

Manhattan Can Now Stock Up for the Long Haul



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

By GUY TREBAY
Published: December 8, 2009

SOMEWHERE in my DNA, and presumably in that of a certain part of the adult population of Manhattan, lurks a hoarder gene. This gene marks us as part of a minority that finds nothing at all strange in the act of stockpiling cleaning supplies, say, or else salted cashews or Bayer aspirin in institutional quantities.

I recognize that not everyone is as bewitched as I am by a four-pack of Fantastik. The only person I ever met who got a bigger charge than I do out of buying Bounty paper towels in the 12-roll size is a man I once interviewed who ran private sex parties from an East Village loft. When a Kmart opened on Astor Place, this man was close to ecstatic, although I suppose he was ecstatic a lot of the time.

Presumably he would be even more charged up to learn that Manhattan's first ever Costco wholesale club opened last month in East Harlem, thus making our island officially a suburb of Hicksville.

As it happens, there was, among the thousands of constantly changing items available last week at Costco, a display of lubricated Trojan condoms in a 40-unit package (\$9.99). And so, for all I know, that sex-club guy has switched careers and is now doing target marketing for big-box chains.

Costco, as most of us are already aware, is a wholesale-warehouse club chain, among the 10 largest retailers in the country and the world. The apparent contradiction in a business being termed

simultaneously a wholesale club and a mass retailer is at the heart of the incredible success Costco has enjoyed since its founding in 1983. There are now more than 560 Costco locations in the United States, and what all of them provide is the benefit of buying Sony Bravias, Ecko sweatshirts, Bachman pretzels, Pepperidge Farm Goldfish, Spam and Vienna sausages, Uggs and vacuum-packed snack trays priced affordably because they are acquired in bulk.

Limited variety and high volume equal savings, the theory goes, and the operative delusion is that a consumer is paying wholesale for what are in fact retail goods exposed to supersizing gamma rays.

Scale is the key at Costco, where the shopping carts are the size of a Mini Cooper; where butter is sold in four-pound bricks (\$6.59); and where pies (pumpkin, \$5.99; apple, \$8.99) are the diameter of cartwheels and come in plastic tubs the size of a kiddie pool. A box of Kellogg's Raisin Bran (\$6.89 for 76.5 ounces) is so enormous that, with a little ingenuity, one could add a handle to the empty box and convert it to a carry-on bag. You could, that is, if you think it would fit in the overhead bin.

There is an annual fee for induction into the wonderful world of savings and 50-pound bags of rice, a fact I learned when I joined a long line stretching along 117th Street on opening day in mid-November.

Laboriously inching along behind an Ellis Island array of New Yorkers yearning to be free of supermarket gouging, I thought that perhaps every single person who had waited the 15 years it took the developer David Blumenfeld to raze the old Washburn Wire factory and replace it with a big-box store was on hand. Still, it was a glorious day for what David Dinkins used to call the gorgeous mosaic. And the palpable excitement on line made it hard to remember why Mr. Blumenfeld's plan had ever caused so much stir.

Two decades ago both the local community board and Jane Jacobs adherents like me had all griped in chorus that the last thing the city needed was a \$500 million, 485,000-square-foot shopping complex (Target, Best Buy and Marshalls will join Costco next spring). Weren't there already plenty of mom-and-pop stores around to rip off New Yorkers for a gallon of milk?

Then the Giuliani years happened, and the early Bloomberg ones and pseudo-malls popped up everywhere and major avenues were converted into picnic grounds and the parks became so much surplus square footage to be leased to dreadful seasonal crafts fairs and Times Square was finally scoured of the final vestiges of delirious sleaze and my city, to paraphrase Chrissie Hynde, was finally gone.

In the name of bulk buying in a recession-era economy, I accept this. Or I did that day as harried but eager Costco employees working the line instructed me that, by doubling the basic membership charge of \$50, I could achieve elite status and thus receive regular mailers containing coupons for extra savings and an elaborately calculated refund at the end of the year.

This might make sense if I were Octomom and really needed Huggies in the 500-count box. But I know my limits, and that is crucial when you shop at Costco. Otherwise you may find that, in no time at all, your automobile-size cart is filled with stuff that would barely fit in the automobile it turns out you do not own.

I BOUGHT two heavyweight plastic Costco shopping bags suitable for lugging boulders, and was careful to fill them with no more cleaning supplies and Kleenex products than could be hoisted home on the Lexington Avenue bus. Costco, it probably goes without saying, does not deliver (although it does maintain a contract with Discovery cabs, whose drivers meet laden shoppers at the parking garage).

Unlike many of my fellow shoppers that day, I forgot to bring a calculator. Unlike Asta Hansen, a shopper whose apartment in upper Manhattan is equidistant from the new East Harlem Costco and the one where she usually shops across the bridge in New Jersey, I had no baseline for price comparisons. ("Nuts are always a bargain," Ms. Hansen told me. "Nuts and sweat socks.")

Still, by my estimate, and at an ordinary rate of consumption, the supply of Soft Scrub With Bleach Cleanser (four for \$9.99) I picked up should carry me through to the end of my days.

COSTCO 517 East 117th Street; (212) 896-5873.

BIG BOX Costco may not be the first, but it is the biggest big-box store in Manhattan. Next spring, when additional tenants like Target and Marshalls open in the mammoth new East Harlem building, it will be the definitive event in the malling of Manhattan.

BIG CHEESE There are savings across the range of consumer goods, Burberry bags to bananas. The best may be on products packaged under the company's Kirkland label: 2.5 pounds of cashews, for instance, cost \$12.49; at a grocery near me, an eight-ounce tub costs \$10. Costco's cheese and meat selections, too, are notably good. And because you can't walk 20 feet without bumping into a food demonstrator offering free samples, you run no risk of starving a you shop.

BIG LETDOWN Depending on one's view of tube socks and sweat pants (Timberland fleece sweatshirt, \$29.99), apparel can be considered the weak link in Costco's impressive supply chain. Some items are downright scary. On a hang tag attached to a Jona Michelle holiday dress for girls, with a black satin bodice and a metallic miniskirt overlaid with sequins and embroidered vines, are these words: "I'm a Tea Dress." That is useful to know if you happen to be planning a holiday tea with the ladies from an Albanian bordello.