

## How to Shop the Co-op on a Budget

According to the Consumer Price Index Summary, food prices went up 4.4% in the 12 months ending January 2012. The reasons for the rise include oil prices, of course, which drive up both the cost of food production and the cost to transport the food to market. But that's not the only culprit. A demand for ethanol and bio-diesel means that more land is being devoted to corn and soybeans for fuel sources than food sources, causing corn prices to more than double and soybean prices to nearly triple in recent years. (Subsidies entice many farmers to grow crops for ethanol rather than food.) At the same time, a high global demand for food and a weak U.S. dollar have driven investors to buy commodities, increasing demand and causing prices on those commodities—like wheat, corn, soybeans and milk—to rise.

Corn, wheat, and soybeans are key crops for feeding livestock and for making many staples—like flour, oils, and sweeteners. Hardest hit, you've likely noticed while shopping, are basics like bread, milk, cereal, meat, poultry, and eggs. While much attention is given to price hikes at the gas pump, for many of us the hike in food prices is more serious.

The good news is that you don't need to compromise the healthfulness of your diet while tightening your budget. In fact, with the help of your Co-op, and by spending just a little more time planning your meals, shopping, and cooking, you can eat better—and more frugally—than ever. Here are some suggestions.

## Realistic Ways to Stretch your Food Dollars

### Plan

- Take stock. Before developing meal plans and shopping lists (both crucial steps), take a

good look in your cupboards and refrigerator. Then build your menus around what's on hand—like that leftover millet you have yet to use, or that cup of red lentils you purchased but never got around to trying. And if the eggplant in the refrigerator is just starting to show its age, be sure to schedule it on a menu soon.

- If you have a garden, of course you'll want to take full advantage of its bounty. But even if you don't, keep a keen eye on what's in season because that's what will be most affordable at the Co-op. You may want to take advantage of seasonal produce by participating in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program such as High Altitude Harvest CSA.
- Keep a copy of your co-op's sales flyer on hand while developing your menus and shopping lists so you can include what's on sale.
- Be open to new possibilities. Substitute inexpensive vegetarian options (like vegetarian soups, casseroles, and omelets) for some of your more expensive meat-based dinners. Look for inexpensive alternatives to your usual snacks and beverages. (Make your own herbal iced tea, for example, instead of serving pop. And substitute dry milk powder for some of the milk in your recipes.)
- Make it easy to use (and stick to) a shopping list. Print a list of which staples you keep on hand, then simply circle those you need before heading to the co-op. (You can add what else you'll be buying to the list as you develop your menus.)
- Remember to include food for making bring-your-own lunches on your shopping list.

### Learn to Cook

Some very basic cooking knowledge can net big gains on food purchases. If you don't know how, learn to cook inexpensive, versatile staples like beans and grains, and make your own yogurt and sprouts.

Yes, cooking from scratch sometimes requires a bit more organization (you may want to soak those beans ahead, for example). But it takes surprisingly little extra time at the stove. And if you

enjoy your time in the kitchen, you may want to broaden your skills—by learning to bake bread or by exploring a new ethnic cuisine, for example. Then you'll save money on groceries and enrich your life at the same time!

Expanding your cooking repertoire can also greatly reduce the number of meals you eat out. Of course, there will still be days when you don't have the time or the inclination to cook. Even then, a restaurant dinner isn't your only option. Consider an easy meal that's not standard dinner fare (like granola and yogurt) or stop by the Co-op's deli for something that's healthful and affordable. (You might bring home a side salad to go with easy-to-prepare sandwiches, for example.)

### Shop your Co-op

Your Co-op is the best place to invest your food dollars. It's where you'll find the most healthful food, food in bulk, and local, seasonal fare. To make the most of your shopping expedition:

- Join the Co-op, if you're not already a member. This will enable you to take the best advantage of prices and information.
- Comparison shop by unit prices. For the best value, buy bulk. With bulk purchases you can purchase just the amount you need, with no waste, at the best price.
- Buy meat and poultry that's not pre-cut; cutting these foods yourself will save about a dollar per pound.
- Emphasize whole, natural foods rather than convenience foods. Packaging is expensive (for you and for the environment).
- Choose organic as much as possible; it's a wise investment in your health, your family, and the environment. While the gap between organic and non-organic prices will hopefully continue to close, there may still be instances when your budget doesn't permit you to choose the organic option. In that case, prioritize. According to Environmental Working Group, you can lower your pesticide exposure by almost 90 percent by avoiding

the top twelve most contaminated fruits and vegetables:

- peaches
- apples
- sweet bell peppers
- celery
- nectarines
- strawberries
- cherries
- pears
- imported grapes
- spinach
- lettuce
- potatoes

The twelve least contaminated foods are:

- onions
- avocados
- frozen sweet corn
- pineapples
- mango
- asparagus
- frozen sweet peas
- kiwi fruit
- bananas
- cabbage
- broccoli
- papaya

Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy are also well worth the investment.

- Consider stocking up on—and canning or freezing—seasonal produce when it's harvested (and at the best price).
- Remember to bring your own bags!

### **Don't Waste Food**

It doesn't make any sense to save money on purchases and then throw away food. To avoid waste, post a list on your refrigerator of the perishables inside so they aren't forgotten. Keep items within sight. Open bowls of fruit in the refrigerator, washed carrots and celery, and cheese cut into handy chunks will invite healthful snacking, for example. Label containers for easy identification and retrieval.

Plan to use all the food you purchase—in meals or for snacks. And schedule a day for leftovers so everything gets eaten. Use that leftover millet in your soup or stew, and that bowl of rice for making rice burgers, a stir-fry, or rice pudding, for example.

Making conscientious use of natural foods—the foods your Co-op specializes in—is the most economical, healthful, delicious, and fulfilling way to cope with rising food prices.

### STAYING PRICE WISE IS EASIER THAN YOU THINK!

- Order in Bulk!
- Look for monthly Co-op specials.
- Check out the Co-op's Basic Buy Program. This program features many, many items throughout the store that are priced well below regular retail prices. Look for the brochure in the store and shelf talkers near the products.
- Watch for member discount and appreciation days, coupon books, and more!

If you have any questions, talk with one of our store managers, or call us at 283.3528.

Thanks to Liz McMann from Mississippi Market for much of the content in this brochure.



## How to Shop on a Budget at the Co-op



7am-8pm Mon.-Sat.

9am-7pm Sunday

269 Main Street, Quincy CA 95971

[www.qnf.coop](http://www.qnf.coop)

