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MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT

Sleuthing for Snacks

Undercover shoppers try to cure their munchies in the produce department.

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For most people, snacking is a daily habit. We snack between meals; we snack to replace meals; we snack as a habit. And at the start of the pandemic (OK, perhaps late in the pandemic, too), we just snacked to counter the stress.

Too often, the produce industry has treated snacking as an impulse buy — but it's not any longer. We know we're going to snack, so we want to buy snacks that are more natural snacks with more diverse flavors and obvious health benefits.

Enter the produce department. What better snack than an apple (whole or in any variety of pre-cut, packaged options), or a handful of nuts or a banana? Why not snack on carrots or radishes or dried apricots? The variety is endless.

Here's why retailers need to up their produce snacking games: According to a 2018 Nielsen report, *The Power of Snacking*, core snacking shoppers shop 2.5 times a week — that's a lot of cash register rings. And in its 2022 *State of Consumers* report, NielsenIQ

says we're still looking to buy things for our at-home lives.

"Over the next 12 months people are expecting to spend more on groceries, utilities and at-home basics, while many signal they will spend less on discretionary items and out-of-home occasions," observes Nicole Corbett, director, global thought leadership, NielsenIQ, in a report summary. "It's clear that the prevailing mindset is of once again living with COVID-19 in 2022 and centered increasingly around the home."

To see how retailers are developing potential produce snack sales, we sent our cadre of writers and editors into stores across the U.S. Here's what we found:

MYSTERY SHOPPER 1: MIDWEST REGION

What's Next on Your List?

I visited a discount store that is part of an international chain midweek around 4 p.m. Overall, the cleanliness of the produce department was excellent, and the pricing was what

I expected of this type of a store: value-oriented. A big plus was the freshness of just about all the produce (with the exception of some sad-looking mushrooms), and an extensive organic section, too. There seemed to be plenty of most of their produce in stock, but it was slim pickings in the hot house cucumber selection.

To tackle our snack-sleuthing, I was trying to find new, healthy snack ideas for a child with Asperger's. I found some recipes on Tik Tok and Instagram, and was hoping to entice this student with new options, and I found an employee that was most helpful!

When I entered the produce department, I spied an employee and explained that I was in a hurry, and could she help me find a couple items quickly. She said, "Sure, what's first?" When I said I needed tomatillos, she said the store didn't have any, but asked what was next on my list. We proceeded down the list with her hustling me around the produce section, helping shop my list. She finally asked what I was making, and when I explained a green dip that I saw on Tik Tok, and cowboy caviar, a

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT



healthy snack, she said, "If you like them, you'll have to come back and give me the recipe!"

While the produce section didn't have everything I needed, and there wasn't a lot of signage with nutrition, origin, recipes or other consumer information, I found the customer service made up for it.

Lots of Fruit, But Too Much Was Moldy

Continuing my search for healthy snacks for a student with Asperger's, I visited a major national supermarket chain with great expectations. I left with great disappointments. There were many sections of the produce department that were completely empty, and I found moldy or overripe produce in several sections. I visited on a weekday, and I found a worker in produce, but he explained that he was only a "filler" working at night and that the produce workers worked during the day (it was 4:45 p.m.). Still, he was thoughtful and helped as best he could.

I asked if he could help me find endive, but he said, "I've never heard of that," then asked, "isn't that the white stuff that comes in a bag?" I replied it is more of a lettuce, then the two of us walked around the area looking

Overall, the cleanliness of the produce department was excellent, and the pricing was what I expected of this type of a store: value-oriented.

for it without success. I explained I needed it for a healthy snack recipe I found on Tik Tok and that I was trying to get an autistic student to try more healthy snacks, adding he only snacks on sweets. I then asked the employee if he knew if they sold tomatillos? He led me to them, but when I asked if he knew how to tell if they were ripe, he said "No, but I guess I need to get rid of this." (It was a moldy roma tomato.) I then asked if they had any hothouse cucumbers, because I was unable to find them. He said, "Not right now, I don't know why, but the other cucumbers are over here on the end." Before returning to refilling stock, he turned and told me, "When I was young, I liked sweet things too. Maybe he would like a Honeycrisp apple, they are sweet." To my disappointment

when I got to the end with the cucumbers, the entire section was littered with moldy cucumbers! It was overall a letdown, because this is a store known for quality foods.

That's Too Fancy for Here

I made one more stop in my snack shopping quest, this time to a supermarket that's part of a regional chain. I stopped by after work, about 5:30 p.m. on a Monday. The cleanliness and overall merchandising of the store's produce department were above average, and I was pleased to see most produce sections were fully stocked, with the exception of sweet potatoes. It also had an extensive bulk station of nuts and dried fruits, etc., within the produce department. I also saw fresh, store-made guacamole, salsa and other dips. Still, the overall selection was thin, and there was very little consumer information available on signs, etc.

I was unable to find a produce employee (the first employee I approached told me, "Due to COVID, produce employees leave at 3 p.m."), so I went in search of someone else, and found an employee who was more than willing to help me. I explained I was

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT

looking for specific items for several healthy snack recipes that I had found on Tik Tok and Instagram for my student who has Asperger's. I needed tomatillos and endive, and could she help me find them. She quickly walked me over to the tomatillos. She out pulled her phone and looked up endive and said, "Oh, that's too fancy for here." I asked if she knew how to tell which tomatillos were ripe, and she again turned to her phone to look up how to pick a good tomatillo, then helped me pick them out. I thanked her for her help, and before she returned to work she mentioned, "Oh, the mini peppers are healthy and a good deal right now at \$2," and pointed them out.

So even though I had to hunt down an employee, at least the effort was made to help, which I appreciated.

MYSTERY SHOPPER 2: NORTHEAST REGION

Beautiful Store, Untrained Staff

The store I visited is one in a group of local gourmet suburban supermarkets. It is well known for its produce department, which starts outside the door of the building with multiple displays. On my visit, the outdoor displays mixed staple items such as tomatoes and seasonal, including cherries, and deals, as in asparagus at 40% to 50% off.

Once through the door, a customer is already in the produce section, which proceeds along to a seafood counter in the back and is bordered by displays of tub nuts and dried fruit. Just beyond that, between the upfront area of check stands and the first grocery aisles, a cold case contains store-cut fruit cross-merchandised with products ranging from quiche to sponge cake dessert shells. A wet case well packed with greens lines the outer wall, followed by a large display of organics and a chill case with fruit such as peaches, mushrooms, garlic and finally store-cut vegetables.

The middle is a double-facing rack, which, front to back starting near the entrance, ranges from avocados to peppers and tomatoes on one side, and fruit such as oranges, apples and a variety of melons on the other. A similar second central rack offers potatoes and onions. The high priority the store gives to that case — with alternative colors brightening the onion and potato lineup — is evidence of the attention given to the produce department layout. There were also lots of Italian and Latino specialties woven into the department.

When I approached, the produce section

employee was filling displays with vegetables, and was a bit reluctant to engage with an older male customer who seemed to be a little new to cooking. I told the employee I was considering a stir fry, and asked if the store-cut vegetable items were fresh enough to produce a good meal. He hesitated, and when asked if the cut fruit was as fresh as the whole, he first said, "No." When asked to confirm the whole

vegetables were better, he just shrugged, said, "I don't know," and turned away.

I got better information when I asked a deli clerk if it was better to cook peppers in the oven or microwave them. The clerk patiently explained that the oven cooking was a bit better, but that they would cook up well in the microwave. Asked about cooking times, he said that the oven would take about 45

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minutes on medium heat and that the microwave would take 3-1/2 minutes. However, he added, after the three and a half minutes, the peppers should be removed and returned to the microwave in different positions for another three and a half minutes to ensure the middle got hot, but the sides didn't get overcooked.

Although my visit demonstrated the staff was well trained in its basic filling and maintaining duties, the deli department got much better training in customer engagement, or so it would seem.

Weird Layout, but Kudos to Staff

My second stop was a prominent East Coast supermarket chain operated in a middle-class suburban neighborhood. The produce section was relatively small for a full-size supermarket, but the building had an unusual configuration, I wondered if the supermarket had been remodeled in an

existing structure not originally designed for grocery store operations.

Still, the store was neatly contained. The produce department had a linear layout and one wall incorporated the cold and wet cases. The bulk displays ran perpendicular to the wall. The produce department was relatively small, but was well merchandised both in terms of the produce display and signage, which was evident but not overwhelming.

The produce assortment was large and diverse, especially for the size of the space. The fresh-cut lineup was extensive and included a lot of ethnic items and specialties, such as packaged fresh figs. The high point was an exotic fruit section at the head of the department that featured bananas, plantains and various Latino-specialty root vegetables. A small display of packaged dates formed a break between two larger bulk displays.

The produce section was so well stocked that there was barely a bare space even in the

The high point was an exotic fruit section at the head of the department that featured bananas, plantains and various Latino-specialty root vegetables.

clamshell salad section despite this being near dinner time. The store was well, if not heavily shopped, which made the neat condition even more surprising.

Or not. A young man was continually and rapidly restocking, returning to the back room and stocking some more. Any bare space was addressed in short order.

I approached the produce employee, asking where I might find kiwis. Ironically, that was one fruit that the store had sold through. However, he immediately volunteered to go

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT

look in the back for more. After just a few moments, he returned with a case of clamshell kiwi. He apologized and said that there was no more bulk fruit, only packaged. I told him the clamshell kiwi was more than I needed for a special occasion use for my family. He apologized again. I said it was OK, and said I would look to buy it somewhere else. Then I told him I was confused about how to serve kiwi. He patiently explained, although he knew I was going to purchase it elsewhere, that I should cut the fruit in half and use a spoon or some other appropriate tool, then scoop out either side. Then I could slice them to make a nice arrangement for the family and friends I told him were expected.

He was helpful, friendly and diligent. I left with a very good impression of the store's produce department.

MYSTERY SHOPPER 3: WEST COAST REGION

Short Staffed? Tell Me How You Really Feel

There's no shortage of grocery stores in my neighborhood, but the one I visited, part of a regional chain, is closer to the lower end of the spectrum.

While this store isn't normally a destination for quality produce, its selection is varied, and the produce department itself is well organized: There's one island devoted completely to apples, with grapes and bananas nearby, and then citrus fruits on another island right across. There's a third island with onions and potatoes, while the vegetables that need to be kept refrigerated, like broccoli and radishes, are along the wall. Everything is fairly easy to find, even if you've never been in the store before.

From my past experience, this location isn't known for its customer service, even on its best days. Since I was there in the middle of the Super Bowl, I wasn't sure anyone would even be there to help me, but I was wrong: It took only a minute or two for me to spot someone and make a beeline to him before he could leave.

"I'm having a Super Bowl party and we ran out of snacks," I explained. "I guess I didn't plan very well. I need something healthy that I can serve quickly."

His immediate reaction indicated he had little idea how to help, but he would do his best. His suggestions were both helpful (buy pre-cut fruit like watermelon and mango) and not so helpful (make a dip or a salad, both I told him I'd consider if I had more time).

Looking a bit lost, he surprisingly said he could go ask someone in the back for some suggestions: The whole store might be getting involved in my snack selection!

I told him that would be great and then picked up some of the fruit he mentioned, unsure if he was actually going to come back or not. When he did, he was armed with a few tepid suggestions: nuts, pretzel chips and hummus.

He pointed me in that direction and then, unprompted, said that our interaction had been unusual, because the store didn't typically have enough employees to help customers. I asked if he could because there were fewer customers thanks to the Super Bowl and he said, "Maybe," before reiterating that they're typically understaffed.

Some of the pre-cut fruit I bought didn't seem to be entirely ripe yet, and probably could have used a little more time.

I thanked him again before putting the hummus in my cart, amused that this employee had told me exactly what he thought of the store where he worked.

And the downside? Some of the pre-cut fruit I bought didn't seem to be entirely ripe yet, and probably could have used a little more time. So much for my healthy Super Bowl snacking!

MYSTERY SHOPPER 4: UPPER MIDWEST REGION

Revamped Department; Helpful Employee

I decided to check out a store I have visited only occasionally, when I'm in the neighborhood and need to pick up a few things. It had changed names last fall to one that suggests a fresher, more modern feel and I was curious to see how it differed from the previous offering. This specific brand is regional, but it's a banner of a larger, national chain.

The overall store design has you enter through one door and exit through another, which now means the first view is the newly revamped produce and floral department. The colorful explosion of flowers, balloons and produce that greeted me was a surprise and created a happy feeling. Perhaps it helped that

it was a grey winter day.

Featuring an open feel and brighter lighting, it was evident that the produce department was significantly larger than in the past. The fruit and vegetable displays were well stocked with the most colorful offerings presented in the center section; the pre-cut options, herbs and more basic vegetables were located in refrigerated displays along the walls. In general, the area was clean and laid out logically, making it easy to find things. A few large murals reflecting scenes of fields and farming rounded out the inviting atmosphere.

Identifying an employee was a bit of a challenge, because it appears they wear their street clothes — no common shirts or colors — and have meager nametags. After a few minutes, I flagged down a young man — "Excuse me, do you work here?" He stopped in mid-stride with a pleasant, "Yes."

"I'm not familiar with this store, could you tell me where I would find the ginger?" I asked. He offered precise directions. Then I added, "I'm actually looking for more healthy snacking options — beyond carrot sticks."

"I'm trying to do that, too," he responded, with a smile.

"So, do you have any advice or ideas?" I inquired.

That was all he needed to offer a range of excellent ideas, starting with snap peas, cherry tomatoes, avocados — "for toast and guac" — and much to my surprise — roasted Brussels sprouts. "The other day, I cut Brussels sprouts in half, drizzled some olive oil, sprinkled on a spice mixture and roasted them," he relayed. "They were great — easy to snack on; kinda like popcorn."

He continued, walking me through various areas of the department, pointing out which grapes looked fresher, expiration dates, price discounts, his preferred apple varieties and which are sweeter or crunchier. Honestly, I was stunned by his enthusiasm, friendliness and the time he spent with me. I discovered that he is a college student and had only worked at the store for a couple of weeks, which might explain some of his enthusiasm. He eventually asked if I needed help with anything else and went off to get some produce to restock the area, but he stopped by one more time to tell me about the pistachios that were on sale and some veggie chips that his friend likes, both of which were displayed within the produce department.

What a wonderful experience, but I also don't expect it to be easily replicated and brief interactions with other store employees

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT

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The Res Moines Register



One mystery shopper was disappointed in the leafy green offering in the produce department.

suggest that might be the case. I feel compelled to comment that, while the store's produce department is enough to make me return, the rest of the store was a disappointment. It hadn't changed from the previous iteration and even seemed to take a step backward in terms of organization, selection and general appearance.

I visited on a weekday afternoon and was surprised at the dozen or so shoppers in the produce department that included college students, young families and retirees. The prices were reasonable and offered a range of options, including impressive specials. It's also worth noting that the store is situated between a high-end local grocery store and a high-end national chain, both of which are less than a mile away and excel in their fruit and vegetable offerings.

MYSTERY SHOPPER 5: PACIFIC NORTHWEST REGION

Crowded Store, but Helpful Associate

After walking through the sliding doors of this Washington-based supermarket chain (which is a subsidiary of a large, national chain), I was immediately engulfed in the freshly stocked produce section, glistening with an abundance of greens and displays stacked high with fruits. Though this retailer carries a small selection of toiletries and kitchen utensils, it is well known for the wide selection of fresh produce, in-store deli and bakery goods, along with a broad selection of pre-packaged foods.

For a Monday night, the store was bustling with a sea of masked shoppers completing their weekly grocery hauls, while attempting

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT



A mystery shopper found empty shelves at a grocery chain.

to maneuver their carts through the narrow aisles. Despite the rather hectic environment, the store associates calmly monitored the floor, stocking shelves and taking inventory.

I walked through a maze of carts and reusable grocery bags and approached a middle-aged store associate price checking a bundle of asparagus. “Can I ask you a quick question?” I said timidly. The associate quickly turned toward me, placing his pricing device atop a flat rolling cart. “Sure thing! What can I help you with?” he exclaimed with a cheerful tone. Though he was wearing a mask, I could tell he had a smile on his face.

“What kind of healthy snacks would you suggest for a hike? I’m pretty active, and am looking for something filling I can bring with me.” The associate turned toward the open refrigerated shelves of leafy greens, his eyes scanning the produce before picking up a small bag of snow peas. “These are my go-to,” he said, handing me the bag. “They stay pretty well in a backpack and taste good with ranch dressing.” The associate’s friendly demeanor and willingness to help felt refreshing, given the frenetic energy of the store.

“Do you have any other snack suggestions that would keep well without refrigeration?” I asked. The associate took a minute to think before pointing to the bags of clementines displayed across from us. “I’ve packed these before. They last great, even on warm days.”

With the aisle becoming increasingly busy, I thanked the associate for his time and proceeded to the self checkout stations near the front of the store.

Lots of Empty Shelves

I also visited a grocery chain, known for its unique selection of private label products. Upon entering, my eyes were drawn to the bare shelves. Once filled with fresh fruits, veggies and pre-packaged meals, the wall of produce contained just a handful of bagged veggies.

As a semi-regular shopper at this establishment, the lack of inventory has caused me to look elsewhere for produce, despite higher prices. Nonetheless, I made my way to the fruit display located in the middle of the store.

On this Tuesday afternoon, the grocery store was as empty as the shelves. As I walked to the display, an employee that looked to be around college age, approached me. “Do you need help finding anything?” she asked, looking toward the barren assortment of apples and berries.

“I’m making a fruit salad as part of my weekly meal prep, but see you’re out of navel oranges. Would blood oranges be a good alternative?” The employee let out a nervous chuckle. “That’s a good question! I’m not a citrus aficionado, but I think blood oranges are more tangy in taste.”

I thanked the employee for her suggestion as I placed the orange in my bag. Although she seemed unsure of her answer, I appreciated her attentiveness. “Do you have any other questions?” she asked, while adjusting one of the shelf labels. I glanced toward the wavering supply of veggies trying to see what options I had left.

“I see you’re a bit picked over, but what kind of veggies do you suggest for someone looking to get more fiber? I’m looking for something I can add as a side to my pre-made meals.” The employee’s face immediately lit up, as if she’d been waiting for someone to ask. “Follow me!” she said, motioning toward the produce shelves where she grabbed one of the last bags of broccoli. “You have to try this seasoned with nutritional yeast. Even if you’re not vegan and want to use cheese, it’s amazing and has a lot of fiber.”

As she handed me the bag of broccoli, another shopper approached her to ask a question. Despite the store’s ongoing supply issues, I was able to leave with a new recipe and great experience.

Lots of Produce, But Few Employees

For my third stop, I shopped at an up-scale multinational supermarket chain known for its wide range of organic products. This was my first time visiting this chain, as the prices are relatively higher than other grocers in my area.

MYSTERY SHOPPER REPORT

As we entered through the sliding doors, I was taken aback by the size of the produce section, as it seemed to take up half of the store. The shelves were well stocked with goods that were organized in an intuitive and aesthetically pleasing design. The absence of pre-packaged fruits and vegetables displayed on the shelves made me feel as if I was at a farmers market, rather than a grocery store chain. Though busy for a weekday, the wide aisles allowed for a comfortable shopping experience.

I approached a produce employee, and told him I was prepping for Super Bowl snacks, and did he have any suggestions for snacks outside of greasy, fatty choices. His brusque answer: “Good luck with that!” All righty, then.

As I approached the broad selection of locally grown fruits, an employee restocking bananas turned to me. “Are you finding everything OK?” she asked, flashing a smile through her mask.

“Yes, I’m looking to get some apples, but want to cut back on my sugar intake. Do you know what kind has the least amount of sugar?” The employee looked puzzled, calling over an employee through her walkie talkie. “John is a produce expert, I bet he would know!” Moments later, another store associate approached us.

I re-stated my question to John. “You’re looking for Granny Smith apples,” he said, directing me to the nearby stand piled high with an assortment of fresh fruit. “These go well with sunflower butter, if you’re a fan.” Before I could ask him where I could find the nut butters, John had walked away to continue his task at the back of the store.

Unfamiliar with the store’s layout, I proceeded to search the aisles for another associate to help me find the product. Fifteen minutes later with no luck, it appeared that the store, like many, was severely understaffed. Thankfully, I was able to find the employee’s suggested sunflower butter on my own and proceeded to get into line.



Moldy cucumbers created a negative experience at one grocery store for a mystery shopper.

MYSTERY SHOPPER 6: EAST CENTRAL FLORIDA

‘Good Luck With That!’

On the morning of Super Bowl Sunday, I bravely went to a regional grocery chain in search of healthy snacks for the Big Game. This particular chain has had a competitive edge with buy-one, get-one items, but recently has had strict competition from another major chain and a bargain chain.

Overall, the produce department was clean and well-stocked, but with only an average breadth of product selections and minimal (to none) signage with consumer education or tips, such as recipes. On the down side, the prices seemed at least 30% higher than the bargain chain and 10% higher than the other local, comparable chain store. On the up side, there was a beautiful display of more exotic tropical fruits on an endcap.

I approached a produce employee, and told him I was prepping for Super Bowl snacks, and did he have any suggestions for snacks outside of greasy, fatty choices. His brusque answer: “Good luck with that!” All righty, then.

And that was all the help I was going to get from him, so I finished my snack sleuthing on my own.

MYSTERY SHOPPER 7: SOUTH CENTRAL REGION

Excellent Produce, Poor Timing

Overall, the store I went to — part of a

major, national chain — presents its products, and its produce, in a very clean and appealing manner. It is in one of the more affluent neighborhoods in a major metropolitan area and has a unique outdoor and indoor appearance. The produce department is somewhat small, and the store itself is smaller compared to other similar stores I’ve shopped at, but still offers a wide variety of produce options.

The produce area is clean, organized and easily navigated. The signage is clear to find this area, however it is located far from the entrance and tucked behind the floral department. The biggest issue with the produce department at this location was the lack of inventory on this Thursday evening. The shelves had signs for different products, but were all either empty or the items were bruised or unappealing.

“What kind of veggies do you suggest for someone looking to get more fiber?” The employee’s face immediately lit up, as if she’d been waiting for someone to ask. “Follow me!” she said, motioning toward the produce shelves where she grabbed one of the last bags of broccoli.

My favorite item to buy from the produce department is the pre-cut pineapple. The item is always hit or miss and on this particular occasion, they were fully out of this item. This store also has a wide variety of dips, salsas and hummus, but when checking some of them, they were expired.

The staff member I interacted with was very friendly when approached, but I was never personally approached by a staff member. There was only one person in the produce department who was stocking items. I asked about certain items and was told that the time of evening was affecting the options (which was understandable, as it was toward the end of the day).

Overall, the staff member was knowledgeable about the department. The store itself is inviting and for, the most part, a good choice for produce options.

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