

The big stop on shop til we drop

It's hard to know what to write about when all about us is about the same topic. So, I'll go with shopping.

There was a time when one of us would hop down to the supermarket every couple of days to get whatever had mounted up on our blackboard, a patch of bare wall with green blackboard paint slapped on it, a work of art with rough edges and a use.

Now, such expeditions are once a week, and take the kind of planning needed for a tramp up Mt Taranaki.

As supermarkets' response to the crisis morphed from nonchalance born of desire not to cause panic, to gloves on some produce workers, to full-on protective measures and queues at the door, our plan has needed revision every time we go.

Early on, what we had typed up at home (yes, you read that right: Jim's barely controlled paranoia was rampant) turned out to be useless as soon as we hit the car park.

Unlike the visit before, there was no queue, just a sign at the door and a security guard taking a distant interest in comings and goings. Lin had to wing it.

I waited in the car and watched customers to gauge approaches, which varied from cautious (mask and gloves, but only a couple) to relaxed (most).

The latter included a large, confident man whose attitude embraced arrogance as he swept his tank out of the parking area, seemingly unaware of people about to traverse the pedestrian crossing. My thoughts jumped to Trump.

Lin emerged a very long time later near to tears, one hand un-gloved and the items for us and a dependent relative mixed up in the trolley by eagerly helpful staff.

She said in her effort to pay for two different lots of groceries with two different cards she dropped them all over the floor.

I gave her another glove and we decided to put everything in the boot, which was designated the contaminated part of the car. The front seats would be our mobile bubble.

The real problem was what to do with it all when we got home. After a series of manoeuvres involving antiseptic cleaning sprays, glove changes and numerous trips to the wash basin, we got it all away.

Some went in the fridge, put to the back of the queue for use, with vague thought given to 72 hours, the supposed stand-down period.

Other stuff went into the tiny freezer in the booze fridge, probably to be forgotten forever, while some joined a series of large containers in the shed to start a time-sensitive journey towards consumption.



Crazy? Probably. But how far do you go? Our problem is I've been trying to absorb everything I can about this bloody plague and that can have unintended consequences.

Try as they might, supermarkets can never guarantee to be uncontaminated by a bug said to lurk on surfaces, travel through masks and the skin of fruit, and be projected up to eight metres by a sneeze, and whose resulting disease causes no initial symptoms at the very time sufferers are most liable to be infectious.

The origin of supermarket products includes multiple chains of supply involving small armies of people, many premises and modes of transport, and myriad forms and sources of packaging.

I don't write this to alarm people. Anyone giving this a minute's consideration realises we rely on a helluva lot of things going right before we put the first item in the trolley.

The precautions we see are aimed at us, the customers, in the hope none of us turns up with an undiagnosed covid infection and spreads it through the aisles or by handling the fruit and veg.

Variations in the shopping system are obvious. Some supermarkets are counting people in and out and insisting on spaced queuing, while others merely have a sign at the door, more concerned about panic buying than anything.

It hasn't occurred to some that aisle widths militate against keeping a safe distance if people are allowed to enter both ends.

Risk may be heightened by customers who stand in the middle of common areas trying to remember what they came to buy, forcing others to squeeze past.

One guy had two children with him, Lin noted with alarm. They were old enough to wait in the car.

While supermarkets are making a big buck out of this (our bill has never been lower, though) I sympathise with them. Big responsibility.