business by not engaging with an array of packaged food products. These original co-ops provided numerous bulk food options that encouraged more conscious participation in the shopping process and discouraged wasteful consumption (Belasco, 2007). Providing staples previously unfamiliar to American consumers, such as brown rice, whole grain breads, herbal teas and soy products (Belasco, 2007) coops allowed their members, who more often than not contribute their labor as well as their business, with an opportunity to reject the normative methods of consumption and production (Belasco, 76).

Nowadays, those from the old co-op school of thought believe that the new wave of health food superstores that project the superficial ambiance and appearance of the old co-ops is fundamentally disingenuous because the new superstores systematically encourage consumers to consume not less, but more. The old co-op school of thought is concerned that the focus on reduced consumption has been blurred and shifted to a more materialistic and less reflective paradigm. The old school was and still is confident in the belief that consumers should be encouraged to consume less through the adoption of shopping what has now become known as “zero waste,” which ultimately reduces impulse purchases by providing fewer and simpler options (Belasco, 2007). The consciousness raised by these early coops about caring where food comes from and how it is prepared led to long-term campaigns to place responsibility and
pressure on companies and manufacturers to develop healthier, more sustainable products and more ethical business practices.

Building on the interest in organic and health food supported by the counterculture movement, the slow food manifesto emerged in the 1980s. The slow food movement is an attempt to push back against the damaging spread of “fast” food. By the 1970s, fast food had become another telltale symptom of a society that had developed a serious abuse problem with convenience and minimal effort. Belasco writes, “...for the most part, Americans have accepted the ideology of convenience, with its aura of liberation, freedom and choice,” unlike delayed gratification, which became unacceptable. This inability to be patient has hindered the economic sector in more ways than one. It has overemphasized efficiency over quality and distorted the economic decision making process (Belasco, 2007). If we examine how convenience as an unrestricted goal has altered the ways in which individuals function within society, it is clear the effects, in balance, have been negative and the consequences long lasting. The decrease in time, which it takes to access any type of information or obtain a desired object or experience, has provided us with an entitled understanding of gratification.

In contrast, the slow food manifesto echoed these concerns stating, “we are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life.” It emphasized the societal importance of appreciating our food in full. Fast Food was increasingly becoming the norm and, as an essential element of Fast Life, threatened the environment and landscapes at an ever faster and more disastrous rate (Slow Food USA, 2018). Joining co-ops and living in communes had been the embodiment of the slow food manifesto in the 60s. Other means were now needed to reconnect with our food and its origins in a more serious way than through the institutions of the 1960s like the commune and the coop that had effectively disappeared from American society.
Rise of Ethical Consumerism

If everyone made ethical food choices and demanded organics, then “we [could] collectively, change the way our food is grown and prepared” believed primatologist Jane Goodall. Goodall’s faith in consumer power is not misplaced. The increase of interest in food labels and the appearance of certifications such as non-GMO, Cage-Free, Fair Trade Certified, Organic, falls under the umbrella of (EC) which contributed significantly to the birth and rapid growth of health food stores like the nationwide Whole Foods chain and Honest Weight in Albany, New York. Tom Gillespie, bulk manager of Honest Weight continually brought up the term EC when discussing the ways in which consumer values shifted and created a market response on the part of some retailers. Ever since the concept of EC came onto the public consciousness there has been an increase in interest on the part of the American consumer in the healthiness and origins of their food and how the supermarket has improved or impeded that development. The food movements of the 80s and 90s, particularly EC, represented attempts to keep alive the need to resist unrestrained consumerism and insist on improvements in the food distribution system. Especially during a time when the countercultural institutions such as the ZWM and ZWL, needed to support those movements were weak or non-existent.

Revival of Bulk through the Zero Waste Lifestyle

Due in large part to the rise of EC in the eighties and nineties, the 2000s was a decade that highlighted a set of intersecting environmental concerns that contributed to an increase of interest in bulk and, by extension, the spread of the concept of “Zero Waste.” As noted earlier, this is the idea that the processes of industrial production and personal consumption could and must take place with no net increase in amount of reusable material. A study conducted by the Zero Waste International Alliance (ZWIA) established in 2002, provides the only peer reviewed
definition of zero waste to date, “Zero Waste is a goal that is ethical, economical, efficient and visionary, to guide people in changing their lifestyles and practices to emulate sustainable natural cycles, where all discarded materials are designed to become resources for other use.” (ZWIA, 2002). In the same year as the ZWIA was focusing on the need for lifestyle changes, An Inconvenient Truth, was released. A documentary narrated by former Vice President Al Gore raising public awareness and concern over global warming, and highlighted humanities consumption and it role in creating the problem. In addition, in 2006, Michael Pollan’s famous book, The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals, detailed the ways in which America’s procurement and processing methods for foodstuffs and its diet is self destructive and unsustainable. Also in 2006, Marion Nestle published her book, What to Eat, which included a powerful critical analysis of the interaction between the consumer and the American supermarket (Nestle, 2006).

These statements, publications and media pieces sparked a new wave of conversation surrounding a sustainable, ethical and organic lifestyle and spurred an interest in a market niche of environmentally conscious consumers. Political figures such as former First Lady Michelle Obama, celebrity chefs like Bobby Flay toured organic farms, and supermodel Claudia Schiffer swore to only eat an organic diet (O’Sullivan, 2015). The increasing popularity of environmental movements such as the ZWL and a reversion to a “slow food” movement (Petrini, 2005), is in large part reflected in the increase of sales within the organic food sector.

The continuing embrace of EC and growing embrace of ZWL by consumers help to revive and expand bulk culture. Those who now frequent the bulk section are consumers who are either environmentally active or adopters of the ZWL. Both want to make a personal contribution to impeding the effects of climate change through their consumption habits. Paul Connet, author
of *The Zero Waste Solution* (2013), argues to readers that they should “go zero waste, zero waste is the solution locally and globally.” The fundamental component of the ZWL and counterculture is slowing down in order to appreciate and connect with your food. In most cases, consumers have the power to change the trajectory of a product, but as manufacturers and their products become less transparent, the consumer becomes less concerned and detached from the production and distribution of a product and EC falls off. Food is a necessity, but it is also a very complex one, it is an activity that we all partake in and rely on for survival, eat it for pleasure and depend on it for fuel. As the zero waste movement grows, it is likely there will be a high demand of consumers who become invested in exclusively shopping in the produce and bulk section of the supermarket. Through this demand, shopping in bulk could become more commonplace and become installed in big box stores like Target and Wal-Mart in order to benefit all demographics (Koch, 2012).

As much as modern day celebrities, politicians, and activists like Connet and Johnson preach the benefits of adopting a ZWL there is criticism towards bulk in its nature of exclusivity (Belasco, 2007). It is a lot easier said than done to maintain and sustain a little to no waste organic whole food diet and lifestyle, many are reluctant to adopt this lifestyle due to a plethora of restrictions. High price, limited availability, skepticism about credibility of product claims, poor appearance, and lack of awareness of organic, and contentment with existing products (O’ Sullivan, 2015), all contribute to the difficulty of a widespread transition to organic, more sustainable food products. In response to the resurgence of bulk through the ZWL, retailers and producers are now encouraged to provide alternative shopping methods for customers who choose to shop in bulk.
The buzz around bulk, organic, slow food movement, EC, and a ZWL have only become more popular with time as companies, farms and manufacturers are urged by consumers to become more transparent in their company practices. The elusive bulk section has survived and continues to survive on the backs of generations, diet and health trends, and now American environmental activists are demanding more transparency, equality, sustainability and open discourse on ways to achieve and improve our current food supply system. The routes consumers are choosing to go through is by adopting a ZWL, shopping in bulk, practicing EC or back to the earth movement that encourages the interaction with bulk foods within the American Supermarket. The ability of bulk to gain real traction in the American food system at this point in its revival depends on the dual participation of corporations and consumers. Corporations must adopt social responsibility for facilitating the changeover to more sustainable shopping and consumption by consumers. But wider acceptance by consumers of the key components of a lifestyle that can successfully integrate bulk is equally essential.
Chapter 3: Case Studies

Hippies Grow Up - Honest Weight

Located in Albany, resides the biggest bulk co-op department in the East. Prior to visiting Honest Weight I assumed that it would be a ‘best case’ of bulk based on comments by one of my colleagues as one of the most impressive bulk sections she had ever encountered.

Figure 5. The bulk section in Honest Weight, Albany.
Figure 6. Pasta in scoop bins at Honest Weight, Albany.

Figure 7. Organic Vegan Worcestershire sauce and Pure Vanilla Extract on tap at Honest Weight, Albany.
Honest Weights’ dedication to promoting a sustainable and clean environment is exemplified in its efforts to make bulk food shopping friendlier, simpler, and more appealing to its customer base. I conducted interviews and engaged in participant observation at the newest location in Albany, New York. I examined their bulk section, which was sustaining itself, but was not prospering as I expected. I toured Honest Weight on a weekend afternoon, where quite a lot of foot traffic filled the aisles, the bulk aisle, was busy, yet not as crowded as the other departments. I was able to speak to Honest Weights Bulk Department Manager, Tom Gillispie, a friendly and engaging environmentalist who has worked at Honest Weight for twelve years and has a passion for making bulk engaging to all demographics. He explained the only way to have
a successful bulk department at this large scale level is the important of trust and respect for
the team and the ethos that is preached. He seemed to thrive on the unmediated and merchandising-
free nature of the bulk environment, even if it came with its challenges. Throughout our
interview, he explained how the store’s bulk section has evolved and expanded from a single
aisle in a storefront to multiple aisles in their current warehouse along with their cafe in Albany’s
Empire State Plaza’s main food court. Honest Weight was founded in 1976 by a group of friends
and began as a bulk buying club the first of its kind in Albany where the mission was to provide
healthy, nutritious, accessible and hard-to-get foodstuffs for the community (Honest Weight,
2018). At this time bulk was a niche market and not part of mainstream grocery stores. Honest
Weight prospered in its early years and dominated the health food scene in Albany. The
commercialization and branding of foodstuffs has no place in Honest Weight, with its ethos of
“acting ethically and responsibly,” (Honest Weight, 2018) even the building itself was made
purposefully environmentally sustainable with green infrastructure and a porous parking lot
(Honest Weight, 2018). Tom has extensive knowledge and experience of the history of the store
and specifically, the bulk department; therefore we were able to have an analytical conversation
about bulk and its future.

Usually, bulk sections in supermarkets appear to be daunting and chaotic, because of
their relative obscurity in a space full of packaged goods; it tends to become difficult for a naive
consumer to approach the bulk aisle with confidence and frequency, however, Honest Weight
seemed to present the possibility of something far from this kind of enigmatic space. I imagined
it as the Disneyland of bulk, where worries were assuaged not with thrilling roller coasters, but
with an array of options of foodstuffs displayed in stacks of spacious and efficient scoop and
gravity bins. It is imperative a reusable container system is consistently practiced in conjunction
with the bulk section by the consumer (Honest Weight, 2018). Although at times, Tom mentioned the difficulty the bulk section displays for certain consumers, however he has a general understanding that when a consumer has agency to direct what is profitable and what is not within the supermarket, there lies a mandatory transparency between both ends of the supply chain; where consumers have access to information such as fair labor practices, organic certification, proper treatment of animals and manufacturers and providers maintain sustainable company practices to impede global warming. The promotion of a reuse culture through the ZWL and bulk food shopping method can greatly reduce all forms of food and packaging waste. Tom was first, a coop member in the early years of Honest Weight, he was involved in the planning and strategizing of the store and reminisces about Honest Weights first location behind a Family Dollar discount store where they didn’t pay much in rent and had little overhead. He claims it was the business model: they were always able to re-stock and pay their staff above minimum wage so that the work environment was particularly cohesive and supportive. The Honest Weights bulk department aids in reducing packaging waste, which generates about 80 million tons of waste annually.

Based on personal experience and observation of shoppers, Tom feels strongly that in order to shop efficiently and economically it is imperative to plan before going bulk food shopping, by doing so reduces the potential for unnecessary waste. This is in line with the ways in which a ZWL operates; to think of the final decomposition phase of the product the consumer is interacting with. Similar to other zero waste advocates, Tom understands the initial investment in the ZWL is tedious, but emphasizes the long-term sustainable benefits for both the consumer and the environment. It is a time for the consumer to practice delayed gratification and take a counterculture approach by conversing with the bulk section as a means to a sustainable future
rather than a fleeting trend, this long-term investment will benefit both consumer, producer and manufacturer.

It was between the 1990s to early 2000s that Honest Weight went through a cycle of economic success as it began to gain popularity. Sales skyrocketed in the nineties, and continued to do so into the 2000s. One reason for this growth was the rise of ethical consumerism. Honest Weights’ efforts to practice what they preach: “to promote more equitable, participatory and ecologically sustainable ways of living [through food shopping]” (Honest Weight, 2018), has influenced the ways in which they handle their bulk section. They invest time and resources into the sustainable development of a successful bulk section on a large scale. Tom was not able to give me a quantifiable answer of how much bulk product is moved, he has yet to install a system to track how much bulk product is used per week, month or year, instead his indicator of the most popular and least popular product is dependent on the frequency in which he refills the containers. Although I do not have a number on how much bulk product is used annually, Tom was able to share with me a plethora of ideas on how to transform bulk shopping into a more accessible experience. He uses an array of imaginative techniques to make the bulk section more inclusive and easier to manage: these include recipes for shoppers on how to cook with purchased bulk ingredients, fun facts about bulk and food waste, descriptions of the bulk product, and quick tutorials on the benefits of shopping bulk among others.

Tom shares with me that it wasn’t long ago when there used to be a lot of excitement over YouTube videos of people cooking for themselves, also known as a DIY (Do It Yourself) movement. His nostalgia and appreciation of the simplicity of Youtube as a platform to educate has now become outdated in relation to the current social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat. One of the many challenges Tom faces with the
bulk department is proper advertising and making the act of bulk shopping convenient, inviting, and affordable. He mentioned the obsession of aesthetic within the millennial generation and how to make bulk, a neutral and unadvertised section of the supermarket, appeal to branding, packaging crazed young adults. In spite of all the problems, Tom remains passionately committed to the underlying philosophy of bulk: the promotion of sustainability in all its aspects: reducing packaging waste, reducing carbon footprints, supporting local businesses and communities, and saving people money. He sent me a scripted version of a soon-to-be YouTube video on the benefits of shopping in bulk, with a special focus on Garbanzo beans. Tom’s hope is to continue producing videos such as these that focuses on a different product and its benefits each week, on social media platforms such as Youtube and Facebook. In hopes of finding a solution, he created a system to make bulk products adaptable to the modern day by turning environmental, nutritional and sustainable jargon surrounding bulk into a language that can easily be communicated with customers. The bulk bin descriptions are unique to Honest Weight, instead of the nutrition and ingredient label on the sides of conventional packaged products; each bulk bin is labeled with ingredients, unique facts about the food product and how to use it in a recipe. Tom hopes that one day all 999 bulk food products available will have a unique description in lieu of the conventional label. The adherence to this task shed light on Tom’s shear dedication to bulk and his strong belief that it is somehow worth the work.

In the last two years, Tom mentions there has been devolution of growth in the Honest Weight bulk department, and although they are able to make substantial sales, profits from the bulk section it is growing at a much slower rate than the rest of the store. Tom was gracious enough to share a pitch he gave to the Honest weight Marketing Department on
how to advertise the bulk section through a fiscal lens, which he assumes ideally, provides
the shopper with more incentive to adopt to this atypical way of food shopping,

In January the Bulk Dept sold 246 different items made or grown with 250 miles
of HWFC. As a result, we made purchases totaling over $55,800 from within
our regional economy. Those purchases supported the local businesses of
granola makers, nut roasters, milling companies, confectioners, coffee roasters,
farmers, an oil press, tree tappers, apiaries and so on! What’s great is that it was
done with less fill for the land-fill. For example, we sold 796lb of maple syrup,
all of which was delivered in stainless steel drums that are returned and used
again next year. Were new 12 oz containers used, that would be roughly 796
glass jars or 461 pounds of manufactured glass! Similarly, we sold 421lb of
Rulison clover honey. This comes to us in reused 5 gallon pails weighing 60lb
each. Were we to have used standard 1lb glass honey containers, that would be
more than 210lb of manufactured glass! While the thought of reusing your glass
jars at the HWFC Bulk Dept may be news to you, but the guys at Rulison Honey
Farms in Amsterdam, NY have been delivering their clover honey to us for X#?
years. Check out their Facebook page and see the honey you buy being made!
How about $2 off the purchase of at least one pound of honey, to help get you
acquainted with our old friends? PLU 1311 Reg Price $5.99/lb.

Tom’s attentiveness and dedication to the ways in which bulk is perceived and interacted
with is exemplified in this strategically written promotional text, which sheds light on the
complexity of bulk. Perhaps with proper advertising, the bulk following could potentially
expand, I assume this because of the plateau in sales throughout the early 2000’s, however
the decline in profit did not stop the bulk section from demanding attention and catering. It
was informative to get a glimpse of the bulk aisle in action; each shopper was scooping up
and refilling oats, beans, and grains. I was able to get a sense of the frequent Honest Weight
bulk shopper from the pacing up and down of each aisle and careful studying of every other
label on the bulk containers. It seemed as if those already well versed in the lifestyle of bulk
shopping were those who were confidently engaged in this bulk section; there seemed to be
no hesitation or question from these bulk veterans on how to interact with the infrastructure.

Tom decided to expand the bulk section’s customer base by reaching out to a wider range of
demographics due to his belief that, “younger folks do not identify with the bulk section
“...[anymore],” he compares this to a time when Honest Weight and shopping in bulk was hitting all demographics, sometime between the eighties and early 2000s. However, I find it important to take into account that Tom is comparing his peak of sales during a time when the American lifestyle and culture was different in demand and design, therefore it is hard to fairly contrast the emergence of bulk (1960s) and the resurgence (1980’s-2000s-present) of bulk. Honest Weights active existence in 2018 speaks to the efforts made by him and his team which is now being rewarded by the loyalty of their bulk customers; bulk food shopping enables customers to save money, support sustainable impacts, and achieve a simpler lifestyle. For customers, these benefits make it worth investing in the extra time and planning it takes to shop bulk. Instead of the Honest Weight bulk section sustaining itself on its own sales, its existence is dependent on other departments and consumer demand this is not only the case in Honest Weight, but in Whole Foods, Red Hook Natural Foods and Adam’s as well.


Based on participant observation and the extensive interview with Tom, I realized it was necessary to understand the role of bulk in a mainstream store. Although Whole Foods (WF) started out in the 1980s as a regional store in Austin, Texas, it began to expand in 1984, starting out within Texas and then nationally and internationally, into Canada, and the United Kingdom. In 2001, the first Whole Foods store moved to Manhattan causing a great deal of interest in the media and, more importantly, the financial industries (Whole Foods Market, 2018). It is now on the scale of a small-regional mainstream supermarket focused on selling food products without artificial preservatives, colors, flavors, and sweeteners (Whole Foods Market, 2018). As of 2017 its revenue was $16.03 billion dollars, with 474 stores and counting (Amigo Bulls,
Whole Foods Market is an American supermarket chain and it has essentially transformed the consumer experience of the chore of grocery shopping into a stimulating and exciting experience. The design strategies, discussed below, combined with the practice of ethical consumerism, mentioned earlier, has resulted in dramatic growth for WF.

I spoke to Christopher Pulver, head of the grocery department at the WF in Albany, which opened in June of 2014. Christopher sees the bulk section as a place of receiving more than what you paid for, where foodstuffs are cheaper than in other parts of the store, and the majority of conventional packaging is not needed. He sees decreased prices in the bulk section as the main benefit to consumers for opting to shop in bulk, and believes that fiscal incentive is one of the drivers that keeps bulk alive in the modern day supermarket. Almost every week around five to ten percent of department sales for the store come from the bulk section, which speaks to the frequency with which the WF bulk section is used. In contrast to Tom’s normative view of bulk, the conversation I had with Christopher regarding bulk was straightforward and pragmatic. He approached the bulk section with a business perspective rather than an anthropological angle like Tom, which was not surprising due to the corporate nature of WF.

In addition to its conventional packaged food items, every Whole Foods is designed to have a bulk section. With around one hundred to one hundred and thirty bulk food products on display, the bulk sections aesthetically appealing layout that has become a standardized model in every Whole Foods store. Since part of the WF appeal to customers is the standardization of stores (like Starbucks) and because bulk has been designed into the stores since the 1980s its complete removal would lead to customers questioning why it was absent. Based on my research, I conclude that bulk exists primarily in Whole Foods through consumer demand for its
financial benefits. The desire of familiarity and continuity across stores is the principle at work here.

Figure 9. The bulk section in the Albany, Whole Foods.¹

Figure 10. The exterior of the Whole Foods in Albany.²

¹ See Appendix B
² See Appendix C
The interior of a standard Whole Foods imitates an outdoor farmer’s market, with wooden styled crates holding berries and hanging bananas on hooks (making customers stretch to get them and seem like they worked to acquire the produce). The minimal, colorful, crisp packaging of conventional products, and high prices with fancy certifications seduces the consumer as their eyes wander from shelf to shelf. Using bright primary colors like blue, yellows and greens portray Whole Foods as an environment of simplicity, sustainability and transparency (Artsy, 2016). Options are abundant, service is friendly, and the atmosphere, is unusually relaxing.

Christopher shared that his “Albany” customers in particular seem to be more value oriented when it comes to grocery shopping than the average consumer. His based this statement on customer requests and feedback. The other main communication with customers focus on responding to questions, and specific concerns about regulations regarding food products and their processing.

Whole Foods’ ability to keep expanding and make a profit while promoting a healthy sustainable lifestyle is impressive. I see WF not only as a modern day food hub, but also a place of socializing. For example, WF has free testing stations where customers are able to sample a variety of foodstuffs. This creates an interactive space where customers engage with one another and the WF team. This echoes similar efforts of HW original goal to create a sense of community through coops. As the ease of social interaction among customers and between customers and employees increases, I can only assume that for customers return visits back to any WF tend to become more inviting than the next, and pretty soon the WF bulk section becomes a for the consumer.

Similar to the experience of other stores, Christopher discussed many of the challenges to the store in providing and maintaining bulk. In contrast to smaller stores, however, the task of
cleaning bulk infrastructure is not as difficult because WF has enough labor to cover the number of bins to be cleaned at the frequency required to maintain safety and appearance. A more serious challenge is maintaining the quality and purity of organic products in the bulk section. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires strict organic standard guidelines that WF must follow by placing organic products in a separate stock room in order to not contaminate the organic with the inorganic products (University of Maryland, 2012). In addition, distributors must instruct their employees to take precautionary measures as to avoid contaminating the organic products. For example, gloves are to always be worn when handling non-organic products. Once an organic product is received at WF, each organic item is labeled, dated, and accounted for, along with its duration in the stockroom. The fact that WF is willing to put in the additional time and labor costs reflects the company’s recognition of the popularity and profit it gains from offering a range of organic products including fresh fruit and vegetables.

Another issue Christopher faces is hygiene in the bulk bins. He claims it is “the single biggest headache to monitor and remind people to use the scoopers,” an example of where bulk consumers must take some responsibility for creating what I term a respectful culture in the bulk section. On the other hand, many of WF’s bulk customers are highly committed to the ethos of waste reduction and they want to bring their own containers to use and reuse when shopping in the bulk section. There posed several problems for WF the primary being one of liability for the store in the unlucky event of a consumer getting ill from a product placed in their dirty jar. In addition, there are certain tare weights specific to Whole Food provided jars and bags. So bringing your own could potentially cost the consumer more money by mis-weighing the food product, and thus undermining a key attraction of the bulk section, reduced cost.
From the conversations I had with both Tom and Christopher, I believe that in order for a bulk section to work seamlessly on both sides, the retailer must make the space inviting and accessible, while the consumer has to be considerate of others and respect the honor system that comes with shopping in bulk. Christopher believes shopping in bulk will probably not take over as a standardized model for supermarkets due to the labor-intensive nature of bulk maintenance. As for now, the bulk section will continue to depend on staple departments such as the butcher and bakery. As noted above, its existence at WF is dependent primarily on the demand of a limited group of loyal consumers for a bulk option.

*Small-Scale Bulk: Adams Fairacre Farms and Red Hook Natural Foods*

In order to thoroughly examine the bulk food section in its entirety, it was necessary to consider small-scale grocers that also provide bulk food shopping as an option. I wanted to provide two different business models that incorporate bulk into their system: a small private owned business and a large scale commercialized business. In the continuum between these two extremes, what similarities or differences, if any, might affect their treatment of bulk? In contrast to Whole Foods and Honest Weight which sell all categories of foodstuffs in bulk, both Red Hook Natural Foods and Adam’s sell exclusive and “sexy” bulk foodstuffs such as spices, nuts and candy. Red Hook Natural Foods is a small sized grocer with a variety of home products, vitamins, produce, and bulk. It opened in 1998 in the center of the small town of Red Hook. Adams Fairacre Farms, which is both a grocer and garden center, with several locations throughout the Hudson River Valley, has a bulk section that does not sell perishable food items, but rather entices customers to shop in bulk through sweets.
Adam’s grew out of a farm founded by Ralph A. and Mary Rogers Adams in 1919. The ethos that has guided it throughout its century-long operation has been to provide customers with quality fresh produce, while at the same time maintaining and promoting the supportive and caring environment of a family-operated store. The current location in Kingston was established in 1981, and is both a grocer, selling conventional packaged products in conjunction with their bulk section, and a garden center, with several locations throughout the Hudson River Valley. During the cold seasons Adam’s feels like an indoor farmers’ market with their harvests of the month sprawled out in the produce section, and an extensive cheese and delicatessen section. On
Wednesday’s students get a twenty percent discount off of their purchases, and the general public receives a ten percent discount. This practice a characteristic of Adams, and it helps create and retain loyal customers. Adams has a reputation of being organic and affordable, with a diversity of options for their customers.

After I collected my data, I interviewed Elena, the manager of the bulk section, who has worked at Adam’s for four years, but recently acquired her current position. The bulk section in Adams is known as a sweet shop, selling exclusively candy, cookies and nuts. Chocolate chip cookie dough chunks, peanut butter cups, and chocolate covered almonds, to name a few, fill the scoop bins and wait patiently to be chosen out of all their other competitors.

Elena sounded satisfied with the amount of business the bulk shop receives on a daily basis. Her frequent customers consist of parents with their young children whose hope is that a bag of goodies will keep them entertained while they shop in other sections of the store. Elena embraces the idea that bulk appeals to the customer as a cheaper alternative to packaged and prepared foodstuffs. She admitted, for example, that Adam’s maintains an artificially low price for nuts as a pragmatic approach to attract and keep loyal customers. She continually surveys other stores to compare bulk nut prices and she has yet to encounter a store that sells their bulk nuts for less than Adam’s. Elena made the point that with monetary incentive, shoppers are more willing to try something new to benefit from greater monetary savings. Adam’s assumes that if customers know they can get more for their money they will do it and will overlook inconvenient obstacles presented by buying bulk. Elena finds that people who want to adopt a more environmentally responsible kind of lifestyle tend to really enjoy the bulk bins. She notes however that although they use paper bags a lot, she still has to order both plastic and paper bags; she can’t just have one or the other.
I was expecting Adam’s to have more of a developed bulk section, offering more than just nuts and candies. Yet the reason they are doing so well may be precisely because of their limited selection of foodstuffs. Based on Elena’s analysis of how often the bulk section is used, she refills popular items like chocolate covered nuts, and other sweets almost every week, is It’s apparent, however, that Elena approaches the bulk section at Adam’s exclusively from the perspective of handling sweets and nuts. She believes that a self-serve environment like bulk is friendlier to customers because individuals prefer to help themselves and she believes the bulk section is particularly consumer friendly in offering that control as an option, bit she is not particularly interested in expanding the range of products offered. She spoke about the bulk section like a strategy in a sports game, “when I was over in the bakery there’s the same sort of situation of self-serve where you can grab a donut or a bagel or whatever the case may be. And after you saw that self-serve situation come into play there you definitely saw the sales elevate.” Elena’s outlook on bulk and its future, at least for sweets, is an optimistic one.

Figure 12. Candy in bulk displayed in scoop bins at Adam’s.
Despite her overall positive perspective on bulk, Elena is aware of the fragility of the bulk lifestyle. She addresses questions about the challenges of the bulk section from a managerial perspective. She struggles with advertising certain food items that do not move, as well as the maintenance of the bins and the constant attention required to manage the upkeep of the infrastructure in a timely manner. Her doubts also center on the ability to maintain bulk in successful, mainstream supermarkets. One of the central reasons for her questioning the viability of expanding bulk in mainstream supermarkets is the continued lure of branding. She admits that even though she is aware of the economic and environmental benefits of shopping in bulk, she herself is very much attracted to advertising and the brand. She feels that sometimes branding matters and will overpower the ethical dimension in making some shopping decisions. She said, “You take a shot as a buyer, but if the product doesn’t move how do you draw attention to it?”

With minimal branding available to distract the consumer from the product itself, there is no attempt to compensate for Elena views as a shortcoming. Unlike the efforts at Honest Weight to expand labeling, the bulk department at Adam’s simply provides the name of the product and the ingredients.

I assumed the lack of advertising and branding would deter non-bulk shoppers from shopping in bulk, however at Adam’s this is not the case, instead non-bulk shoppers tend to be frequenters of the bulk section due to its sweet-oriented appeal. These are items that, although commonly found in more general bulk sections, appeal to the consumer as a luxury and treat. Timeless sweets that are addictive and nostalgic to our palettes, like the ones exclusively offered in the Adam’s bulk section, are also familiar to the non-bulk shopper, and this creates a more inviting space to shop than if only less “exciting” staples are offered to already dedicated bulk shoppers. As praised and valued as the Adam’s bulk section is, it is misleading to predict the
ultimate future success of bulk based on the experience of a store that only provides the most desired food items in bulk.


Red Hook Natural Foods functions on a typical small town local level. The store has existed for two decades and continues to thrive, although the bulk section does not sustain itself. It definitely is an additive and unique feature of the store and it continues to be popular based on requests and comments from consumers. The bulk section is tucked away in a corner of the store. It takes up wall space and is the size of two modest size bathrooms. Instead of the conventional scoop and gravity bulk bins found in the other stores I studied, Red Hook Natural Foods exclusively sells beans, herbs and spices from Frontier Natural Products Co-Op in refillable 32 to 64 oz. jars.

![Figure 13. Frontier Natural Products in refillable containers at Red Hook Natural Foods](image)
I spoke to Michael Uccellini, who has owned the store for twenty years, about his overall attitude towards the bulk section. “If [bulk] makes the customer happy, helps the environment and is economically sound, why not invest a little buck into a small section of the store for these benefits?” Michael, aware of the maintenance and resource efforts required for bulk infrastructure, wanted a bulk section that was manageable and easy to clean along with enough of a variety of foodstuffs to satisfy every customer. He is pragmatic when it comes to what sells and what doesn’t and he believes that everyone has to have beans, herbs, and spices so if they’re smart about it, they will begin to make their purchases in bulk quantities in his refillable jars, but he maintains an extensive variety in his other inventory in order to maintain the store’s identity as a food niche and satisfy all of his customers food shopping needs.

Michael believes in trusting the customers to gravitate towards the bulk section if they so desire because he believes so strongly in establishing relationship of trust with his customers in order to maintain their loyalty to the bulk section. He is very careful not to give any impression that customers are being manipulated in any way. From our conversation it appeared that Michael has only had good experiences in providing a bulk section. Like Elena at Adam’s, this is due in no small part to the support of loyal community members and the niche character of the bulk section of beans, spices and herbs that he provides.

Contrary to what I was expecting, there was no intentional effort placed on advertising the bulk section because for Michael, it is important that customers see it as just another, equally valid way of food shopping. Even if there is no explicitly articulated purpose for its bulk section, and that section is small and limited in product range, Red Hook Natural Foods still projects the identity of an outlet for those who wish to shop in bulk or live a ZWL. Red Hook Natural Foods was able to promote their bulk section by riding the second wave of the counterculture revival
through the ZWM (2002) and the ZWL (2013). Michael, receptive to customer feedback, gets compliments on the options provided in his spice and herb collection, rarely, however, do customers explicitly comment on the infrastructure itself or on sustainability issues in general. I argue that although the bulk section does not provide conventional bulk staples, but only niche herbs and spices, it is still an indicator that there is a demographic of people who are demanding stores to supply bulk shopping options.

**Moving Forward with Bulk**

Across the board, the biggest challenges in having a bulk section are: maintenance of the bulk the infrastructure, providing a variety of bulk food items, and advertising and education that targets each demographic. As much as I hoped sustainability and health was at the forefront of food purchasing decisions for consumers, I realize the monetary component is much more valuable to both consumers and producers. Both were more likely to become involved with a bulk section if a monetary benefit was involved. All four stores studied here exemplify extraordinary dedication to providing their customers with healthy, affordable, and sustainable food options but the ultimate controlling element in the viability of their bulk sections was economic. From these interviews I now recognize the necessary components of the bulk section that need to be improved in order for bulk food shopping to gain cultural acceptance. Maintaining a successful and appealing bulk section requires labor-intensive cleaning and maintenance that demands the allocation of a reasonable portion of a store’s resources. For many stores this is not a affordable option, therefore I can only conclude that the future spread of bulk sections to mainstream stores will proceed, at best, at a slow pace. It is unavoidable to
acknowledge that the bulk food sections in the U.S. will only exist as an additive in the supermarket, not the primary.

I came to realize that the bulk section, although it continues to exist and is even prominent in many health food stores, does not render itself as important as conventional packaged items, and consequently, must be carefully tracked and measured. The lack of research and literature on the bulk section directly reflects the secondary nature that the bulk section has in environmental discourse.

There is still a desire to keep the bulk section around, even though it has currently been shown to be by and large dormant in comparison to its conventional competitors in both small and large-scale American supermarkets. I was able to acquire a lot of information on what consumer and producers want to give and get, however no one I interviewed focused on the bulk infrastructure itself beyond a discussion of its routine maintenance. I expected them to address the material makeup of the bulk infrastructure itself. Is it as sustainable as it could be? Should the gravity and scoop bins be made out of recyclable glass, instead of plastic? Issues like these shift the attention to the specifics of design and away from the more general on focus on how bulk can reduce food waste. From what I have gathered from the literature and my case studies I conclude that for now bulk will stay in its position as secondary to its current economic superior, packaged conventional goods. But through interviews and participant observation I was able to understand the key to the success of bulk: pick a niche, stick with it and nurture a loyal customer base. As long as the niche consumers follow the ethos of Ethical Consumerism, continue to stay loyal to the ZWL and perfect the bulk shopping method, the bulk section will never disappear.
Conclusion

The purpose behind examining individual stores was to aid in getting a better, more detailed, nuanced idea of practical challenges facing that expansion and the potential for expanding bulk in the American supermarket. I examine bulk as an alternative to food and packaging waste because of the pressing issues like the progress of global warming and the eventual shortage of fossil fuels may force major changes in many of the food production and distributions systems that we now take for granted. My initial assumption towards the bulk section in modern American supermarkets was that if bulk were to successfully enter the mainstream as an efficient, convenient, albeit evolving form of grocery shopping, it could have a significant impact on the reduction of waste produced during all stages of the food supply chain.

What I found worth pursuing further, after I interviewed each store, was the development of a system to measure the progress of how often bulk sections are used by consumers, what items are frequented the most, and what can be done to overcome consumer resistance in the face of cultural preferences for convenience and branding in shopping style. Each bulk manager was able to provide me, for example, with their guess on popular products based on how often they have to refill that bulk or scoop bin. The collection of this kind of data could be systematized, shared and studied so that planning and education could be offered on an industry-wide basis to enhance the appeal and acceptability of bulk as a useful shopping alternative that is responsive to consumers’ needs. I now see that in order for the bulk section to continue its presence and potential expansion it is necessary to continue to have conventional-packaged alternatives and that the bulk section has a long way to go before being able to shoulder its burden of functioning as a profitable unit in the American supermarket. Time will tell whether or not it will ultimately end up being the savior of food distribution in the United States and indeed, the world.
**Conclusion - The Present and Future of Bulk**

In this study I examined bulk as a means of reducing both food and packaging waste. Pressing environmental issues like the progress of global warming and the eventual shortage of fossil fuels may force major changes in many of the food production and distributions systems that we now take for granted. Bulk may become not just an option but a necessity. My initial assumption about the bulk section in modern American supermarkets was that if bulk were to successfully enter the mainstream as an efficient, convenient, albeit evolving form of grocery shopping, it could have a significant impact on the reduction of waste produced during all stages of the food supply chain. While that assumption remains valid, in the course of my study it became evident that it was not likely that entry would happen anytime in the near future. Nevertheless it is equally evident that keeping bulk alive, albeit in a kind of compact, miniaturized form, was just important as its expansion.

A number of things could be done to aid in that preservation. After interviewing each store in this study, what I found worth pursuing further was the development of a system to measure the progress of how often bulk sections are used by consumers, what items are frequented the most, and what can be done to overcome consumer resistance in the face of cultural preferences for convenience and branding in shopping style. Each bulk manager was able to provide me, for example, with their guess on popular products based on how often they have to refill that bulk or scoop bin. The collection of this kind of data could be systematized, shared and studied so that planning and education could be offered on an industry-wide basis to enhance the appeal and acceptability of bulk as a useful shopping alternative that is responsive to consumers’ needs.
In addition, I see the integration of technology as playing a large role in helping to bulk to thrive on either a small or large scale, in a modernized form. The acquisition of the Whole Foods chain of supermarkets by the visionary mass marketing conglomerate Amazon.com could be a harbinger of many technological changes in the food distribution system, including a vastly expanded home delivery system. Bulk could well be one of the prime targets for a radical modernization. I suggest here some of the kinds of potential solutions that could aid and perhaps even transform bulk infrastructure:

**Containers**

All containers would be reusable and available at the store. There would be a reward system for returns of containers used for in-store purchases and a penalty system for those used for delivered purchases.

**App**

A sophisticated app for both smartphones and computers would be widely available for seamlessly integrating “pre-shopping” planning with the bulk section, something that Tom at Honest Weight correctly saw as critical to the success of bulk shopping. That app would designed to take advantage of barcodes for in-store use, as well as for direct delivery from warehouses,. Quantities could be pre-set so that orders could be either ready for pick-up or modified by customers who would fill the order by holding up their phone to readers at each bin, which would be dispensed into their container.

**Bin Diffusion**

Bulk is spread *throughout the store* as well as in a concentrated section: for example, where there are cereals there are also bulk bins where you can put cereal in reusable bags or
containers (cloth or cardboard) and actually see the cereal you are buying, along with the same kind of visual information, including nutritional and even branding information (pictures, etc.). A dedicated bulk section would continue to provide access to more obscure and alternative items (e.g. sprouted halved walnuts, organic spelt flour, etc.).

Checkout

Done by app with confirmation of payment included on a removable custom label automatically attached to the reusable container for each item at the bin.

Pre-planning

Items that are pre-planned are pre-loaded and available for dispensing from bins at the store when the customer arrives. Customer could modify pre-orders in the store. Alternatively, pre-planned orders would be available for direct delivery to the customer from warehouses. All items are delivered in reusable containers. Failure to send containers back results in penalties or blocking of account.

Tracking

Every item purchased is stored for five years in a database and available to customers for economic, health or meal-planning analysis.

The future of bulk is as yet unknown. I now see that the bulk section has a long way to go before being able to shoulder its burden of functioning as a profitable unit in the American supermarket and in order for it to maintain its presence and potential for expansion it is necessary to continue to have conventional-packaged alternatives. Time will tell, however whether or not bulk will ultimately end up being the savior of food distribution in the United States and indeed, the world.
Bibliography


Appendix

A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Bulk Managers

- When was your bulk section implemented?
- In your opinion what is the role of the bulk section in your store?
- How often would you say the bulk section is used in relation to the other sections of the store?
- What are the benefits of having a bulk section?
- What are the challenges of having a bulk section?
- What is the most frequently purchased food item?
- In your opinion what do you think needs to happen in order for customers to start shopping in bulk more frequently?
- Do you have any other thoughts, questions, or concerns?


C. Source: ibid
A week worth of frozen food waste headed for the compost.
E. Table 1. Qualities all four stores want to improve on

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F. Table 2. My assumptions vs. reality of case studies

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<td>• The bulk section is an additive to the store along with its quaint nostalgic presence</td>
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<td>Red Hook Natural Foods</td>
<td>• Intentional reason for a wide bulk section</td>
<td>• It was the initial intent of the store ethos therefore it continues to exists</td>
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</table>
| Honest Weight  | • Store is dependent upon its bulk section  
• Very attentive to the bulk section | • Bulk section is well developed, and constantly being improved  
• Only exists through the support of consumers and the packaged conventional goods section |
| Whole Foods    | • Bulk section exists as a result of their mission statement, it provides a green alternative | • Bulk section only exists through the consumer |
G. Table 3. Challenges of bulk

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H. Table 4. Benefits of Bulk

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<th>Sustainable for the environment</th>
<th>Unique store attraction</th>
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I. Table 5. Popular Bulk Products

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<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√ (Dried Mango)</td>
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Adam’s
Popular:
• Plain and chocolate covered nuts

Red Hook Natural Foods
Popular:
• Turmeric
• Cinnamon
• Black Teas

Honest Weight
Popular:
• Oats
• Organic Walnuts

Whole Foods
Popular:
• Dried mango
• Oats

Least Popular:
• Flour
J. Table 6. Case studies and associated literature

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