

Save more at the supermarket

Spend less—and eat better—with these easy shopping and cooking tricks

You're probably already using coupons and store-loyalty cards, scanning circulars and your pantry when planning meals, and buying store brands to cut food bills. Maybe you're even speeding past the Milano cookies and other impulse goodies not on your list. But even if you think you're doing everything right every time, there's probably room for improvement. To cut your costs even more, you need to look beyond the

supermarket. The biggest place for savings is right in your kitchen. On the next few pages, you'll learn how to buy foods and tweak recipes to lower your grocery bills and even make your dinners more healthful and tasty. All these little steps can really add up. We also tell you where to go online to stretch your food dollar even further. With all the money you'll save, you can go ahead and treat yourself to a bag of those Milanos. You earned them!



MONICA BUCK; FOOD STYLING: TONI BROGAN;
PROP STYLING: LYNDY WHITE

21 creative ways to cut food costs

1 INSTEAD OF buying by the pound TRY picking up a bag.

We know you like to pick out each potato and apple, but buying some items by the pound costs several times the price of buying them by the bag. We found a 5-pound sack of potatoes for \$2.99 at a local ShopRite; loose ones were 99 cents per pound. If a vegetable has a long shelf life, as potatoes and onions do, bagged is usually a better buy.

2 INSTEAD OF bottled salad dressing TRY making your own.

Shake or whisk together one part balsamic or wine vinegar to three parts oil with a little prepared mustard, salt, and pepper, and you'll get something far superior to the Italian dressings selling for \$2.99 a bottle. Like it creamy? Whisk in a tablespoon or so of mayonnaise. Another reason to make your own is to avoid the preservatives in bottled dressing, but the

trade-off is that homemade will keep in the refrigerator for just a week or so.

3 INSTEAD OF packaged bread and rolls TRY supermarket baked goods.

Many supermarkets sell store-made bakery goods, often for a lot less than the name-brand alternatives. At a local supermarket we found six hot-from-the-oven rolls for \$1.99; a packaged half-dozen from Freihofer's cost \$3.19.

4 INSTEAD OF dried herbs TRY fresh herbs.

Dried parsley, chives, and cilantro are so delicate that their flavors dissipate quickly. So fresh herbs can be a better value; store them in plastic bags in the fridge, where they will last a few days to a week. Or chop them up, seal in airtight bags, and freeze for up to six months.

5 INSTEAD OF fresh vegetables TRY frozen produce.

Frozen corn, peas, and spinach can be cheaper and as good as or better than fresh because they're picked and processed at their peak. And since they're frozen, they can be stored for up to a year. They have been cleaned and prepped, so they are more cook-friendly, too. Canned veggies last longer, but they're usually packed with additives like salt.

6 INSTEAD OF buying oils, nuts, and other perishables in bulk TRY small packages on sale.

Unless you use these things up relatively fast, you might end up wasting a lot of food. So don't go nuts at the warehouse store! Cooking oils go rancid faster if not refrigerated, nuts go bad unless refrigerated or frozen, and the flavor of spices fades fast. As a result, it's often more economical to buy small packages.

8 INSTEAD OF grated cheese TRY a hunk of cheese.

Grate your own Parmigiano Reggiano and save about \$1 a pound; do this every couple of weeks and save \$26 a year. Grate your own mozzarella or Monterey Jack and save \$1.50 or so per pound. Cheddar might be comparable in price in block and grated form, but in bags of grated cheese there are additives to keep the shreds from sticking together. A food processor or box grater will help you make quick work of any cheese.

ANNUAL SAVINGS \$26

9 INSTEAD OF ready-to-eat baby carrots TRY a regular bunch.

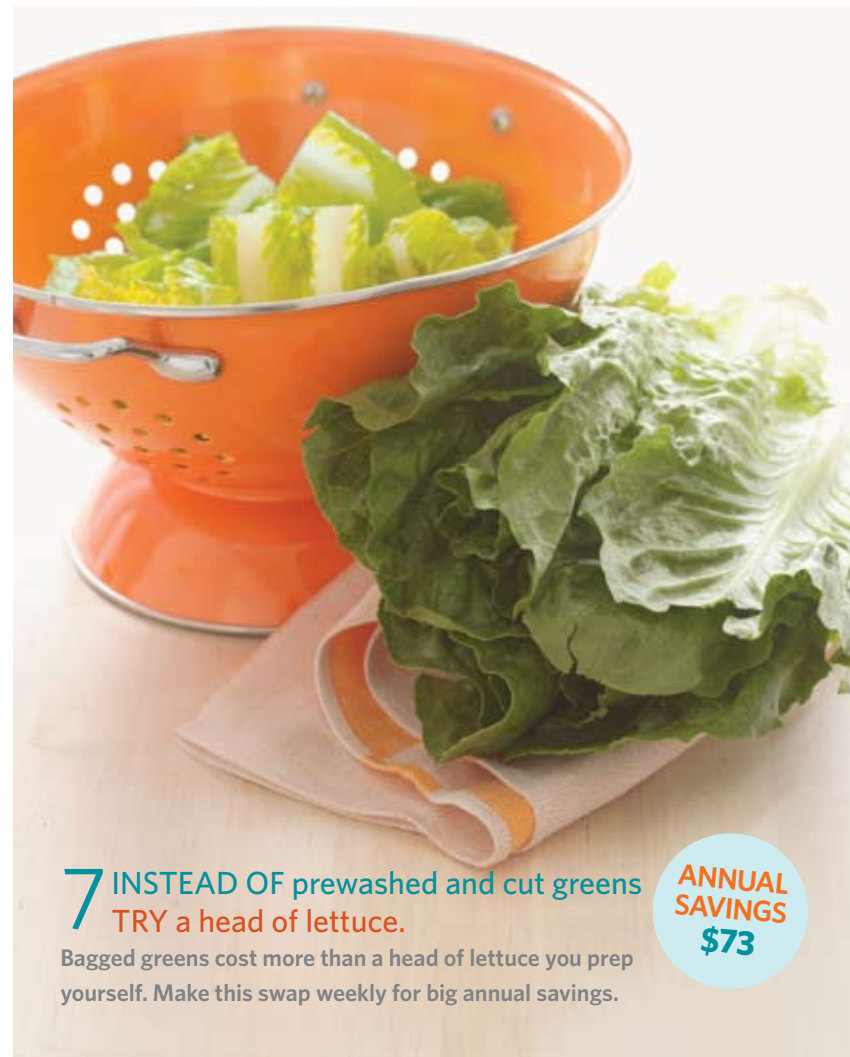
Those peeled and washed "baby carrots" are usually just big carrots that have been whittled down to bite size. Cut up a bunch weekly and save big.

ANNUAL SAVINGS \$62

10 INSTEAD OF chopped garlic TRY fresh garlic.

Fresh garlic has a much more pungent and powerful flavor, and if you use it weekly instead of prechopped, you will save some bucks. Use a garlic press or sharp grater to mince. To peel cloves, lay a knife blade flat on top and press down; the skin will slide off the clove. You can freeze chopped garlic in recipe-sized portions.

ANNUAL SAVINGS \$54



MONICA BUCK; FOOD STYLING: TONI BROGAN; PROP STYLING: LYNDIA WHITE

11 INSTEAD OF bottled lemon juice

TRY slitting a fresh lemon and squeezing out juice as needed.

Wrap the lemon in plastic wrap and it will last for a few weeks in the crisper. Fresh has none of the preservatives and a better flavor than bottled lemon juice.

12 INSTEAD OF whole peppers or onions

TRY hitting the supermarket salad bar if all you need is a little bit.

They're already sliced or diced, and just buying a recipe's worth of peppers, onions, or even carrots will be cheaper than buying them whole. Plus you won't end up wasting what you might not be able to use.

13 INSTEAD OF ready-made croutons

TRY recycling stale bread.

Cut it into cubes and crisp them in a little olive oil with garlic in a nonstick skillet. You'll save money and get a much richer flavor.

14 INSTEAD OF fancy sea salt

TRY kosher salt.

This chefs' favorite has a subtler flavor than regular salt. And a 3-pound box goes for \$2, far less than fancy sea salts, which can cost at least twice as much.

15 INSTEAD OF ground pepper

TRY whole peppercorns.

Peppercorns are usually cheaper, and the flavor difference between already

ground black pepper and your own freshly ground is really astonishing. There are few other seasonings that will punch up a dish as cheaply or as dramatically as fresh ground pepper.

16 INSTEAD OF buttermilk

TRY making an easy substitution.

For a recipe that calls for a cup or less, substitute fresh milk soured with a tablespoon of lemon juice or vinegar.

17 INSTEAD OF cooking with white wine

TRY replacing it with dry white vermouth in recipes.

Its interesting botanical flavor works in most recipes that call for white wine. A liter is around \$7 and it's "shelf stable," which means it won't go "off" as a chardonnay could.

18 INSTEAD OF pricey cuts of meat

TRY less expensive substitutions such as pork chops and stew meat.

You can also use sliced turkey breast, for example, as a stand-in for veal in scallopine. And you can substitute chicken in just about any meat recipe because it takes on flavors so easily.

19 INSTEAD OF pasta sauce

TRY buying canned tomatoes and making your own.

They're half the price and are a ready foundation for sauces, soups, and much more. Make your own pasta topper in minutes by sautéing garlic in olive oil, then adding canned tomatoes, dried oregano, and a little tomato paste. Hot pepper flakes are optional.

20 INSTEAD OF buying lots of fancy spices for your cabinet

TRY paring down.

Not every ingredient is essential; bay leaves can be omitted; ditto for a lot of fresh herbs. If a recipe calls for tarragon, chives, chervil, and dill, for instance, you can experiment: Often one of them will do fine.



21 INSTEAD OF hamburgers

TRY beans.

Substituting beans for just one meaty meal a week can save a lot in a year. A 16-ounce can runs about 70 cents and buys you fiber and iron; add corn or rice and you have a complete protein. Beans can be a building block of soups, salads, dips, burritos, purées, and more. (See page 30 for recipe Web sites.)

Don't toss those berries!

Admit it: You probably have some over-the-hill fruits and other foods in your fridge that you're ready to give the heave-ho. But hold off until you read this. There might be the makings of some delicious meals in what you're about to throw away, according to Kim O'Donnel, food columnist for the Washington Post. Last spring O'Donnel challenged readers to abstain from food shopping for a week and use whatever they had in their fridges, freezers, and pantries. Here are some of their use-it-up tips.

■ Don't shop until you take inventory.

Check the fridge and pantry before you go. Look inside the freezer, too. If you have lots of chicken in there, defrost it and turn it into a one-pot stew with those wilting vegetables in the crisper. Keep foraging and you might not have to shop at all. Bacon, eggs, and cheese can be transformed into a delicious carbonara sauce for pasta; turn a can of soup into a sauce for chicken pot pie.

■ Don't throw away the carcass of that rotisserie chicken.

Put it in a pot with celery stalks and leaves, carrots, trimmed onion halves, garlic cloves, and leftover fresh herbs, and cover with water. Simmer for an hour and strain. You'll have a rich stock to use now or to freeze in 2-cup containers for later.

■ Resuscitate carrots and celery.

Trim and chill them in a bowl of ice water. They should crisp up enough so you can use them in stir-fry and other dishes.



Make fruit last longer. Trim off the bruised spots and cut the rest up into a fruit salad. Have leftover berries? Pick out the bad ones, mix the rest of them gently with a little sugar, and refrigerate them in a sealed container. The sugar will help preserve them a day or two longer, and you'll have an instant topping for ice cream or Saturday morning pancakes.

■ **Skip produce that isn't fresh.** Check with the market and shop on the days of produce deliveries. If the fruit doesn't have good color and is pocked with blemishes, don't buy it. And always check sell-by and expiration dates on meat, poultry, dairy, and other perishables. (In a previous investigation, Consumer Reports found dozens of

items at supermarkets that were past their sell-by or expiration dates.)

■ **Disguise leftovers.** Use leftover spinach, roasted peppers, cheese, and sausage as omelet fillings or pizza toppings, or turn them into crostini. Bits of leftover meat can be wrapped in a tortilla or added to soups.

NOW you know A University of Arizona study found that Americans throw out 14 percent of the food they buy, especially meat, veggies, fruit, and grains. For a family of four, that amounts to almost \$600 a year down the drain!

Grocery bag chic

You're at the checkout and you have one more shopping decision to make: Should you take the free bags or shell out a little and commit to reusables? We tested eight reusable bags sold at A&P, ShopRite, Stop & Shop, Target, Trader Joe's, Walmart, and Whole Foods Market to see which ones were worth buying. We loaded them with 30 pounds of flour, tomato cans, and a few weights and hooked them up to a mechanical arm, which lifted them few inches off the floor 500 times to check for strength. We also measured how much they would hold, checked for leaks by spilling milk into them, then washed the bags by hand and machine to see how well they held up. All the bags we tested survived intact and could hold much more than throwaway plastic bags, but a few stood out for other reasons.

Green picks



Trader Joe's
Price 99 cents



Whole Foods foldable tote
Price \$3.99



A&P
Elizabeth Haub
Price 99 cents

Why we like them All three are made of 100 percent recycled materials (mostly plastic bottles). The nylon-like \$3.99 tote folds into a handy pouch you can carry in your purse. **Bummer** The Trader Joe's bag held fewer items than the other bags in our tests and was not as well constructed. And you might have trouble slipping large bulky items through the neck opening of the Whole Foods foldable tote.

The most stylish



Whole Foods A Better Bag
Price 99 cents

Why we like it It looks more like a chic cloth tote with its long handles and funky tree design by the pop musician and environmental activist Sheryl Crow. And its roomy 0.9-cubic-foot capacity held the most groceries. Another plus: If it ever rips, you can

exchange it at the store for a new one.

Bummer It was harder to clean spills in this bag than it was in the others we tested.

Green runner-up



Walmart
Price \$1

Why we like it It's made from 85 percent recycled material and Walmart will take your old worn-out bag back for recycling.

Bummer It leaked badly in our spill-repellent tests.

Paper or plastic?

What 1,000 U.S. households in a Consumer Reports National Research Center survey said they choose:

80% pick plastic, grocery-supplied bags at least occasionally.

34% may opt for paper.

40% usually remember to bring their own cloth, string, or laminated bag.

94% reuse plastic and paper grocery bags (to line wastebaskets or pick up after a pet, for example).

Watch where you shop

Which grocery stores are best? In a survey of more than 32,000 Consumer Reports readers we found big differences among 59 national and regional chains. Trader Joe's, Costco, Market Basket, WinCo, Aldi, and Save-a-Lot had the lowest prices. Here are stores that ranked near the top in customer satisfaction. Walmart didn't make this list because of low scores in satisfaction and other areas; see below.

The top supermarkets

1. Wegmans
2. Trader Joe's
3. Publix
4. Raley's
5. Harris Teeter
6. Fareway
7. Costco
8. Whole Foods Market
9. Market Basket
10. (tie) WinCo Foods and Stater Bros.

And the worst for ...

Price Giant Eagle and Whole Foods (Other stores that rated not so great on price included A&P, Dillons, Dominick's, Giant, Harris Teeter, IGA, Jewel-Osco, Shaw's, and Waldbaum's.)

Service Walmart Supercenter and Waldbaum's

Perishables Walmart Supercenter

Cleanliness Waldbaum's

Readers' tips

In addition to relying on coupons, warehouse clubs, and ingredient-stretching slow cookers, here are other ways ShopSmart readers said they save:

I make casseroles. You can feed six with one helping of meat and you have fewer dishes to clean up afterward!

—Lois Newton, Big Rapids, Mich.

I shop only once a week. The more I keep out of the store, the more money I save in the end. Printable coupons have been indispensable for my family.

—Susan Brothers, Shelby Township, Mich.

I buy less meat and make it go further. Sometimes I'll shred it to make it look like more than it is.

—Cathryn Wenzler, Ardsley-on-Hudson, N.Y.

I create my grocery list based on recipes I plan to make that week. I then go through my coupons and what I don't have one for, I'll search online to find. Most foods do offer a coupon if you just take time to find them.

—Janis White, Raleigh, N.C.

Every three months I make our family eat up everything in the freezer and pantry. I won't shop, unless for milk, eggs, and cheese. It forces me to be more creative and the kids find it fun to do.

—Denise Gregorie, Winter Garden, Fla.

Not only do I use less expensive cuts of meat in the slow cooker, I use less and add more vegetables. And I use a lot of brown rice. It fills everyone up better than white rice.

—Deanna Polakowski, Chicago

Huge bags of frozen vegetables are great and can stretch any meal further without adding a ton of extra calories.

—Dori Perkins, Sioux Falls, S.D.



Stretch a batch of tomato sauce.

You can feed more people by adding tomato juice and spices to spaghetti sauce.

—Christine Yancy, Radcliff, Ky.

Click here for more savings

Got a chicken hanging out in your fridge? What about those wilted mushrooms and that bag of onions beginning to sprout? You can type in the ingredients you have on hand at one of the sites below and voilà! You have new recipes instead of another trip to the supermarket. We scoured the Internet to find the best sites to help you make the most of what you buy, zeroing in on those with the best recipe searches for using up what you have, personal recipe storage for easy access to your favorites, menu planners that give you great ways to use leftovers in completely different dishes, and substitution charts so you know what to do if you get stuck. And if your cooking skills are a little rusty, we also found sites with great how-to videos to help you feel more confident in the kitchen. Here are five sites worth checking out and our favorite features at each.

Allrecipes.com

Best for How-to videos

With more than 40,000 user-rated recipes and great video cooking tutorials, this is the go-to source for bringing your

skills up to speed so you can do more yourself, whether it's cutting up a whole chicken and using all the parts or learning how to choose the freshest salmon. The ingredient search lets you type in not only the items you want to use but also the ones you specifically don't want in the dish. Just one bummer: The site is so large that it can be a bit confusing to navigate.

Eatingwell.com

Best for Healthful cooking on the cheap

This is a great site to visit if you're trying to save money and eat well, too. We especially liked the "priced" recipe collections, like "Healthy Entrees Under \$3 Per Serving," with dishes like Portobello Quesadillas and Almond-Crusted Pork with Honey Mustard Dipping Sauce. The site's recipe makeovers show you how to use less fat and low-calorie ingredients, and the cool menu-planning tool allows you to create daily or weekly plans with the site's recipes or your own personal favorites, complete with a shopping list and printable coupons for healthful foods. We found coupons for \$1 off Organic

Valley cheese and \$1 off four containers of Brown Cow yogurt. And don't miss the ingredient guides, which will tell you all kinds of interesting stuff, including what persimmons taste like and how to buy the right kind of cooking oil.

Epicurious.com

Best for Recycling leftovers

In addition to more than 25,000 recipes, free recipe storage, great videos to improve your cooking skills, and a wireless recipe download for your smart phone, the site offers a weeknight menu planner called "Dinner Rush," which can be a big money saver. Each week it features meals with a few seasonal main ingredients and then seamlessly recycles the leftovers into new dishes for you, complete with a time-saving prep plan and shopping list. For example, a cut-up whole chicken that is Chicken Thighs with Creole Mustard Orange Sauce on Tuesday becomes Chicken Broccoli Stir Fry on Friday.

Recipe Central

(lancaster.unl.edu/food/recipe.shtml)

Best for Money-saving food-storage tips

This site, run by the cooperative extension food experts at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, is full of recipes and money-saving tips such as ingredient-substitution charts (cottage cheese puréed in a blender can replace mayonnaise, or one-fourth teaspoon of baking soda plus five-eighths teaspoon of cream of tartar can replace a teaspoon of baking powder), food-storage tips so stuff lasts longer, and an easy way to keep track of odds and ends in the fridge (keep them all in one handy place, such as a metal tray). It even tells you what to do with all that zucchini in your garden (marinate in vinegar and grill it, or grate and freeze it for holiday baking).

Recipezaar.com

Best for Recipe searches

Click on "Choose from 365,000 member-contributed recipes" to find "Recipe Sifter," where you can search for recipes by ingredient, prep time, occasion, diet, equipment needed, and more. Click on "Budget-Friendly Cooking" for inexpensive meals or "OAMC" (once-a-month cooking) for dishes like Chicken Salsa that you can cook in bulk when the ingredients are on sale and then divide into smaller portions to freeze. The recipes are not professionally tested, but they are rated and critiqued by users. Create a free personal page (click on "My Page") for your own cookbook of favorites, which you can print or text to your phone.

What's cooking



When it comes to weeknight dinner planning and fixing, what's going on at your house? Is pinching pennies more important than convenience? Are you eating more leftovers and fewer dinners out? See how your everyday food habits stack up against what more than 1,000 women in our new ShopSmart national poll told us they're doing—and not doing.

DINNER BY THE NUMBERS

6 p.m. The most popular time to eat.

5 The average number of home-cooked dinners eaten per week.

45 minutes The average time spent cooking weeknight meals.

31 minutes The average time it takes to eat dinner.

3 per week The number of dinners eaten in front of the TV.

How do you plan weeknight meals?

86% go through the fridge to see what they have.

78% choose what can be prepared quickly.

72% build menus around what's nutritious and healthful.

34% plan a few days ahead.

But ... 38% don't think about dinner until that day.

\$157 What the average woman with kids spends on groceries weekly.

Love it or hate it?

55% said they don't mind cooking nightly dinners.

25% said they enjoy it.

18% said they dislike it.

How has the economy changed your cooking habits?

42% are stocking up on food items when they go on sale.

35% are buying more generic and store brands.

38% are cooking more at home.

35% are preparing less-expensive meals.

But ... hardly anyone is sticking to a shopping list to curb impulse purchases!

16% do **vs.** **84%** don't.

The biggest surprise: One in 10 women flat-out refuse to eat leftovers.

70% of married women cook all or most of weeknight dinners in the household.

TABLETOP: MONICA BUCK; FOOD STYLING: TONI BROGAN; PROP STYLING: LYNDY WHITE