

Costco: A World Of Big Buys

By Pamela Gerhardt
Special to The Washington Post
Monday, April 12, 2004; Page C10

My dear friend initiated me into the Cult of Costco when he gave me a one-year membership to the warehouse-club superstore as a gift. He held up the nearly foot-long white envelope and said, "Just maybe you might go there a few times a year?"

All I could think was, *Gee. Even the membership envelope is super-sized.*

Nothing at Costco is small. And therein lies my problem.

An overview for those not yet indoctrinated: Picture a Home Depot-like, cavernous barn stuffed with recent DVD releases, five-gallon cans of green beans, a heap of Calvin Klein drawstring cotton slacks, solid oak mission-style rockers and five-pound packages of fresh tilapia. All at (alleged) wholesale prices.

Even if you do save a few cents on the gallon of marinated mozzarella balls, you must face the hard truth not long after you get home: All that stuff needs to go somewhere -- either in storage or your mouth.

After my first trip, I was confronted by a two-pound carton of smoked whitefish salad my husband had gleefully purchased. When we got home we discovered it was more mayo than fish. More than 20 grams of fat in a small serving. I wasn't having any of that. Now what? The milk, the butter, everything in the refrigerator began to smell like a Norwegian smokehouse. My husband, a Lutheran Midwesterner descended from poor Swedish farmers (Read: waste not, want not), dutifully smeared the stuff on bread and crackers, chewing methodically, swallowing hard, and tried his best to put a dent in the whole fatty affair. My kids swooned and ran for cover every time someone opened the fridge. On Day 5, panic set in. We rushed to the grocery store and purchased two boxes of baking soda.

After a recent barbecue, the buddy who gave me the membership tried to hand off to guests American cheese in chunks the size of bricks. "Please," he pleaded and laughed as guests headed for the door empty-handed. "We needed only a few slices when my 5-year-old niece came over and wanted a grilled cheese sandwich."

Day 7. We fretted, leaving cryptic messages for each other at work. "My face smells like a pier," my husband said into the machine. Then it hit us. Why not throw a party? Dump the whitefish into a crystal serving bowl and circle it with toasted bagels. Boil up that five-pound bag of pot stickers crystallizing with ice in the freezer since December. Use the 500-count box of heavy-duty plastic forks.

Voilà -- Party by Costco! At any given time in the world (Costco, based in suburban Seattle, has stores in seven countries, 300 in the United States), hundreds of households are simultaneously serving identical plates of baked brie and marinated, roasted pork loin. Costco is to home entertaining what Target is to fashion -- McMaolist in its wide-scale sameness.

The quagmire of abundance begins before you get home. Big parking lot. Big building. Big carts. And -- dare I say? -- big customers.

Once you recover from the scale of things, other anxieties arise. For one, if you place a 24-count package of apricot pastries next to the \$100 leather jacket in your cart, you risk crossover soiling. It just seems wrong.

And as with any cult, you can't just show up at the store. Someone must "witness" the event with you and show you the ropes. Shrouded in mystery and innuendo, the rules governing the rituals are not readily posted or made public. *You just have to know*. Get the cart from outside before you enter; flash your membership card to the stoical bouncer at the barn-size sliding-glass-door entrance. After shopping, make your way toward the front of the store and ease your overstuffed, boat-size cart into the sea of other shoppers, who are making impromptu lines in front of checkout people who *never say a word*.

Big stuff stays in the cart. Little stuff goes on the conveyor belt. You look in your cart and panic. Nothing in front of you really constitutes *small*.

Ducking beneath a customer's live, six-foot palm tree, you watch members "bag" their own purchases by stuffing items into empty Tropicana cases. You follow suit, eyeball the exit and exhale. But it's not over yet. Another bouncer must see your receipt (which you naively crumpled into your jeans pocket). She searches your cart, scans your facial expression like airport security, grunts and passes you through.

Since getting the membership, I've been there twice. I don't know if I will renew it, but I still love my friend who initiated me and I'm grateful for the gift. Costco, if nothing else, certainly gives us something to talk -- and laugh -- about.

One Costco devotee, a neighbor, recently confessed with sadness as she lugged a 20-pound bag of rice out of her cupboard, "I use more than I need and throw out the leftovers because I know I can get more so cheaply. It's wrong, somehow."

As for the whitefish salad, in the end, we nixed the party idea. The fish was too old. Someone could get sick. We caved. We joined the ranks of other red-blooded members of the high church of American waste and consumerism.

We dumped it into the trash.

And I swear I heard a voice, like a message from above, distant, persistent, a sacred mantra that once held universal appeal and wisdom. Was it my mother speaking? She was saying something . . .

About children.

Starving.

In China.

Boy. Those were the days.

© 2004 The Washington Post Company