

Our 7 Steps to Slashing The Food Bill

I know some people who spend much less than us; bottom line? It's about balance & priorities & your budget choices. We love cooking together, eating (somewhat) healthy and gathering for dinner - this is what is important to us as a family. With that as our priority, I tackled learning the keys to savvy shopping, planning, and prep. It was hard at first; I made some costly mistakes. But it all started to come together. Ultimately, I cut our food bill by about 2/3 without slashing our standards.

Step 1: Know What You'll Eat. Take a minute and think about what foods & meals work for you. What can't you live without? My husband loves oranges. My son would eat Kraft Mac & Cheese every lunch of his life and smile happily. I keep 5 "must haves" in the house at all times for us. *If you feel like you're constantly sacrificing, you are set to fail.*

Step 2: Know What You Already Spend. Go back through your online bank statements and just sit there with a calculator making a running total. Restaurants, Starbucks, Whole Foods, Stop & Shop, Trader Joe's – add all your food costs for at least a month (more will give you a better baseline).

Step 3: Know Your Time Constraints. How much time are you really, truly willing to spend on shopping, coupon hunting, cooking, recipe hunting, and food prep? For me, it's fairly unlimited – I'm a SAHM/WAHM and every penny I save is a penny quite literally earned.

Step 4: Now, Make a Goal. When I left my job (the Big Gig), Whole Foods and Restaurant Take-Outs were staples. I *never* used a coupon. With those habits, \$250/week was a crazy hard goal to reach. But once I got there? I started slowly working it down further.

Step 5: Shop Smart. There are several rules of thumb that frugal folks pass along. BELIEVE THEM! Me? I learned it all the hard way; here's what I WISH someone had explained:

- *Split out household and food costs.* They are two different animals, and when you start treating them that way things will come together for you much easier.
- *Make A List.* Just having one could save you *thousands* of dollars over the year. For me, I scan what's on sale in the local circulars (several stores have them online) to see what's in season, fresh, on sale. That's the basis of my week's meal ideas.
- *Use coupons.* Use sites like <http://www.bettycrocker.com/coupons-promotions/coupons/>. Take advantage of loyal buyer programs. Read Mindi's be-all end-all Coupon Primer at: <http://www.momsneedtoknow.com/2009/01/02/coupon-101-the-lingo/>
- *SHOP THE LIST but allow yourself a certain amount for impulse shopping.* Stores routinely have "loss-leaders" - items that are priced insanely good. Leave budget (I set aside up to \$10) for deals. The cardinal rule is: **ONE SHOP per week.** Except for milk and special occasions, we live with what is in the house until shopping day.
- *Use several stores.* Comparison shopping is your friend. My local Jewel sold lemons at \$.50 & Trader Joe's for \$.25. Stores play with prices to keep their aggregate shopper's spend where they want it. Beat their system by knowing which things they're overpricing. Use other people's research, like: <http://www.amitymama.com/vb/mamas-simplifying-thrift-forum/387181-aldi-shoppers-stop-here-whats-good.html>
- A few times a year, **skip all food shopping for a week** and use what you have on hand. I "shop" the pantry and the deep freezer and come up with the week's menus that way. It won't be anyone's favorite food week, but it ensures you're using everything you have.

Step 6: Plan your meals. Once you're done shopping for the week, look at your cupboards and absolutely **commit** by writing down the week's menus. *This step is absolutely critical.* I think about it before I shop but wait until prep to lock it in. Whenever you do it, you have to actually make it real before the week starts. 15 minutes now will mean untold savings, I promise!

Step 7: Prep, Prep, Prep! How many nights were disrupted because I was just too tired to deal with cooking? I want back those thousands of dollars spent on mediocre take-out Chinese! Invest a few hours once a week, go through the plan, and prepare as much as you can ahead of time.

Putting it into Practice

This week I had a couple of special events to navigate, so I had to work those into my budget. Monday is Icelandic "Bun Day" so I had buy special bakery buns. Also, it's our tradition to have a nice steak dinner before Ash Wednesday as a last "splurge" before I go fairly meatless for Lent – I found steak tips at Trader Joe's and they were great. Plus, I like to kick off Lent with a pot of French Onion Soup.

On top of these considerations are our regular habits: my husband likes one orange and some plain yoghurt (that he adds to) for breakfast each morning. My son loves apples & homemade waffles. I keep fruit, chopped carrots, microwave popcorn, and one treat (this week my son picked fruit rolls) for snacks. Here's this week's actual menu plan. NOTE: Because of our wildly different preferences, A=My husband and I, B=my son, C=me, when different from my husband

Sunday:

Meal 1 Brunch:

(a) Homemade fruit smoothies, waffles, bacon

Meal 2 Tea (Supper):

(a) Steak tips, potatoes, chopped salad

(b) Hamburger, carrots, oatmeal cookies

Monday - Friday:

Meal 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 Breakfast:

(a) Yoghurt, orange, coffee, toast, quiche, strawberries

(b) Bowl of cereal or frozen waffles, strawberries

Monday - Thursday:

Meal 8, 9, 10 11, Lunch:

(a) Leftovers or sandwiches packed the night before

(b) Macaroni & cheese or plain pasta, or leftovers, carrots

(c) Quiche or soup & sandwich

Monday/Bun Day (Special desert: Sweet Buns)

Meal 12 Dinner:

(a) Stir-fry: Ham, chicken, veggies, over rice with curry sauce and tomato slices

Fat Tuesday

Meal 13 Dinner:

(a) (b) House-recipe spaghetti with meat sauce, carrots, bread

(c) I'll eat the pasta with mushrooms in a light wine sauce

Ash Wednesday

Meal 14 Dinner:

(a) Lemon Chicken with capers over rice pilaf, tomato salad

(b) Hamburger & the rice, carrots

Thursday

Meal 15 Dinner:

(a) Pork Chops (need to defrost and use), home fries, peas, salad

Friday

Meal 16 Lunch:

(a) Eat out with guys from work (\$6)

(b) Pack lunch for cooperative school: goldfish crackers, fresh apples & grapes, carrots

(c) Jimmy John's with a friend (\$6)

Meal 17 Dinner:

(a) (b) Meatballs, pasta, salad

(c) (*no-meat Fridays in Lent) Onion soup, garlic bread, salad (*followed by mouthwash, lol*)

Saturday

Meal 18 Brunch:

(a) Bacon or sausage, eggs, waffles, fruit smoothies, cinnamon rolls.

Lunch/Dinner on Saturday depends on our plans, activities, what I've got on hand.

PREP, PREP, PREP

On Sunday, we make what we can be ahead of time. Ever had the best intentions and no energy to cook? Avoid those "sabotaged" nights with preparation. (And yes, the guys do help.)



- 1) Made the quiche. This will be the cornerstone of my lunches this week (husband will nibble). I use self-crust Bisquick recipe. It's great and re-heats nicely. I lined my crockpot with tin foil and cooked the quiche on "high" for an hour, then browned top and cheese in broiler. Result? Imperfect shape, great flavor. Recipe: <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Easy-Quiche/Detail.aspx>
- 2) Chop iceberg lettuce and spinach into each other, sealed up in a baggie with as little air as possible for salads. Pre-cooked mushrooms (for the steak tips and spaghetti). Prep veggies & fruit so it is easy to just grab and munch.
- 3) Browned & seasoned 1.5 pounds of hamburger. My picky son adores hamburger, so having some I can heat up for him for lunch or dinners is critical. It is also the basis of their "secret" spaghetti sauce and the tortilla-wrap taco's we love.
- 4) Made half-dozen waffles. I use the Bisquick recipe. The trick is to toast them for about 1 min *immediately* after pulling them out of the waffle iron – that dries them out. Pop into a freezer bag and in the freezer, toast again on "light" to eat.
- 5) Boiled 8 potatoes, cut in good-sized chunks. Chill in a bag with as little air as possible.
- 6) Normally, I would have made the soup, too. But I stopped because I wanted my kitchen clean before supper.

Recipes

Besides the Quiche (link in prep section) and the Bisquick waffles (recipe on box), here are some recipes for this week's dinners. NOTE: I always cook with reduced salt. Also usually lo-fat as possible. That said, my husband likes the formula of: protein + starch + 2 vegetable = dinner.



Ham & Chicken stir fry with curry sauce on Monday Night

1) Steak Tips. If you can find them, these are an economical way to enjoy the tenderness of good cuts of steak. They are usually sized about the length of a playing card and half as wide, and priced about 50% of the larger true steak cuts. My mom soaks them in a freezer bag with teriyaki sauce overnight and then broils or grills them medium rare and that's our favorite, too.

2) Stir Fry. I use a little spray stick in the pan and then sauté first celery and carrot, then add diced chicken and ham. Season while cooking with Chinese 5 spice, a little salt, a little pepper, and a dash of paprika. When meat is almost cooked, I add in frozen peas and green onion and a couple dashes of lo-sodium soy sauce. I stir curry into plain yoghurt for a sauce on the side.

- 3) Lemon Chicken with capers.** Also from my mom. This is one of those recipes people are going to ask you to make again and again. Even if they HATE capers. Even if they're picky.
- Defrost 1 large chicken breast per 2 people (more if you want leftovers, like we do.) Carefully slice each breast into 2 breasts that are half as thick.
 - Add 1 cup flour (We like wheat but any kind you prefer, or even plain breadcrumbs), a dash of salt, pepper (or Lemon Pepper seasoning, if you have it) to a freezer bag. Rinse each piece of chicken in water then shake in the bag for a few moments until lightly coated.
 - Heat an oven-friendly pan on the cooktop while pre-heating oven to 350f. Using light vegetable oil (or butter, if you need the flavor), lightly sauté the chicken for about 3 minutes per side.
 - Pop the pan into the oven for 20 minutes to finish cooking to 165f internal temp.
 - For 4 thin-breasts, add the juice of 1 medium lemon and 1/2 jar of capers (with juice) over the meat before serving. I often add a bit of lemon zest, as well.

4) Pork Chops with apples & potatoes.

- Chop one apple (any kind, prefer green delicious) and half a sweet onion into dice-sized chunks. Sauté them in non-stick, with a dash of mirin (Chinese sweet wine) and season with a little salt, pepper, nutmeg, and allspice.
- Once they have softened (not completely cooked), Pull them from the pan and put to the side. Sprinkle a little bit of plain breadcrumbs to each side of the chops, then add a bit of light oil to the drippings left in the pan. Cook the chops about 4 minutes each side until done.
- Plate the chops, and then add the apple and onion back to the pan. Add in about 3/4 cup of the pre-boiled potatoes. Sauté until the potatoes are steaming hot, and just a little browned. Serve on the side of the chops.

Total Shopping Bill this Week: \$94.43

STORE1 : Aldi's, Total with tax: \$36.91 – I buy basics here, things I know we like.

3lbs 80/20 hamburger: 4.99
3lbs boneless/skinless chicken breasts: 6.49
1 ham steak: \$4
1 10-lb bag Idaho potatoes: \$2.39
1 bag onions: \$.99
1 bag mixed frozen fruit: \$3.49
1 dozen eggs: \$.99
1 box spaghetti: \$.69
Bacon: \$1.99
Cinnamon Rolls: \$1.39
Non-stick cooking spray: \$.99
Soft oatmeal cookies: \$2.49
Bottle of cooking wine: \$2.99
Fruit gummies: \$1.29
Rice: \$1

Store2 : Dollar Store, Total with tax: \$1.01 – Here for other reasons, saw the salt.

Morton's Kosher salt: \$1,

Store3 : Trader Joe's, Total with tax: \$25.96 – In Winter, I love produce from Trader Joe's.

Steak tips: \$7.89
2 lemons: \$.50
Tomatoes on the vine: \$4
Strawberries: \$2
Bag of fresh Spinach: \$2.29
Bag of organic carrots: \$1.99
Cucumber: \$.90
Quart of unflavored natural yoghurt: \$3.49
Cheddar cheese (for quiche): \$2.40

Store4 : Jewel Grocery, Total with tax: \$29.54 – Always my last stop!

Capers: \$.99
Pork chops: \$3.29
Iceberg lettuce \$.99
Whole wheat bread: \$1.89
Box of cereal: \$3.89
3 boxes of Mac & Cheese: \$2.49
Earth Choice (butter): \$2.89
Box of Bisquick: \$2.30
Goldfish crackers: \$1.29
Apples & grapes produce: \$4.00
Navel Oranges: \$4.50
Beef broth: \$1.29
Buns for Bunday: \$3.29
Breadcrumbs: \$1.99
Mfr coupons (Trix) \$.55, (Bisquick): \$75
Shopper savings (cheese, oranges, goldfish crackers, broth, Mac & Cheese, breadcrumbs): \$4.95

Notes: *This was my actual shopping, mostly taken from my receipts this week (I lost the Aldi's one and recreated it from memory and old receipts). As you see – had to stock up on breadcrumbs, cooking spray, potatoes, beef broth, kosher salt, Bisquick, and cooking wine. Balancing that - ketchup, spices, soy sauce, microwave popcorn, coffee, sugar, flour, etc we've got in stock.*