

EAT ORGANIC ON A BUDGET? IT CAN BE DONE!¹

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Let's start with full disclosure: I am not by nature a frugal shopper, nor a shopper on a budget. In fact, I've been known to make salespeople gawk at me when my bill gets tallied (like when I drive an hour to the closest Whole Foods with a cooler in the back of my truck to stock up for months at a time). I am fortunate in that I don't have to worry about my grocery bill. However, I know that lots of people do, including my mother-in-law, who would be a frugal shopper even if she were a millionaire. She uses tea bags at least twice, and always wraps rolls and butter in paper napkins and stuffs them in her purse when we go out. Her famous line is, "Our people's poor food is your gourmet!" She was born in America, but will always consider herself Italian first and foremost. Here is what I learned from her: Don't Frack Organic Food!²

- (1) **Make meats, poultry, and fish a side dish, not the main dish.** After 19 years of eating amazing meals in LeRoy, NY, at Rita and Louie Cinquino's house, I can say the only time meat is the main dish is when there is a turkey or a ham and a major holiday—and even then there are so many side dishes, it's hard to eat too much meat. Meats, poultry, and fish are used to flavor soups, sauces, and pastas, and not the main focus. Besides being cost-effective, this method is also much better for your health and is one of the key components of the famed "Mediterranean diet"—which includes the Italian cuisine, of course.
- (2) **Use everything.** Never throw a bone or carcass into the trash unless you've already made soup out of it! Eat the skins of all your fruits and vegetables. Whatever you have left, feed it to the pets (that's my tip—my-mother-in-law never let a pet in her house!), and if there's anything else left, make compost.
- (3) **Make it from scratch.** Most of what people waste money on is alleged "convenience," a.k.a. processed, overly salted, overly marketed food with excess packaging. Most things we buy in processed form are fairly easy to make from scratch with a good, simple recipe. Spend your money on quality ingredients, and you won't need fancy sauces and artificial flavoring to make it taste good.
- (4) **Garden! Nature's bounty is infamous.** A few dollars' worth of seeds can produce hundreds of dollars' worth of foods—a winter's worth of frozen pesto, tomato sauce from scratch, and many other good, good things. Plus, gardening is good exercise—which is one of the reasons my in-laws are both 87 and living at home together.
- (5) **Trade.** Whenever you have extra, give it away. It will come back to you in other ways. In his gardening prime, my father-in-law was always giving away garlic, seeds, and extra vegetables. Often, friends and neighbors would repay him with corn, apples, or beans. Now

¹ Care2, Green Living, November 08, 2010

² Leah Zerbe, Don't Frack Organic Food! Rodale.com, August 3, 2010

that he can't garden anymore, people are still bringing him things for free. He's a lucky man.

- (6) **Freeze it.** When things are in season, they are either free from the garden or cheap from the farmer's market. Freeze veggies, fruit sauces, extra casseroles, and soups. Make broths from leftovers and freeze them for when you need them later. Just don't forget to label and date things. That's my pet peeve. I do think Rita Cinquino has things in her freezer that have been there for over 20 years.
- (7) **Keep it simple.** Really, you don't need to complicate things with fancy ingredients and elaborate preparations. The best foods are the simple ones that just rely on fresh, tasty ingredients.
- (8) **Cook at home.** My mother-in-law has issues with eating out. It can get annoying at times, but it's how they put four kids through private school and college on a very limited income. Anyway, no one cooks as well as she does, so why go out and pay more for something inferior? But darn it, if you do go out, always bring home every speck of leftovers. But also, it's hard to find restaurants that only serve organic foods, so if you really want to eat organic, you had better learn how to cook!
- (9) **Don't fall for newfangled gimmicks.** This is my downfall. I always want to try the new things—but whenever I end up cleaning out my pantry or fridge, it's those very new things that end up getting wasted. All you really need in your pantry are the basics—a bag of brown rice, some whole wheat pasta, a bottle of olive oil, some beans, and you've got the makings of yummy goodness. Oh, and plenty of Heinz 57 organic catsup.
- (10) **Forage!** This is Louie Cinquino's realm, but what a wonderful realm! I feel so lucky to have tasted (many times) his "gardooni," which is a burdock-stem delight, made from a common weed. (This spring I will share the recipe.) We have all gone out collecting wild mustard greens, also a common weed. Many friends of mine rely on their husbands' going out and foraging a deer to provide them with meat for the winter. Through my father-in-law, I learned that the world is filled with good, free things to eat—you just have to know how to look for them.

So, don't let anyone tell you that eating organic on a budget can't be done. In fact, it's the best eating in the world.