



In tough economic times, many families include food in their spending cuts. How can we tighten our budget and yet still eat well?

Six months ago, Josh Viertel threw down the “value meal” gauntlet in a major way. The Slow Food USA president challenged cooks around the country to create a family-friendly feast for under \$5. Many responded, sharing their tips and tricks at SlowFoodUSA.org/5Challenge. Here are some favorites.

Setting a Budget

Five dollars per meal for 21 meals a week, plus snacks, neatly totals the \$125 weekly food budget set by the Leake family, of Charlotte, North Carolina. Lisa and Jason Leake, parents of two young daughters, first explored what it would be like to eliminate processed food from their diet, which they describe in their blog at 100DaysOfRealFood.com. Their success led to the additional challenge of eating real food on a budget.

“Having a realistic weekly budget is helpful, because you can’t go too far over budget before you realize you are in trouble,” advises Lisa Leake. To make it even easier to stay on track, she makes it a habit to shop near home and uses cash instead of credit.

Seasonal Shopping

“If we shop for seasonal produce and freeze or can surplus from our local farmers’ market, we can eat well all year and still eat frugally,” advises Rebecca Miller, a macrobiotic and healing foods caterer from Overland Park, Kansas. “When fresh blueberries are \$3 a cup at the grocery during the off-season, for example, we can still enjoy canned berries in recipes or thawed from the freezer on our morning oatmeal.”

Eating Down the Fridge

Seattle-based Kim O’Donnel, author of *The Meatlover’s Meatless Cookbook*, blogs about family meals for *USA Today*. “I regularly emphasize what I call ‘eating down the frig,’” she says. “That means making use of what we’ve got on hand, like generations before us that also went through food shortages. We’re just out of practice.”

One way to help ourselves learn, says O’Donnel, is to stock a “smarter” pantry. Staples include different varieties of dried beans; lentils; quick-cooking grains such as quinoa, bulgur, couscous and purple barley; garbanzo beans; brown and black rice; and a few BPA-free canned goods like tomatoes, black beans and chickpeas.

“If we take our time and watch for good deals, we can build a pantry at a low cost,” she says, because such ingredients are basically “blank slates.” As just one example of a low-cost, pantry-based



meal, O'Donnel might start with cooked red lentils, then add fresh ginger and garlic, sautéed onion with cumin, and fresh spinach and tomatoes, and then serve it with whole-wheat pita bread.

Ingredient-First Cooking

Jane Zieha, a certified public accountant, knows that feeding people and watching the bottom line can go together. She owns the acclaimed Blue Bird Bistro, in Kansas City, Missouri. An avowed all-natural, organic, sustainable and local foods passionista, Zieha has stayed true to the principles of her Pennsylvania upbringing.

"I didn't eat like anybody else growing up," she says. "We never ate packaged food. We ate what was fresh. When I was old enough to go to a friend's house for dinner, I was surprised at how they ate." Today, both at home and at work, Zieha continues to select the best that local farmers can provide. "I don't start with a recipe and then find the food, like most chefs and restaurants do," she explains. "I find the ingredients and then go from there."

Meat as a Condiment

More expensive ingredients, such as heritage turkey, can bring more flavor and texture to an entrée as an ingredient instead of a standalone part of a meal, advises Zieha. She might feature heritage turkey in an enchilada filling, pasta or savory bread pudding, so that a little goes a long way.

It also makes sense to shop for varieties of fish or cuts of meat that aren't widely popular or that take longer to cook. Slow Food's Viertel, who shops near Brooklyn, New York, remarks: "I buy 'trash fish'—sea robin, squid, mackerel, sardines—because they are cheaper and I believe, taste best. The same is true of the other meats I buy. I never cook pork chops or filet mignon; I cook oxtail and short ribs."

Then, O'Donnel adds, the frugal cook turns bones of roasted poultry or trimmings from a whole fish into a delicious stock. Any homemade broth can be just the frozen asset we need for yet another tasty "value" meal.

Cookbook author Judith Fertig writes at AlfrescoFoodAndLifestyle.blogspot.com.