

Cutting Food Costs: 5 Ways to Beat Skyrocketing Prices

If you have been trying to slash your food budget, you probably already do weekly menu planning, you don't shop hungry and you take your lunch to work. What else can you do to cut your grocery bills? More and more people are asking that question and there's good reason. Food costs have soared nearly 20% in the last eight years.

To help you in your quest for better prices, here are five proven ways to reduce food expenses without sacrificing nutritional value or taste.

First, investigate! Make a list of the food items that you normally buy, go to each of the grocery stores in your area and check the prices. Actually write them down for your records. This comparison might be a little time-consuming but it can be well worth it in terms of savings, even if you have to drive a few miles to get the best prices.

Second, be daring! Make one or two dinners of the week a vegan repast – no dairy, fish or meat. You may need to do some research to find something that your family will like if they are used to having meat as a main dish. There are lots of recipes online or in vegetarian/vegan cookbooks at your local library. But remember, no fair eating empty calories! If you are using pasta, it should be the whole grain variety. Use brown rice instead of white. Skip any foods that contain sugar or refined carbohydrates or you will probably feel hungry soon after eating.

Third, continue your explorations! There are places that you may not have thought of that offer great deals on fresh produce. For example, there is a chain of stores in some western states that sells all its items for a dollar, including fresh fruits and vegetables that are approaching their sell-by date. If you never checked out the store, you might not have guessed that it sells items like fresh strawberries and organic baby lettuce – for a dollar.

Fourth, get creative with maintaining your budget! If you find it's too easy to overspend when you pay with a debit or credit card, use cash – it's still legal tender! Turning those dollars over to the cashier – and seeing how much is left for the rest of your shopping list – makes it a lot easier to say “no” to any junk food that you may have grabbed on a whim.

Five, drive smart! Your dollars will stretch even further if you plan your food shopping route so that you begin at the least expensive store and finish at the highest priced one. That way you'll only pay top dollar for items that were not available at the other, lower priced stores.

And here is a final, bonus tip in case you find your budgeting efforts sabotaged by moans and groans when everyone sits down to the dinner table. Get your family members involved in the menu choices for the upcoming week. Just make sure that you define the financial and nutritional guidelines with them. They'll be happier with their power of choice and you'll find that food planning on a budget can be lot more fun.