

# MORE FOR YOUR Money



Tasty Savings

## Eat Healthy for Less

How to buy the best food  
without supersizing your bill

BY REBEKAH DENN ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON M. PARK

■ Linda Watson enjoys organic strawberries and asparagus quiche. The 56-year-old author of *Wildly Affordable Organic* shops nearly every week at a farmers' market near her Raleigh, North Carolina, home. Her food budget for a full day's worth of meals? Less than \$5.

Watson's economical eats defy the elitist aura around foodie buzzwords like *organic*, *local*, and *sustainable*. It's true that pesticide-free peaches and grass-fed filets mignons don't come cheap. But home cooks who shop smart can eat more "clean" foods—those that are better for their health and for the environment—without running up a huge bill. "You don't have to be snooty," says

Watson, "You don't have to use fiddle-head ferns." (She prefers snap peas to these wild-harvested ferns, which easily run \$20 per pound.)

Advocates for locally produced food, or "locavores," argue that cheap food is no bargain if you add the costs of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related maladies. "We are paying way more for drugs and medical care than we used to, and less for food, and that is not a coincidence," says Erin Barnett, director of LocalHarvest, which connects consumers to small farms.

And going locavore can cost less than you think. Here's how to save and still satisfy a taste for the good stuff.

#### ■ **Make a beeline for the bulk bins**

Even at high-end natural grocers like Whole Foods Market, you can find budget-friendly deals in the bulk bins for spices, grains, beans, and pasta. A Washington State store, for example, sells organic bay leaves for \$1.75 per ounce in bulk, compared with \$42.78 per ounce for a small container.

#### ■ **Rely on the range**

Store-bought staples can be made for less money and effort than you'd guess. Author Jennifer Reese chronicles the cost-to-hassle ratio in her book *Make the Bread, Buy the Butter*. Homemade hummus involves little more than turning on the blender, she says, and costs 85 cents per cup, compared with up to \$4.45 per cup for national brands. And baked goods? "Never buy muffins at Starbucks. It's pennies on the dollar if you bake from scratch," says Reese.

#### ■ **Buy part of the farm**

When you have a community-supported agriculture (CSA) subscription, farmers deliver a weekly selection, or "share," from their current harvests to pickup points nearby. Paying up front for a season's worth

of produce can run roughly \$400 to \$800, but that works out to a reasonable \$20 to \$40 per week, and you'll expand your culinary horizons with exotic ingredients like garlic scapes. To find a CSA, visit [LocalHarvest.org](http://LocalHarvest.org).

#### ■ **Waste not, store a lot**

If you're tossing away half of your CSA produce, you're not saving money. To

use ingredients efficiently and avoid restaurant and takeout meals (which account for about 43 percent of the average American's food expenditures, according to the USDA), take up "batch cooking": preparing big quantities to stock your fridge and freezer with a week of meals. Use more perishable products first, store vegetables properly, and preserve or pickle the

**5 FOODS YOU SHOULD SPEND MORE ON**

- Apples** Most conventional apples contain pesticide residue; they top the Environmental Working Group's Dirty Dozen list of most polluted produce (see the full list at [ewg.org](http://ewg.org)). Pay extra for organic apples.
- Salmon** Farmed Atlantic salmon has been linked to higher levels of PCBs and antibiotics overuse. Wild Pacific salmon is cleaner, and the canned version is budget-friendly.
- Canned tomatoes** Most canned tomatoes contain bisphenol-A, an endocrine disrupter. Muir Glen organic canned tomatoes are costlier but BPA-free, as are Eden Foods' organic tomatoes in glass jars.
- Milk** If you can't afford organic, buy milk labeled as from cows that haven't been treated with the hormone rBST (also known as rBGH), which is banned in the European Union and Canada.
- Ground beef** After a consumer uproar, groceries are pulling ground beef with "lean, finely textured beef," also known as "pink slime"—fatty scraps treated with ammonium hydroxide. To avoid it, grind your own beef chuck or buy organic.

rest. Websites like FoodinJars.com offer reliable recipes for quick small-batch canning.

### ■ Scout for the cheapest store

Prices vary widely from store to store within a region. One reliable source of cheap produce: Asian markets. You aren't likely to find organics, but you can score amazing deals on greens like bok choy or Chinese broccoli.

### ■ Stay seasonal

Farmers' markets get a bad rap as expensive temples of exquisite produce, but produce is often cheaper there than at supermarkets, studies show. The trick is to buy during seasonal peaks—the first strawberries cost far more than the later glut. Buy in bulk for a quantity discount, and don't fear bruised or imperfect fruit. "You won't be able to use every bite, but often you'll get it at 25 percent or less of original cost," Watson says.

### ■ Join a cow pool

Organic, grass-fed beef is better for you and the planet, but at \$25 per pound or more, it can be tough on your wallet. Carnivores with freezer space and friends willing to share can try "cow pooling": You arrange for farmers to provide a butchered and wrapped beast, nose to tail, and then split it up. "Depending on where you are, every cut averages out to \$5 to \$6 per pound," said Lynne Curry, author of *Pure Beef*. She also recommends "underappreciated and penny-wise" cuts such as sirloin tip, skirt steak, and on-the-bone meats for braising.

### ■ Eat lower on the food chain

Eggs are a far cheaper protein than meat, and vegetarian meals are low-cost and nutritious. Organizers of the Meatless Monday movement, who advocate forgoing meat one day a week, estimate the strategy can save families \$80 to \$100 per month.

### ■ Grow your own

Herbs are money savers in kitchen gardens, especially perennials like rosemary and oregano. You can avoid the organic markup for berries by raising them clean at home; loose-leaf lettuces and greens like kale and chard sprout new leaves after they're trimmed, providing a season-long salad.

### ■ Go wild

Wild edibles like huckleberries and morel mushrooms are free for the taking—if you know what you're doing. For those who don't, parks departments offer foraging classes, and author Steve Brill created a Wild Edibles smartphone app. Newbie mushroom hunters should connect with a club (find one via the North American Mycological Association: [namyco.org](http://namyco.org)).

Two-time James Beard Award winner Rebekah Denn regularly contributes to *The Seattle Times* and *Sunset* magazine.

## Back of the Envelope

How Much Money Would You Save in One Year If You Baked All Your Bread?

Bake-at-home cost of a 1-pound whole wheat loaf, including energy use:

less than \$1  
x 52 weeks  
= less than \$52

Average U.S. commercial cost of a whole wheat loaf in January:

\$1.98  
x 52 weeks  
= \$102.96

If your household eats one loaf a week, you save more than \$50 a year.



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ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE SANDOZ. BREAD BAKING COSTS: FIGURES AND MAKE THE BUDGET BY JEFF HERRICK