

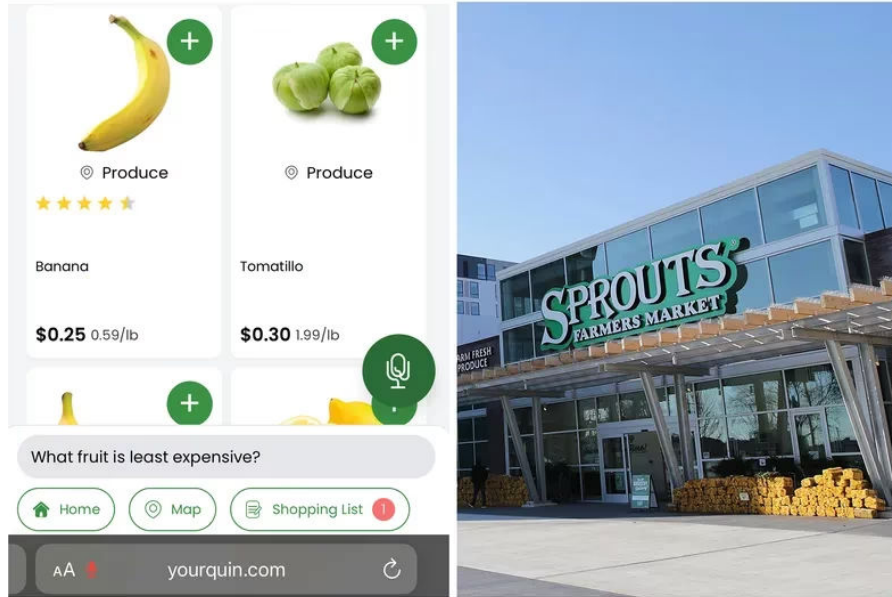


NEWS



We used a new AI app to grocery shop in South Philly. This is what happened.

Quin, a consumer AI tool, allows shoppers to ask questions into their phone, quickly find answers, and see where suggested items are located.



Sprouts Farmers Market has an AI tool that allows shoppers to locate specific products in the grocery store, identify items that fit their dietary or budget needs, etc.

Staff

by Erin McCarthy
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I always thought grocery shopping seemed like such a fun, grown-up activity when I was a kid.

Now that I’m an adult, I dread it.

Without warning, the store can suck me into a vortex, a quick trip turning into an hourlong endeavor that costs more than I anticipated.

And I live alone, have no allergies or dietary restrictions, and am not a picky eater. I can’t imagine the headache of grocery shopping for a family, let alone one that includes people with different restrictions and preferences.

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When a reader emailed me last month saying they were “blown away” by an AI tool available for free to customers at one local store, I was intrigued. While I’d heard about headline-making AI like [ChatGPT](#), I didn’t know much about consumer AI.

But from the reader’s description, it seemed as though this tool, which I’d soon learn was called Quin, could help mitigate some of the hassles of shopping.

On purple-and-white signs inside Sprouts Farmers Market on South Broad Street, Quin is depicted as two squiggly-line arms and an oblong face, and says, “I’m here to help find anything.”

Quin is a phone-based AI innovation that can answer spoken or typed questions about the items sold in a store, including nutrition information and

Items can be added to a digital shopping list, in-store or from home, and located on a store map.

New York-based tech startup Verneek decided to deploy its technology in grocery stores because it just seemed like the right time, said Nasrin Mostafazadeh, the company's cofounder. Grocery store shoppers today have to balance the continued impacts of inflation with a heightened awareness of the importance of healthy eating in a COVID-aware world.

“Food shoppers are possibly the most neglected group of consumers in the U.S.,” she said. “Food allergies, food preferences, dietary choices, all of these are things that average Americans have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. When they enter a grocery store, they are left to their own devices.”

Mostafazadeh said Quin is not intended to replace grocery workers but to supplement them, giving them more time to focus on their job responsibilities, such as stocking shelves, doing inventory, or checking out customers.

I decided to try Quin myself. Could AI make grocery shopping less of a chore? Maybe even fun?

Getting started

Once I walked into the store, I opened my phone's camera app and scanned the QR code on a Quin sign perched between stacks of boxed vegan muffins. Up popped a webpage with a green microphone button in the bottom corner, prompting me to ask a question. (The sign provided the example: “What is the healthiest snack for kids that costs under \$5?”).

I asked my first question. Instead of answers, I got seemingly never-ending prompts to refresh the page. Welp, what a buzzkill, I thought to myself.

Turns out, my service just wasn't great inside the store.

Once I got connected to Sprouts guest WiFi and reloaded the page, Quin and I were ready to roll.

Shopping with Quin

Armed with a list of questions designed more to test Quin than to replicate a regular shopping list, I walked around the store staring at my phone and felt as though I were grocery shopping in the future.

I spoke out loud to Quin. I was impressed that it could understand me over the store's background music.

During my hourlong trip, I didn't see any of my fellow shoppers doing the same, making me feel a bit self-conscious.

Security guards and store workers asked me several times if I needed help, and I worried that they thought I was trying to shoplift. I hoped, too, that I wasn't annoying fellow shoppers.

But Quin had no hesitations, successfully answering most of my questions: What bread has the lowest carbs? What fruit is in season right now? What fresh vegetables can I buy for under \$5? Which frozen meals have the lowest amount of sodium? What meat is cheapest per pound? What is the best deal on ice cream right now?

After each question, it would share an array of choices in a second or two, with options ranked from lowest to highest price, unit price, or nutrient amount.

What Quin got right

Quin had a solid grasp on the store's many offerings for those with dietary restrictions. It provided a long list of kosher items, keto-friendly snacks, and gluten-free pastas.

It recommended which olive oils I should buy for cooking and what wines to pair with chicken and beef. It knew where to find honey and organic tampons,

When Quin told me which eggs — including the kosher dark chocolate salted-caramel-filled variety — [were the cheapest](#), it alerted me that the stock of some types of chicken eggs were running low.

Once I used Quin's map to get to the egg section in the store's back corner, I saw that a few of the store's least expensive 12-pack varieties were sold out. Still available, however, were store-brand pasture-raised brown eggs for \$4.99, a dollar more than the cage-free eggs Quin had set my eye on.

Quin automatically updates based on real-time inventory data provided by retailers, Mostafazadeh said, but someday hopes to incorporate crowdsourcing. That would allow a shopper like me to let Quin know that an item is out of stock before an official inventory list has been updated.

What Quin got wrong

Quin faltered a few times, such as when I asked "What could I serve as a side with beef?" and it suggested peanut butter (perhaps confusing a side with a sauce, such as [the peanut sauces served with beef stir fry](#)). It did better with chicken, suggesting I serve it with Brussels sprouts.

In each case, it also brought up several side recipes, though those appeared to be generic options not tailored to a specific protein.

Only a few times Quin said: "I'm so sorry. I don't seem to find what you are looking for. Do you mind rephrasing your question or ask me something else?" Each time, the issue was not Quin's understanding of my words, but the complexity of the question.

Quin couldn't tell me where I could find "eggs, milk, and bread," when I asked

Another question that stumped Quin, at least initially: “What can I make two people for dinner tonight for less than \$10?”

First, it asked me to rephrase. So I said, less politely, “Give me a dinner recipe for under \$10.”

This time, it delivered with a list of recipes, including a breakdown of ingredients required, where I could find those items in the store, and how much they cost. However, it told me upfront, “I couldn’t find items with your minimum price preference,” though it did provide cook times.

The price point may have been impossible for Quin to meet, Mostafazadeh said, because it calculates the cost of all ingredients needed to make a recipe, including ingredients like butter, milk, and spices that many shoppers already have at home.

The verdict

While it takes some getting used to, Quin is pretty cool. If you shop at Sprouts — or another store that offers it — I’d recommend trying it, especially if you have a lengthy shopping list or dread the task like I do.

If I had to do it again, I’d create an account on yourquin.com and log in before I headed to the store. I might even create a shopping list from home throughout

the week, cutting down even more on the time I have to spend in the store and allowing me to be more conscious about my total spending.

I could also ask specific questions about nutrition or price in the comfort and privacy of my home, instead of standing in the middle of the pasta aisle talking into my phone. Though maybe someday everyone in the store will do that and it’ll feel less weird.

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