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Ring Up the Savings: Nicole Cheslock saved 33 percent by choosing sale items and taking advantage of online coupons.

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An Indulgent Foodie's Challenge: Eating Well On \$50

Published: January 17, 2011

January Print Edition

by Nicole Cheslock

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It's possible to shop locally and eat well for less than \$50 a week. In fact, there were even leftovers after one resident experimented with a food budget.



photo by Nicole Cheslock

It's possible to shop locally and eat well for less than \$50 a week. In fact, there were even leftovers after Cheslock experimented with a food budget.



Clip Coupons: Safeway's new "Just for U" program includes online coupons with many specials that can be used more than once and last 90 days.

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Tips for a Healthy Diet on a Budget

- Plan ahead.
- Cook at home and leverage leftovers. 🍴🍴🍴
- Eat more vegetarian meals.
- Think in threes.
- Buy produce that's in season.
- Shop sales and stock up.
- For Safeway customers, shop on Sunday to take advantage of all the weekly deals.

I crossed morning smoothies off my list after the shock from a \$3.99 sticker on a small bag of frozen blueberries hit. I took comfort in the breakfast items already in my cart — whole-wheat toast with peanut butter and banana, and ingredients for a cheesy spinach and zucchini baked-egg dish that I planned to make over the weekend. Why fret over the berries? My goal was to eat well for one week on less than \$50.

I don't own the latest gadget, shop for trendy runway pieces, or even buy the hottest ski gear, but I like to cook and I love to eat out. I splurge on food. It was time to build awareness and get creative. Time to experiment with a grocery budget.

According to Internal Revenue Service figures, the average monthly national expenditure for groceries is \$293 for one person (\$66 per week). The food-stamp budget for a family of four is less than \$70 a week, and to bring the national picture into focus, consider this: Project MANA, Tahoe/Truckee's hunger-relief agency, serves 450 individuals every week.

"Most Project MANA clients have around \$80 a week to spend on a family of four," said Kaili Sanchez, Project MANA's Truckee program manager, noting that time to plan and prepare fulfilling meals is often the challenge surrounding a budget-regulated diet. "Many parents have to work long hours, have more than one child, no or limited transportation, and limited cooking space."

Eating on a budget can be stressful. I found anxiety crept in on day two — would I run out of food? Why didn't I buy more veggies or save money for an impromptu lunch out with colleagues? Could I stick to the planned meals? Obsessing and second-guessing got me nowhere, so I focused on recommendations from local experts.

Eating well defined

Eating well is about more than tasty meals, so I consulted Jill Whisler, a registered dietitian with the Tahoe Center for Health and Sports Performance, who advised me to "think in threes." Each meal should contain at least three of the six food groups (fruits, vegetables, protein, dairy, fat, and carbohydrates). As Sanchez puts it, "When you plate your food, think of a peace symbol. Two large portions should be your veggies/fruit and then whole grains. The smaller portion can be your protein or dairy with a little bit of healthy fats."

Taking time to think about what I was going to prepare was critical. Lentil soup with carrots, onions, and whole-wheat toast croutons — protein, vegetable, carb. Multigrain penne with sautéed spinach and zucchini topped with mozzarella cheese — carb, vegetables, protein, and fat. You get the idea.

Shop the sales

Nancy Klenow, the store manager for Safeway in Kings Beach, emphasized the importance of planning ahead, buying items on sale, and using coupons to maximize savings. She also told me that the new "Just for U" program provides long-lasting coupons. I signed up online, linked coupons to my card, and got a dozen eggs for free.

Before I added groceries to my cart, I weighed items, double checked costs, and tried to keep a running total. When I checked out after an hour at the grocery store, I was relieved to see my total drop to \$31.05 from \$45.17. I immediately brought the groceries to the car, turned around, and bought a box of store-brand black pekoe tea bags and honey to satisfy my decade old morning routine. I also picked up olive oil and butter. Revised total — \$47.61.

Buying items on sale and using online coupons wound up saving me more than \$15. Still, there was no way I was buying a latte, at nearly four

Buy in season

“The best way to stretch your dollars is to buy seasonally,” Sanchez said. “When produce is in season, it tastes so much better, is usually on sale because of its abundance, and is nutritionally great for that time of year.” Citrus and leafy greens, high in vitamin C, are great choices for wintertime. I snacked on a large orange, loved adding fresh spinach to soups and pasta dishes, and regretted not buying a box of clementines on sale for \$4.99.

Meal makeovers

Sanchez suggested cooking a large batch of veggies or soup and using or freezing it to enjoy other convenient meals when there’s not much time to prepare dinner.

Pasta, lentils, and a one-pound bag of Great Northern beans provided nutritious lunches and dinners for the entire week. I prepared a bean soup by sautéing onions and carrots in olive oil and butter before adding veggie stock. One bowl was great for dinner. Topped with fresh spinach, the soup was satisfying for lunch the next day, and at the end of the week, a third bowl was spruced up with leftover tomato sauce and penne. All in all, a variety of fulfilling meals came to just 78 cents a serving by using Sanchez’s advice.

Meals revealed

It is definitely possible to eat well on a budget in Tahoe/Truckee. My meals included a cheese, spinach, mushroom, and zucchini egg dish, grilled cheddar and mozzarella sandwiches, a mashed yam with honey and a side of steamed broccoli, homemade lentil soup, and multigrain penne with a hearty tomato mushroom sauce.

I was never hungry and didn’t have to watch my portion size. In fact, I even had leftovers including four eggs, a hunk of mozzarella, a box of pasta, and bowls of soup. Though I must confess, a friend called with a dinner invitation and I didn’t hesitate. After all, I believe part of eating well is enjoying meals with others and I had enough food to reciprocate with a lunch invitation.

After this experience, I plan to continue to use Sanchez’s recommendations, which she summarized as “buy in bulk, in season, cook in larger batches, freeze and/or plan other meals around your cooked foods.” However, you’ll still catch me spending a little extra for real Parmesan and enjoying a meal out from time to time.

1 Reader Comment so far ...

1. Eating Well on \$50

Don't forget to buy extra berries, peaches, etc. during the summer---or ask the vendor to sell a #2 box of overripe fruit, then you can freeze, etc. and have your smoothie year round!

posted by: Amy Lyons on Jan 26, 2011 at 8:50 AM

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