

# Love Among the Onions

Romance, the shopper's way. By Lawrence Savell

I used to think that a supermarket was a place specifically designed to satisfy my digestive desires. I have since come to the realization, however, that what a supermarket really offers is the opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex.

When you think about it, a supermarket offers all the advantages and none of the disadvantages of the customary settings where people meet. Unlike a singles bar, there is no built-in assumption that one is there to find someone; one can always pretend that he or she actually came to buy food. And, unlike a health club or disco, few supermarkets impose membership fees or cover charges; nevertheless, shoppers can readily get their fill of strenuous physical activity pushing a cart overloaded with laundry detergent and gallon jugs of mineral water.

Historians report that, contrary to common misconceptions, the supermarket was originally conceived as a place to meet potential partners. Indeed, early records suggest that "A&P" was actually an abbreviation for "Available and Prowling." The supermarket provided a natural surrounding for mating, with the greenery of the produce section suggesting a modern-day Garden of Eden waiting for its next couple of innocents. Many a walk down the aisle, no doubt, began with a walk down the grocery aisle.

Sociologists and psychologists have studied this phenomenon for many years. In the 1950's, the ground-breaking research team of Masters and Swanson published their study, detailing courting behavior observed in a Brooklyn grocery store. In the 1960's and 1970's, the popular press joined the act with the release of the best-sellers *Deliveries* (set in a backwoods general store), the effervescent *Looking for Mister Bubble* and the controversial *Fear of Frying*.

These writers agreed that a supermarket encourages a "natural selection" among qualified dating candidates. As it is a place where food is sold, a male immediately increases the odds that any woman he meets there has some idea of where her kitchen is located. Conversely, a man who shops in a supermarket

sends a clear message to his female counterparts: He can display his tenderness by the way he gingerly loads light-bulbs into his cart. He can demonstrate that he is not swayed by showiness or superficiality by selecting generic products over brands with flashy packaging. And he can display his sense of loyalty by, without hesitation, consistently selecting one manufacturer's products from among a bevy of competitors without callously assessing each candidate's price per ounce or fat content.

The supermarket setting provides additional insight into the people who shop there through scrutiny of the contents of their carts. For example, a woman whose wagon contains pasta, tomatoes, soup,



flour and cocoa mix is likely to be a warm, friendly person. By contrast, someone whose cart is filled with vinegar, Raid, witch hazel, boot polish and industrial-strength antiperspirant probably isn't a life-of-the-party type. A cart bearing skim milk and bran flakes suggests a person who is concerned about health and fitness. (By contrast, a cart loaded with Mallomars, Yoo-Hoo and Haagen-Dazs suggests someone with a view of the priorities of life more in tune with mine.)

In addition, careful review of cart contents can quickly provide critical information regarding the availability of its "push-

er." A woman whose cart contains such items as after-shave lotion and Cruex is either involved with someone or has an hormonal imbalance. Conversely, a man whose cart is filled with cosmetic puffs, cold cream and Midol *quite possibly* has a girlfriend or wife.

At checkout time, a male can impress female shoppers with his wealth, as, nowadays, a person with a fully-loaded cart and the apparent intention to pay for its contents is obviously a man of means. He can then build upon the sense of awe he has engendered and prove his virility by announcing that he will carry his purchases home himself, forsaking delivery service. In many cases, this will lead to an opportunity for him to demonstrate his humanity, as the sharp pain of his new hernia will reveal to those around him his ability to express strong emotion.

Approaching someone in a supermarket can be a very natural process. For example, if you see an announcement that a particular item is subject to a "two-for-one" sale, grab one, find someone else with one of that same item and offer to split the savings. Be on the lookout for items in other people's carts that would go well with those in yours, such as peanut butter and jelly, coffee and cream or ice cream and *anything*.

The movements of two lovers meeting for the first time in a supermarket can verge on the poetic. Such a scene recently occurred late one night in a Food Emporium. Their carts had run into each other accidentally, spilling their contents. Their eyes met. He grasped her hand lotion. She reached out for his Head and Shoulders. He gently touched her facial tissues. She gave him his Pledge.

In sum, if you are in the market for a significant other, check out your local supermarket. In an era when traditional meeting spots have been shunned, the corner grocery store has risen to the forefront as the place to find true love. And, someday, you and your loved one can return to the place where you first met, where the two of you romantically traced your initials for posterity on the door of the frozen food case.

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