

## Eating Well on a Budget

By Stacy Ranta

Where is it written in stone that if you don't have a lot of money for food that you have to eat ramen? Some college people practically lived on the stuff when money was tight. After doing some number crunching, you might find you could eat a lot better for about the same amount.

You don't have to live on the same thing to keep your food budget to a reasonable level. By calculating the cost of your meals, paying close attention to price labels, and thinking ahead, you won't be doomed to eating salty noodles three meals a day. During these increasingly difficult financial times, you can keep your food budget under control with these simple steps.

### 1.) Take a realistic look at your budget.

Figure out how much you can spend per meal. Then make your grocery list based on how many meals you can get for your dollar. A \$6.00 jar of peanut butter might seem expensive, but think about how many sandwiches a jar of peanut butter makes. Provided you don't get too fancy, even once you factor in the cost of bread and jam, a peanut butter sandwich makes a meal for less than \$0.50. Save those old peanut butter jars, because you'll be putting them to good use.

### 2.) The bulk food aisle is your friend.

Many stores sell staples like flour, sugar, and various grains cheaper out of bulk bins. If you don't want a specific brand, you can save a lot of money here. Scoop out however much you want into the plastic bags the store provides, and transfer to your own containers at home.

### 3.) Stay away from prepared meals.

You can make it cheaper and often better yourself. Why spend \$5.00 on a soggy fried chicken TV dinner when you can buy a whole chicken, fry it yourself, and get five dinners out of it for half that? Plus you get to choose your own sides to boot.

### 4.) Keep an eye on the newspapers.

Grocery stores usually include flyers in the newspaper on Sundays and in the middle of the week announcing their sales. This gives you an excellent chance to comparison shop without having to go anywhere. The paper is also a good source of coupons, but be careful not to let a coupon sway you into buying something you wouldn't normally use.

### 5.) Eat fresh fruits and vegetables in season.

While it's possible to get fresh fruits and veggies at any time of the year, the prices are affected by shipping costs, as well as supply and demand. When a fruit or vegetable is in season, there's more supply and so prices fall. It's easy to find berries and tomatoes cheap in the summer, but in the winter they have to be grown indoors or shipped from warmer climates. This leads to higher prices and possibly inferior quality.

6.) Read the labels and estimate costs.

Just because the smaller bottle of barbecue sauce costs less than the big bottle doesn't necessarily mean it's cheaper compared to the amount you get. That doesn't necessarily mean it's more expensive, either. Stores are required by law to print the cost of food per unit on their price tags. It's usually in microscopic print, but it is always there.

Compare the cost per unit, but pay attention to how much you will realistically use. If the small bottle is 10 ounces for \$1.50 and the large bottle is 22 ounces for \$3.00, then you should buy the large bottle as long as you know you will use it all. You won't save money buying the bigger bottle if it goes bad before you use it and you end up having to throw it out.

7.) Take along a calculator to avoid confusion.

While stores have to print the price per unit, sometimes the units of measurement aren't always the same. A six pack of soda might be priced per can, while a two liter bottle of the same soda might be priced per fluid ounce, for example. You may already have one, since most modern cell phones have a calculator function built in.

8.) Keep it in the freezer.

Some foods that are perishable can be kept for long periods in the freezer. You can save money by stocking up on meat when it's on sale and freeze it. Air is the enemy of food in the freezer. It causes freezer burn and wastes space. You can make do by submerging the freezer bag in a bucket of water as you seal it. This forces most of the air out, but not all.

9.) Invest in some gadgets.

A vacuum sealer is necessary to really get the job done. It draws out all the air, allowing you to keep food free of freezer burn for longer periods and saving valuable freezer space. You don't need one with all the bells and whistles. A low end vacuum sealer can be bought new for around \$60. This might seem like a lot on a budget, but it quickly pays for itself by allowing you to make recipes in large batches and throw away less food.

Another money and time saving kitchen gadget is the humble Crock Pot, or slow cooker. These holdovers from your mother's kitchen are surprisingly versatile. They excel at cooking cheaper cuts of meat that require moisture and long cooking times to become tender. Many recipes can be prepared the night before and kept in the refrigerator overnight for cooking while at work or school the next day.