

MEALS

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Make a grocery list — and stick to it. You'll be less likely to waste money on something that looks good in the store but you'll never use, says Hutter.

Choose store brands over name brands, which are almost always priced higher. And always check price per ounce when comparing prices.

If you insist on fresh, choose vegetables and fruits that are in season. They're typically cheaper and often come from local farms. Minimize waste by buying root vegetables such as sweet potatoes and carrots and leafy veggies such as cabbage, which have a long shelf life.

Study the store circular before making your list and take advantage of what's on sale.

Plan some meals by creatively cooking once and serving the leftovers in another dish. I served a big pot of beef and bean chili in bowls one night for supper and inside flour tortillas with cheese the next day for lunch.

Never shop when you're hungry (it leads to impulse buying) and, above all, know your budget and shop appropriately; fail to plan and you're really planning to fail, says Krieger. "You have to know what you can (afford to) spend."

Yes, it's tougher than ever to eat well while stretching those mealtime dollars. But with planning and persistence, it's not impossible.

EASY MEAT AND CHEESE RIGATONI

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Pasta is inexpensive, and easy to prepare. Served with a homemade meat sauce, it's everyone's favorite.

For sauce

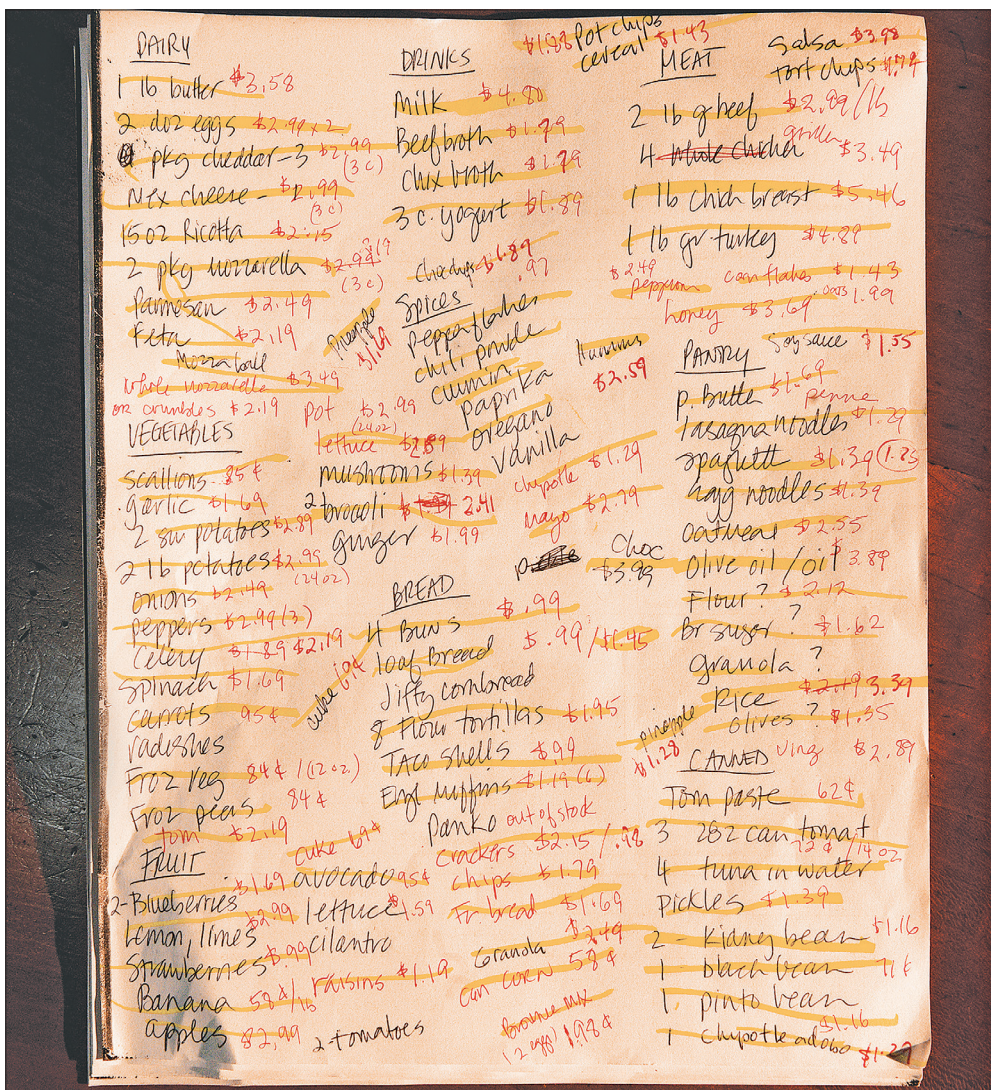
- 1 tablespoon olive oil or butter, plus more for pan
1/2 onion, peeled and chopped
1 pound ground beef
Salt and pepper
28-ounce can crushed plum tomatoes
2 tablespoons tomato paste
Red pepper flakes, to taste

For pasta

- 15-ounce container of ricotta
2 1/2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese, divided
1 large egg, beaten
16-ounce package rigatoni
1/4 cup grated Parmesan
Chopped fresh parsley, for garnish, optional

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 9-by-13-inch baking with oil or cooking spray. Heat olive oil or butter in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add onion and cook until soft and translucent, about 4 minutes. Add ground beef and cook until beef has browned, about 5 minutes, crumbling it with a spoon as it cooks. Season to taste with salt and pepper, then drain excess fat. Stir in tomatoes and tomato paste and a pinch or two of red pepper flakes. Stir well to combine, then set heat to low and allow sauce to simmer. In a medium bowl, combine ricotta, 1 cup mozzarella and the egg, then set aside. While sauce is simmering, cook pasta noodles al dente according to package directions. Rinse well under cold water and drain. Prepare pasta: Spread 1 cup sauce onto the bottom of the prepared baking dish. Top with 1/3 of the cooked noodles, 1/2 of the ricotta cheese mixture and 1/2 cup mozzarella cheese. Repeat with a second layer. Top with remaining noodles, more sauce and remaining 1/2 cup mozzarella. Sprinkle Parmesan cheese on top. Place in oven and bake for 30 minutes or until brown and bubbly. Let cool for 5 minutes, then serve.

Makes 8 servings.



Steve Mellon/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

This is the list of more than 60 ingredients purchased for less than \$200 by Pittsburgh Post-Gazette food writer Gretchen McKay, who will use the ingredients to provide a week's worth of meals for a family of four.

BROCCOLI AND CHEESE FRITTATA

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

A frittata is an egg-based dish similar to an omelet, only it's finished in the oven. The perfect dish for Sunday brunch, this one gets heft from broccoli and cheese.

For potatoes

- 1 pound small (1 1/2-2 inches) red bliss, Yukon Gold or other waxy potatoes

Olive oil

Kosher salt and pepper

Italian seasoning

For frittata

- 2 tablespoons butter
2 cups fresh or frozen (thawed) broccoli, chopped
1 clove garlic, minced
8 eggs
1/2 teaspoon each salt and pepper
1 cup grated cheddar cheese

Preheat oven to 425 degrees Fahrenheit, making sure there are two racks in place. Halve the potatoes and place in a large bowl. Drizzle with oil, season with salt, pepper and Italian seasoning, then toss to combine. Spread potatoes onto a parchment-lined cooking sheet, and roast 20-30 minutes, or until crispy and tender. While potatoes are roasting, prepare frittata. In a large oven-proof, nonstick skillet, melt butter over medium heat. Add broccoli and cook, stirring occasionally, until broccoli is tender, 3-4 minutes. Stir in garlic, and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly, until fragrant. In a large bowl, whisk the eggs, 1/4 cup water, salt and pepper until blended. Stir in cheese. Pour egg mixture over broccoli mixture, stirring gently, and cook over medium heat until eggs begin to set. (Occasionally lift edges of frittata to allow uncooked mixture to go to the bottom.) Place skillet in oven and bake until frittata is set, 8-10 minutes. Slide frittata onto cutting board, cut into wedges and serve.

Serves 4.

OVERNIGHT OATMEAL

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Oatmeal is one of the most nutritious breakfast foods. This recipe is prepared the night before, so it's ready to go in the morning.

- 2 cups whole rolled oats
2 cups milk, or more as needed
2 teaspoons maple syrup
Pinch of cinnamon, optional
Pinch of sea salt
1 cup blueberries, sliced strawberries and/or banana, for topping
Granola, for topping

In a large bowl, combine the oats, milk, maple syrup, cinnamon

(if using) and a generous pinch of salt. Stir and chill overnight. In the morning, scoop the oats into a bowl and, if desired, stir in more milk for a smoother consistency. Top with fruit and granola.

Serves 4.

TUNA FISH SANDWICHES

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Canned tuna is a healthful food rich in protein and vitamins.

- 2 6-ounce cans tuna in water
1/4 cup mayonnaise or more to taste
1/4 cup chopped sweet or dill pickle
1/4 cup chopped onion
1 large stalk celery, minced
Salt and pepper
4 rolls or 8 slices of bread
Handful of potato chips, crushed, plus more for serving

In large bowl, combine tuna, mayonnaise, pickle, onion and celery. Stir to mix well, season to taste with salt and pepper, then fold in potato chips. Serve tuna salad between two slices of bread or in a roll, with extra potato chips on the side.

Serves 4.

BEEF AND BEAN CHILI

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

This chili is even better the next day rolled with cheese into a burrito.

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
1 medium onion, peeled and chopped
1 large bell pepper, chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 pound ground beef
Salt and black pepper
1/4 cup chili powder or more to taste

- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 large can (28 ounces) diced tomatoes, with juice
2 15-ounce cans kidney beans, rinsed and drained
2 cups beef broth
Grated cheese and chopped scallions for garnish.
Saltine crackers, for serving

Heat oil in heavy large pot over medium-high heat. Add onions and cook until translucent, about 6 minutes. Add green pepper and garlic; sauté 1 minute. Add beef and cook until brown, about 6-7 minutes minutes, breaking up with back of a spoon. Add chili powder, cumin, paprika and oregano, then mix in tomatoes with juices, beans and broth. Bring chili to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for about 45 minutes, skimming any fat that rises to the surface. Ladle chili into bowls and

garnish with grated cheese and scallions. Serve with crackers.

Makes 8 cups.

LEFTOVER CHILI BURRITOS

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Burritos make a great grab-and-go lunch, and when they're made with leftover chili, they're also quick and easy.

- 2 cups leftover beef and bean chili, warmed, divided
2 cups cooked rice, divided
1 cup shredded cheese, divided
8 flour tortillas
Tortilla chip and salsa, for serving

Warm the tortillas in the microwave for 1 minute. Spoon 1/4 cup chili, 1/4 cup rice and 2 tablespoons cheese in top third of warmed tortilla, fold over the ends of the tortilla, and then roll up. Repeat with the rest of the tortillas. Serve with chips and salsa.

Serves 4.

GREEK-STYLE CHICKEN WITH POTATOES

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Lemon zest, briny olives and feta give this easy sheet pan dish a burst of Mediterranean flavor.

- 1 lemon
2 teaspoons oregano, divided
2 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 teaspoon salt, divided
1/4 teaspoon pepper, divided
2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
4 pieces bone-in chicken thigh
1 pound baby potatoes, halved
2 large bell peppers, seeded and cut into wedges
1/3 cup olives
1/3 cup crumbled feta

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Finely zest the lemon. Combine lemon zest, 1 teaspoon oregano, garlic, 1/4 teaspoon salt, 1/8 teaspoon pepper and 1 tablespoon oil in small bowl. Rub spice mixture all over the chicken and underneath the skin. Place potatoes and pepper on a sheet pan. Drizzle with remaining olive oil and squeeze about 1 tablespoon lemon juice on top. Sprinkle with remaining 1 teaspoon oregano, 1/4 teaspoon salt and 1/8 teaspoon pepper and toss to coat. Distribute the vegetables around the pan, then nestle the chicken pieces on the pan among the vegetables. Cook until the chicken is cooked through with an internal

temperature of 165 degrees and the veggies are tender, about 30 minutes. If the chicken is cooked before the vegetables are done, transfer to a plate, cover with foil to keep warm and allow the vegetables to cook a bit more. Serve sprinkled with olives, feta, the remaining lemon juice and more oregano to taste. Serves 4.

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BLUEBERRY PANCAKES

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Pancakes for breakfast. Need we say more?

- 1 1/4 cup flour
2 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 1/3 cups milk, mixed with 1 tablespoon vinegar
1 egg, beaten
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 pint blueberries

In large bowl, combine flour, sugar, and baking powder and soda. Make a well in the middle, then stir in soured milk, beaten egg and vegetable oil. Gently fold in most of the blueberries. Heat a lightly oiled griddle or nonstick frying pan over medium-high heat. (A drop of water should sizzle in the pan.) Pour or scoop the batter onto the griddle, using approximately 1/4 cup for each pancake. Cook until surface of pancakes has some bubbles and a few have burst, 1-2 minutes. Flip carefully with a spatula and cook until browned on the underside, 1-2 minutes more. Transfer to a baking sheet or platter. cover loosely with aluminum foil and keep warm in oven. Continue with remaining batter. (You'll have 12-16 pancakes.) Serve warm, with butter and maple syrup, if desired, and remaining blueberries.

Serves 4.

PEANUT BUTTER BANANA SMOOTHIE

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Packed with nutrient-rich ingredients, smoothies take just minutes to make and are a great way to get kids to eat fruit.

- 2-3 bananas, cut into chunks
2 cups milk
1/2 cup peanut butter
1-2 tablespoons honey
2 cups ice cubes

Place bananas, milk, peanut butter, honey and ice cubes in a blender. Blend until smooth, about 30 seconds. Divide into 4 glasses.

Serves 4.

SPINACH & EGG RICE BOWL

Adapted from eatingwell.com

If you don't have sesame oil in your pantry, vegetable oil works fine in this recipe. Also feel free to substitute your favorite veggies.

- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil, divided
2 1/2 cups cooked rice
1/2 teaspoon salt plus a pinch, divided
2 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided
1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
2 8-ounce packages baby spinach
1 tablespoon lime juice
4 large eggs
1 ripe avocado, sliced

- 1 cup julienned carrot
1/2 cucumber, thinly sliced
2 scallions, thinly sliced
4 teaspoons Sriracha or hot sauce
Limes, for garnish

Heat 1 teaspoon sesame oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add rice and sprinkle with 1/4 teaspoon salt; cook, stirring occasionally, until crispy, about 10 minutes. Divide among 4 shallow bowls. Add the remaining 1 teaspoon sesame oil, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil and ginger to the pan. Add spinach, in batches, and cook, tossing until wilted, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in lime juice and 1/4 teaspoon salt. Divide among the rice bowls. Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in the pan. Crack eggs into it and cook until the whites are set and the edges are crispy, about 3 minutes. Sprinkle with the remaining pinch of salt. Place an egg on each rice bowl. Top with avocado, carrots, cucumber slices, scallions and Sriracha.

Serves 4.

VEGGIE NOODLE STIR-FRY

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

Spaghetti doesn't just call out for red sauce — It's also great in an Asian stir-fry featuring frozen veggies.

For sauce

- 1/4 cup soy sauce
1/4 cup water
2 tablespoon brown sugar
1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes, or more to taste
1 tablespoon cornstarch

For noodles

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
12-ounce bag frozen mixed vegetables
2 scallions, sliced on the diagonal
2 garlic cloves, minced
8 ounces spaghetti, cooked

Make the stir-fry sauce first. Combine the soy sauce, water, brown sugar, sesame oil, garlic, ginger and cornstarch in a small bowl. Set the sauce aside.

Make noodles: Heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in a large skillet or wok over high heat. Once the oil is very hot and shimmering, add frozen vegetables and stir-fry until they are just tender, about 3-4 minutes. Add garlic and scallions and sauté until fragrant, about 1 minute.

Add cooked spaghetti and toss to combine with vegetables. Pour in the soy sauce mixture, letting it bubble and simmer. Continue stirring the noodles and vegetables for 3 minutes until the liquid has been absorbed.

Serves 4.

FRUIT AND YOGURT BOWL

Recipe by Gretchen McKay

So easy, so delicious.

- 3 cups vanilla or plain yogurt
2 cups mixed berries of choice (such as blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries)
1/2 cup granola
Honey, for drizzling

Divide yogurt among 4 bowls. Add berries on top, then granola. Drizzle with a little honey, if desired.

Serves 4.

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