

# Stretching Your Food Dollars



Photo: Gerrit Weatherbee

With food costs rising, families are finding creative ways to save money.

by Donald Fraser

**I**t's no secret that food prices are going up. And up. And up.

We hear about it regularly on newscasts. We read about it online and in newspapers and magazines. And we sure do see it for ourselves whenever we go shopping. Experts everywhere are telling us that we should brace for even tougher times.

Many families, realizing that their food dollars need to be stretched further, have been finding creative ways to feed themselves in a more affordable fashion. While they haven't been able to completely offset the increase in food prices, they've come up with some very practical ideas.

## Waste not, want not

Melanie Cushti is a single mom with two very active teenagers to feed on a limited budget. Both her 14-year old daughter, Auryynn, and her 16-year old son, Phoenix, are athletic and take part in multiple sports. They burn a lot of calories and seem to be eating constantly. Keeping them fed can be challenge.

"I would say the biggest thing for us is making sure they are getting food that is both healthy and fun," says Cushti. "The most expensive food is the food that you throw out.

Your food dollar goes nowhere if it ends up in the garbage."

Cushti lets her kids take a very active role in both menu planning and shopping. She makes sure that they are choosing healthy foods that they are certain to eat.

"I give them a budget to buy the fruits and vegetables that they want to have," she explains. "There is no sense in buying produce that they don't want. I also have them take part in both shopping and cooking so that the meals are ones that they will eat. They've learned about the realities of food prices and they've learned that if they want the food that they like, they have to be a part of making sure it gets to the table."

The result? "We rarely throw anything out," reports Cushti. "And, trust me, that goes a long way to reducing our costs."

## Planning makes sense

Annie Scherz and Rodney Fuentes are at the other end of the spectrum. Their daughter, Lucia, is only four, and their son, Mateo, is just under a year. But just because the kids are smaller doesn't mean that their parents have to be any less budget-conscious.

"For us, it is all about planning," says Scherz. "We make full menus at the beginning of the week and stick firmly to the meals on it. We don't buy extra food throughout the week. We try to keep our grocery budget limited to our once-a-week shop. You'd be surprised how much it adds up when you start buying extras throughout the week."

Annie and Rodney also carefully plan where they are going to purchase food before they go out. "Store flyers will help you make sure you are getting the best bargains and help you find on-sale items," she says. "Even if you don't get a newspaper, most supermarkets have their flyers online."

Another trick is to price your items by weight and volume. Take notes as you browse flyers and shop in person and you'll eventually get a good idea of where different grocery products are going to be least expensive. You may have to make a couple of stops while shopping, but the savings will start to show.

## Bulking up

Shopping at bulk food stores can often mean extra savings. At supermarkets you may be paying more for the label and the brand name. When buying at bulk food stores, you can often

shave off a few dollars – particularly on staple items such as rice, flour and sugar, as well as on products like peanut butter and jelly.

Bulk dried beans are a particularly good deal. They can provide a good source of protein for all kinds of dinners, not just chilis and soups. And they're much less expensive than meats and poultry.

The downside? They require soaking and cooking, something canned beans don't.

"We always have dried and canned varieties on hand," says Melanie Cushti. "I use the dried ones for when I've got beans on the menu the next day. I soak them overnight. But, when we're in a hurry, the slightly more expensive canned ones do the trick."

Aurynn and Phoenix will also use canned chickpeas to make a quick hummus for pitas – an instant protein snack for the athlete on the go.

Buying in bulk can also mean buying larger sizes of packaged goods. Individually packed yogurts, cheese snacks, meat products, drinks, and other kid-friendly products are much more expensive than larger packages that you can divvy up into your own portion sizes. You end up paying more for the packaging and convenience.

## Meating your budget

Meats and poultry can represent a significant part of your shopping bills. While making regular use of other protein-rich, high-iron foods, such as beans, legumes (such as lentils), nuts, and dark, leafy greens, can mean great savings, there are also some cost-effective ways to keep beef, chicken and pork as part of your weekly menu.

Buying meats in bulk is a great way to start. Purchasing a 1/2 or 1/4 of a cow from your local farmer allows you a great variety of different cuts at a fraction of the supermarket price. When you buy beef in this quantity, you usually end up with a good combination of steaks, roasts, ground, and stewing meat. Don't have freezer space for a 1/4 of cow? Talk to your friends and neighbours and see if anyone is interested in splitting an order.

The same goes with chicken. "You can buy whole fresh chickens from farmers, farmers' markets or local butchers and cut it into portions," says Scherz. "It takes only a few minutes to cut, bag and freeze the legs, thighs, wings, and breasts. You can also buy whole frozen chickens and make several meals out of one roasted bird (don't forget to use the bones and skin for soup). And when you see bulk chicken on sale, split the purchase with someone and freeze as much as you can."



You can also save by choosing less expensive cuts of meat. Inexpensive steaks and roasts become versatile and delicious beginnings for many slow-cooker ingredients, while thinly cut marinated flank steak will make some of the best fajitas you've ever

had. Similarly, chicken thighs are a fraction of the price of breast, and yet, thrown on the grill or in the oven with BBQ or jerk sauce they make a great kid-friendly meal.

## Preserving food is cool

Buying fresh, seasonal food from farmers' markets and fruit and vegetable stands can often lead to exceptional savings. During the winter months, you will find great deals on potatoes, carrots, onions, and other root veggies. Come spring, you'll start finding all kinds of seasonal produce that will be high on taste and nutritional value and low on cost.

"Sometimes when I'm at market, I can't believe the prices," says Scherz. "I think to myself, 'those farmers should be charging more if they want to make a profit!'"

While we don't all have time for canning and drying food, it takes little effort to freeze vegetables such as corn and tomatoes. "Plus, frozen local vegetables contain almost all of their nutrients," reminds Scherz. "Canned veggies lose a lot during processing, and foreign ones end up ripening on trucks and in storage. They're not nearly as healthy."

## Cooperatives Provide Savings

There are a number of different co-operative buying models out there to help get affordable, healthy foods onto the tables of families. And most of them help support local farmers and businesses.

### CSAs

Community-Shared Agriculture programs (CSAs) work by charging a set fee to customers at the beginning of the growing season. When you sign up, you get a weekly selection of produce from the farm or organization that is running the program. The food is fresh-picked, healthy and nutritious.

Best of all, because you are not paying for shipping, distribution, storage, packaging, or store overhead, it is usually much cheaper than supermarket or even farmers' market prices. You never know what produce you are going to get, but you will be truly eating what is in season. ([www.csafarms.ca](http://www.csafarms.ca))

### Good Food Box

The non-profit Good Food Box program offers a similar service to customers, but with a very different structure. Organized by local health units and the Salvation Army, volunteer coordinators collect money for food boxes in advance and then deliver them to centralized drop-off locations, such as daycares, apartment buildings, and churches – anywhere there are 10 or more people ordering boxes.

The program is intended to get healthy, primarily local fruits and vegetables to the communities it serves. While many of the clients that order boxes are low-income earners, the program is open to anyone who is looking for affordable, healthy foods. Boxes range in price from \$13 to \$34. ([www.foodshare.net](http://www.foodshare.net))

### Ontario Natural Food Co-op

There are also some co-operative buying programs that are a little less local. Companies such as Ontario Natural Food Co-op (ONFC) deliver organic and ethically sourced health food items to buying groups across Ontario. By organizing local buying groups of friends and neighbours, you can achieve some extraordinary savings. ([www.onfc.ca](http://www.onfc.ca))

## All together now

One of the best ways to start saving immediately is to talk to your friends and neighbours. After only a few conversations you'll find that some of them are part of buying clubs, cooperatives, or community-shared agriculture programs (*see sidebar*). Others will have knowledge or connections that you don't have or can give you tips on stores or markets to check out.

The most important thing to remember, though, is that the food you buy needs to be both nutritious and fun. The one place you don't want to skimp is on the health of your children.

After all, you're saving most of this money for them.

*Donald Fraser is a freelance writer and local food enthusiast. He specializes in nutritious and delicious foods that don't break the bank.*