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Piled on the kitchen table of food writer Gretchen McKay are more than 60 ingredients that she purchased for less than \$200. The ingredients will be used to provide a week's worth of meals for a family of four.

Budget meals

The challenge: One week of meals, from scratch, for a family of 4 for less than \$200

By GRETCHEN MCKAY • Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There's no getting around this simple and unpalatable fact: It's pretty stressful to go grocery shopping these days.

Thanks to the skyrocketing cost of inflation — which climbed to a 40-year record high of 9.1% in June compared to last year — food has never been more expensive.

The price of pantry staples such as bread and cereal has jumped nearly 14%, according to the Consumer Price Index, and dairy products are not far behind, costing an average of 13.5% more than a year ago. The price of meat, poultry, fish and eggs will also leave a shopper reeling from sticker shock, and don't even get me started on what a bag of Lay's potato chips will set you back these days.

As the Post-Gazette's food editor, my job is to cook — a lot. And while I try (really) hard to choose recipes that are as easy for the average cook as they are inspirational and great tasting, it's gotten considerably tougher in recent months to also make them 100% affordable. Having raised five kids, including three always-hungry sons, I know firsthand how expensive three meals a day can be for a family in good economic times. I can't imagine doing it today, especially when the cost of everything else we need on a daily basis is rising, too.

The challenge

Yet I'm also a problem-solver who has penny-pinched at meal time for decades. So I decided to make myself this challenge: Prepare a week's worth of meals for a family of four, completely from scratch, for around \$200.

Why that number? The USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program currently allots \$215.10 a week to a four-person household to cover the cost of groceries necessary to provide a "healthy, budget-conscious diet" under its official Thrifty Food Plan. I wanted to know what that would buy you and whether you could make three squares a day taste good on a budget.

To accomplish that goal, I set some parameters. I'd do one marathon shopping session to save on both time and the crazy cost of gas. And I'd do so at a discount grocery to assure I was getting the most bang for the buck.

Still ...

I'm not going to lie. Even with all my experience and

excess storage (I have two refrigerators and a huge walk-in pantry), coming up with a grocery list and nutritious recipes to feed a family of four for an entire week wasn't easy. It certainly took time, along with some math skills to break it all down and figure out what ingredients were as affordable as they were easy to prepare for the average cook — and what had to be left off the list.

To my surprise — and delight — my bill was \$198.14. And that included a brownie mix, a fresh pineapple, English muffins, green chile salsa, a box of (real) Corn Flakes and some chocolate-covered almonds I tossed in the cart on a whim because they were so cheap. I had so much, I had to supplement the four reusable bags I'd brought with three 12-cent paper bags sold at checkout — and still ended up under budget.

Menu planning

For advice on how to devise a healthful menu before that marathon shopping trip, I turned to cookbook author and registered dietitian and nutritionist Ellie Krieger. Kelsey Hutter, a registered dietitian with Allegheny Health Network, also weighed in.

Meat can stretch the budget, so both suggested building at least a few recipes around plant-based proteins such as tofu, peanut butter, lentils, or canned or dried beans, which are nutrient-rich and full of heart-healthy fiber and antioxidants.

"I would look at all different varieties and go with what's on sale, and then substitute them in a dish" like chili

or burgers, Krieger says.

Eggs are another good budget item — especially for breakfast — along with frozen vegetables, which, because they're flash-frozen at harvest, are just as healthful as fresh cooked (although the texture may be different), says Hutter.

Frozen fruit, which makes superior smoothies and is wonderful on top of yogurt, is another smart buy. Not only is it much less expensive than fresh, but also it reduces waste because it's not going to rot when you forget about it in your refrigerator.

Something as simple as brown rice is perfectly nutritious as are oats and canned fish. Krieger, for instance, likes to use canned tuna in water for sandwiches and tuna in oil for salads "because I can use the oil in the can as my dressing."

Pasta is another great choice that's shelf stable. Pair it with a homemade sauce made from canned tomatoes or toss it with frozen veggies for a quick and low-cost stir-fry. Also, grains like rice can help stretch out a meal.

"You have to change your mindset that 'healthy' is expensive, so why bother," says Krieger. "You just have to be strategic about it."

Shopping tips

Take an inventory of your pantry and fridge before shopping so you don't end up buying what you already have.

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Cool down with cucumber soup

By LINDA GASSENHEIMER
Tribune News Service

Cucumbers and cooked shrimp make a cool and refreshing summer soup. No cooking is needed. The entire soup is made in a food processor or blender and takes about 10 minutes, start to finish. You can serve it right away at room temperature. Or, if you want to serve it very cold, fill a large bowl with ice water. Add the cucumber soup to a smaller bowl and nest it in the ice water. Stir to help the cooling.

Helpful Hints

• You can find cooked shrimp in the frozen section

of the market. It takes about 5 minutes to defrost in a bowl of water.

• The recipe uses a small amount of chicken broth. Freeze the remaining broth for another time.
• You can use any type of bread.

Countdown

• Prepare all ingredients.
• Make the soup.
• Toast the slices of bread.

Shopping List

• To buy: 2 cucumbers, 1 loaf whole wheat country-style bread, 1 container plain, low-fat Greek-style yogurt, 1 bunch fresh dill, 1/2 pound cooked shrimp, and 1 container no-salt

added chicken broth.

• Staples: olive oil, onion, garlic, salt and black peppercorns.

COLD CUCUMBER SOUP WITH SHRIMP

Recipe by Linda Gassenheimer

2 cucumbers (about 1 3/4 pound, 3 1/2 cups cubed)
3 slices whole wheat country-style bread, divided use
3/4 cup plain, low-fat Greek style yogurt
1/2 cup fresh dill leaves, coarsely chopped, divided use
1 crushed garlic clove
1 cup coarsely chopped onion

1/4 cup no-salt-added chicken broth
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/2 pound small, cooked shrimp
2 tablespoons olive oil

Peel cucumbers and cut in half lengthwise. Scoop out seeds with a teaspoon and discard. Cut off half of one cucumber, cut into small cubes and set aside. Cut the remaining cucumbers into 1 inch pieces. Add these pieces to a food processor or blender. Remove crust from 1 bread slice and reserve remaining 2 slices. Add the crustless bread, yogurt, half the dill, garlic clove, onion and broth to the food processor. Process until a smooth puree. Add salt and pepper to taste. Save out 6 shrimp for a garnish. Divide the rest of the shrimp between two soup bowls.



Linda Gassenheimer/TNS

Cold cucumber soup with shrimp.

Pour the cucumber puree over the shrimp. Divide the reserved cucumber cubes in half and add to the bowls as a garnish. Add the reserved shrimp to the cucumber cubes. Sprinkle the remaining dill on top. Drizzle olive oil over soup. Toast remaining 2 slices of bread

and serve with the soup.

Yield 2 servings. Per serving: 444 calories (36% from fat), 17.8 g fat (3.5 g saturated, 7.3 g mono-unsaturated), 193 mg cholesterol, 36.9 g protein, 34 g carbohydrates, 5.7 g fiber, 275 mg sodium.