

Many things one does on a weekly basis is grocery shopping. It can be a simple task if you exclude the other shoppers around you. However, learning to find items in a new grocery store, in an entirely new country, can often be a small struggle, even more so when you are living in a country who spells yogurt with an h.

My first shopping experience here was nothing short of harrowing, stressful, and breath taking, but not in the “oh this is so beautiful” kinda breathtaking way. I’m talking in the, “Have I lost my ever living mind, and will I survive this!” gasping for air and wondering if, perhaps, you are having a full blown panic attack kind of way.

You see, you take a normal shopping list to the store and you figure you’ll be all set, right? Wrong. Things just aren’t located in their proper places. I mean who looks for eggs down the bread aisle? Isn’t that a health code violation of some sort to store eggs on the shelf instead of the fridge? I mean, I can actually see dried caked on egg yolk on the shelves! Are you sure the eggs are really safe and food worthy?

Seriously, I considered never buying eggs again when we moved here, but then it became normal and we now consume eggs regularly. So much so that I no longer blink or think twice when I see them on the shop shelves instead of in the refrigerator section.

Then there’s broth. Why isn’t the broth down the same aisle as the soups? Doesn’t this make logical sense? Shouldn’t they be in their own little section in this area? I can find every kind of soup known to mankind from pumpkin to corn but can I find broth? No. I’m about to scrap broth and change whatever flimsy meal needed it when I decide I’ll just ask where the broth is.

It’s down the gravy aisle. They say this with every mark of confidence as if that’s 100% normal. Excuse me? Down the gravy aisle? May I ask why? That’s just where they’ve always kept it so it makes sense. Do you use broth to make gravy with? Of course not they use the drippings from their lamb roasts. Don’t be silly you wouldn’t use broth for gravy.

Okay fine, I can accept that, but why on earth is the broth down there then? At this point the store employee had already walked away leaving me wondering exactly which aisle contained

gravy and wondering if the gravy was canned or not. Not being a fan of gravy I was highly concerned.

I find the broth, down the gravy aisle. The gravy is mostly boxes of powdered mix that require water. Which still left me wondering why on earth the broth was down that aisle. The mystery remains.

I manage to survive the canned goods with only a few more back tracks. I contemplate what treacle is and if it will be as good as molasses is. I decide I'll try it and deal with the consequences, good or bad, later. I'm distressed because they don't sell Jiff peanut butter and their natural peanut butter has no nutty taste to it. I'm undecided on what to do.

I give up and decide I'll search out a health food store later, but then I realize the kids can't survive without peanut butter for another 24 hours and I grab something that boasts a roasted peanut taste and that has a very low sugar reading on the back. It turns out to be a mistake, but I won't know this for a few more hours so the jar of peanut butter sits happily in my trolley.

I make it to the dairy section and begin to wonder why no one told the person who made the yogurt sign that they spelled it wrong. I'm standing there staring at it when a few people ask if I need help. I realize I must look as though I don't know how to read. I tell them no and start to examine the yogurt.

My husband turns up. I point out the sign with a bit of a giggle. He looks at it and shrugs. I figure he's far more polite than I am. Then I realize that half the pots of yogurt on the shelf are spelled with an H too.

My word is it a country wide miss spelling?! I point it out again and then my husband laughs. No, it's not spelled wrong, it's suppose to have an H in it. Don't be daft, in all the years I failed my spelling tests it was never because I forgot to put an h in yogurt. Of course not, apparently when yogurt got to America the h had fallen off. This is what happens when you store your eggs on the shelf instead of in the dairy section, isn't it?!

We move on to the milk department. There are so many milks to choose from that I decide to read the labels. Each milk takes the time to actually boast exactly how much milk fat is in its container. Wow, now that's a new one. Where I come from they boast how little fat is in each one. We pick out milk and I'm struck by a new sense of awe as I see that the cream is boasting fat contents too. 'No less than 18% fat!'

There's cream so thick that when you tip the container over it doesn't move. Cream comes in all shapes and sizes here. Thickened, sweetened, and evened whipped. But you won't find cool-whip on the shelf. Nor will you find a vast variety of creams in cans to spray either. I realize that cream is revered here. It's on a pedestal far above other dairy products. Clearly eggs are at the bottom of that totem pole, the poor lowly things.

Next we hit the meat department. My word did I just see kangaroo meat for sale? I can't decide if I'm grossed out or not. There's more meat for dogs on display than any dog I've ever owned has had the pleasure of smelling. For human's there's mince with three different levels of fat content to them. Pork chops, chicken, and more sausages than you can imagine. And it all stinks. I mean really stinks- like raw meat. I suddenly feel weak and nauseated. I cover my mouth and my nose and attempt to push the shopping cart with my foot.

I discover that all four wheels on the shopping cart can turn in a 360 degree motion. Amazing. If only the stupid cart would go forward instead of sideways. I run into three customers who back away when they see my mouth and nose covered. They presume I have some deadly illness.

I uncover my face long enough to grab the cart and skip the entire meat department. I go straight for the veggies. My husband picks out a few pieces of meat and returns with them wrapped in brown paper.

"Why is it wrapped in brown?"

"What color did you want it to be?"

"I mean, why is it wrapped up?"

"That's just what the butcher does."

"The butcher, you went to the butchers?"

Yes, as it turns out most people buy their meat directly from the butcher, or what we might normally call the deli. Ok, so how does that smell? Like raw meat. Only, you get to see them chopping and cutting the meat and they look at you with great concern when you gasp for air outside their door, and dash in to give them your order before darting back out the door for more fresh air again. They can't decide if they should laugh at your behavior or offer to help you.

Produce picking isn't any easier. Did you know there are at least 100 different varieties of potatoes to choose from? I mean, I knew that, but I've never had that choice before. You normally go into the supermarket and you pick what they have which is either red potatoes or Idaho potatoes. Now I have to choose between potatoes with names like Dutch Cream, Kennenbeck, Midnight, Kipfler, King Edward, Pink Eye, Bintje and so on. Then you decide if you want potatoes that are fully washed, lightly brushed or still covered in caked on mud. After which you must decide how many kilos you want.

Kilos. Right. Exactly how many pounds is that anyway? You do the math and get confused. You start again.. a kilo is equivalent to two pounds two ounces so if I need five pounds of potatoes.. Man, those mathy word problems you always hated are coming back to haunt you! You give up and grab a bag of potatoes with your eyes closed and hope they'll do the trick.

You move on to bananas only to pass out when you see that they are more than ten dollars a kilo. Even after the math that's insane. You suddenly feel the need for a banana right now. You refuse to give in and buy one and you wonder how long you can go without a banana on your morning oatmeal and toast. You wonder if you'll ever have the pleasure of enjoying another banana and you find yourself stare longingly at the sweet yellow fruit.

You move forward and see the cherries are dirt cheap. They are only 5.95 a kilo and even before the math you know that's a great price. You load up with so many cherries that everyone around you is now in shock. Never mind they have plenty of bananas in their carts but no cherries. You smile cheerfully and pick up strawberries which are also pretty cheap at only a couple of dollars.

You move on to watermelon and are shocked to see that all watermelon is sold by the kilo.

Good grief, can I return the rind for a refund? What's a good deal on watermelon. How much is a kilo again? You stop and try to do the math. You give up and throw two large chunks of melon in the cart.

You grab some apples but are highly disappointed to see that they have no fuji apples for sale. What gives with that? If you can buy a New Zealand apple in America why on earth can't you get one in Australia. You get no farther then New Zealand before a hand is clamped firmly over your mouth and you are ushered to a dark corner of the store.

Your husband hisses at you not to mention the name of this country with the word apples attached to the same sentence. You think he's gone a bit nutty and you decide this must be discussed further, but clearly from the signs of his stress you must wait until you are home again.

You pretend you fully understand and nod your head. Then you ask where the fuji apples are to which he shrugs. You return to the produce section and decide you'll get a few oranges while you're there, and skip the apples. Once done with that you look for romaine lettuce.

You can't find any. You begin to wonder why, and you look around to see what kind of lettuce everyone else is grabbing. They've taking bags of lettuce so you check the bags out. No way are you paying 5 bucks for a bag of lettuce. That's insane! You return to the iceberg and spot something called cos. You think it looks decent and grab it up. You'll learn, a week later, that cos and romaine are the same lettuce.

You think you are done, but you realize you have no black beans in the cart and you forgot cheese. You husband escorts you to the bean isle. He's still on edge from the words New Zealand and apple and he's worried to let you out of his sight. You're beginning to get a bit creeped out by this behavior but you are soon distracted while you search for black beans.

No luck. You can get any can of baked beans you want. Spicy Indian ones, bbqed baked beans, English, and original flavor to name a very very small amount. Yet, there are no black beans. You question this theory and get a funny look. Of course there are baked beans what else would you eat for breakfast on your toast. Black beans sound burned and gross. You sigh

heavily before you realize he said they eat baked beans for breakfast.

You question this line of thinking. Don't you ever eat them for a picnic dish? That's insane why would he do that, he's confused now. Because they are tasty that way and that's normal, but eating them on toast for breakfast? That seems awfully heavy for a morning meal. Do they do this in New Zealand. Horror struck he looks over his shoulder and a few passerby's hiss at you.

You move to the cheese case. You can't find cheddar. Gobs and gobs of something called Tasty Cheese. You begin to think Australians are incredibly confident to label their cheese tasty. I mean shouldn't you get to try it before someone deems it such?

You ask your husband what kind of cheese he normally use to buy. He didn't. Cheese wasn't his thing. Mm.. but what if you wanted a sandwich with cheese on it what would you buy? Tasty. Really? Is it tasty? I mean what makes it tasty, and what exactly does it taste like anyway? He doesn't know, it's just what he bought if he had the need. Interesting.

You inspect the package a bit more and discover that some of the fancier ones dub it tasty cheese but write in fine print that it's cheddar. Oo, you agree cheddar is tasty cheese and Australia should indeed refer to it as Tasty, but shouldn't they say how old this cheese is? He points out the expiry date.

No, I explain that I mean I want to know if it's sharp or not. They don't put sharp objects in cheese, I consider whacking him with a brick of this delicacy, but decide there are too many witnesses. Instead, I make my cheese selection and throw it in the trolley.

You remember you need bread and you spend ten hours looking for the bread aisle. You discover there is no whole wheat bread but something called WholeMeal. You decide it will have to do and try to decide which loaf is best. When you finally choose one your husband points out that most people just grab a fresh loaf from the bakery. So you amble over to the bakery and try to pick out another loaf when he says that he meant the bakery on the corner. You pretend you understood and make that you are looking for cookies instead.

We decide to pick up a pail of ice cream on our way out. I'm disappointed that with the amount of creams this country can offer there are very few flavors of ice cream to choose from. I'm horrified that they are over 5 dollars a container too. We decide that, despite the price, we'll splurge, after all the kids will be overjoyed.

You pick something that looks decent and is suppose to be a top notch brand. You throw it in your cart and make your way to the exits. You pay for your groceries and are startled by the high price of your total. Your husband isn't and you wonder if he was paying attention or not.

You go home unload all your groceries and fix dinner. You decide it will be sandwiches because it's quick and simple and you're tired. You pull out that loaf of bread that took two hours to select once you finally located the bakery that was on the corner.

You try the cheese and find that it's not very aged but it will suffice. The mayonnaise is hideously sweet, and you are grossed out by it. The cos lettuce isn't bad, and the watermelon is delicious.

The kids beg for ice cream so you break it open. You scoop up a large clump of vanilla ice cream (chocolate wasn't available..) for everyone and you dig in. For a country with cream as high in fat as they boast, their ice cream is more ice than cream. It's got ice lumps in it so big you can chew them, and you can't believe you just paid 6 bucks for this container of it. Then you see the instructions on the side of the box: Best if left to soften for 10 minutes first.

But if I wanted soft warm ice cream wouldn't I just drink milk? Probably not because the gang has all ready downed 2 of the 3 liters you've purchased at a horrific price. You decide you'll need to invest in a cow in order to have enough milk, and the added bonus is you'll be able to make your own ice cream.

But before researching the price of a cow, you decide to discuss the New Zealand topic, as you bring it up your husband rushes around the house closing windows and pulling the blinds shut before he'll even allow you to utter another word about it.

You think he's making a big fuss for nothing. I mean it's only New Zealand right? Then he

says one word which brings full comprehension down on me, "Canada."

I helped him fasten the blinds.



While looking through one of my writing books, I stumbled across the prompt to write about shopping in a foreign country. I laughed, not just a little either. I'm talking the kind of laughter that has tears running down your cheeks. That's not just something I can write about, it was something I distinctively remember writing about after my first shopping experience when my family moved to Australia.

That first shopping trip took me hours, yes hours! to complete. I can laugh about it all now, but I can also reflect back on it and feel the same mixed up confusion I felt that very first day as I wandered continuous laps around the store looking for items in all the wrong places!

I thought I might try to rewrite that experience, and put it on my to-do list. Then, one sunny morning in June of 2020, while looking through some old stories I had written, I was looking for a particular scene I wanted to share here with my readers, and I stumbled upon my original account of shopping in Australia.

I'm not sure when I first wrote it, although I would guess December of 2006, or January of 2007, based on the dates when we arrived here and finally moved into our own home. However, the writing file was dated 2009.

Either way, the emotions were every bit as I remembered them as I read back over it. I was truly floored by the layout of the shop, the unusual locations of foods, unrefrigerated eggs, and what felt like a random H in yogurt.

Reflecting back after living here for fourteen years none of those things seem odd to me

anymore, and it makes me wonder what my first shopping experience upon returning to life in America will be like. After all, I can still remember the last time I went grocery shopping in the USA.

I forgot that grocery cart wheels do not move in 360 degree directions and nearly toppled the grocery cart over. I was overwhelmed by the plethora of choices, something the small island we live on doesn't offer, and I was blown away by the sizes I could buy everything in if I only knew how much I need. All, once in my life, a very common occurrence but now just distant memories.

As for grocery shopping here, I still refuse to buy bananas if they exceed \$4.50 per kilo, but have rarely turned down an opportunity to purchase cherries. I can now readily find black beans down the canned veggie isle, or the international isle. Fuji apples are occasionally spotted in shop, although my favourites are now RubiGolds, and on really special occasions I might wander down the international isle and buy a few American treats to grace the table.

An extra special note to my Canadian and New Zealand readers, we love you, despite the friendly rivalries between our countries.

The Reluctant Author.