

CAN WE AFFORD TO EAT ETHICALLY?¹

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Last month, a report from England found sales of some organic food had fallen up to 31 percent. Ethical food advocates have been worrying about a similar trend in this country since the recession began: Just as the need for better food choices became more widely accepted, our economy fell apart, and consumers who once considered free-range, \$5-a-dozen eggs a necessity may start eyeing the caged-hens carton for half that price. A recent National Review column argued that organic food was, in fact, "an expensive luxury item, something bought by those who have the resources."

I had wondered about the elitism of ethical eating ever since I started reading about the movement in books like "The Omnivore's Dilemma," "Fast Food Nation" and "Food Politics." When Alice Waters told Americans that they could dine better by forgoing "the cellphone or the third pair of Nike shoes," my monthly cellphone bill totaled zero and I owned just one pair of sneakers. When Michael Pollan urged citizens to plant a garden, I was living on the 10th floor of an urban apartment building. When Barbara Kingsolver wrote in "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" that sustainable cooking could be thrifty, her recommendations included a plot of land and a second freezer that I didn't own. My kitchen had the dimensions of a medium-size walk-in closet. And I was better off than many in my neighborhood.

At honest moments, though, I suspected my reluctance to seek out organic rutabagas was more lazy than practical. So last year, when global food prices began to soar, I devised an experiment: My husband and I would eat conscientiously for a month, not just on our regular grocery allotment but on the government-defined, food-stamp minimum: \$248 for two people in our hometown of New Haven, Conn. We would choose the SOLE-est products available -- that is, the sustainable, organic, local or ethical alternative. We would start from a bare pantry, shop only at places that took food stamps and could be reached on foot, and use only basic appliances. The test would mean some painful changes; gone was my husband's customary breakfast of Honey Nut Cheerios and our favorite dinner of pepperoni pizza. But it would answer that nagging question: When shopping for food, did I have to choose between my budget and my beliefs?

Challenges began on my first grocery trip, where staples required some massive outlays of cash. It was anxiety-inducing to shell out \$4 a jar for organic spices, even after I pared down my shelf to salt, pepper, oregano, basil, curry, cumin, chili and cinnamon. (I also bought some garlic, soy sauce and red wine vinegar, though these were non-local organic; I justified the carbon footprint -- not to mention the price -- with the thought that cheap eaters need to fill up on flavor.) It was frightening to spend \$7 on a small bottle of organic olive oil in hopes it would last all month.

The costliest decision was meat; I didn't want to impose a completely vegetarian diet on my carnivorous husband or on-and-off-carnivorous self, but the frozen slabs of grass-fed steak at the farmers' market seemed tough to manage. Instead, I bought a small free-range chicken for about \$9 and a scant pound of local ground beef for about \$6, knowing that this, along with some sustainable canned fish, was our allotment of animal flesh for four weeks. Even less expensive purchases demanded worry and adjustments; the price difference between organic

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fruits and vegetables, for example, prompted me to switch apples for carrots in my packed lunch.

The real work began when I lugged my haul home. The chicken had to go far: After roasting my scrawny-looking bird in the most basic way -- a smear of oil across the skin, a sprinkle of salt and pepper -- I sliced, hacked and pulled every piece of meat I could find off the bones and then simmered the carcass in a pot for basic stock. (I saved the fat for cooking.) Along with the meat, this broth was divided into meal-size portions and stored in my freezer for soups, sandwiches and dinners to come.

I then tackled the beef, which had to be stretched, too. The right choice, I figured, was chili, not just because my husband and I both love it but also because it's a thrifty dish -- especially if you use dried beans. I hadn't before my test month, I confess, but once I did, I discarded the intimidating time charts that had stymied me and relied on a basic process of soak, then cook. Beans are forgiving. The first of my merciful batches went into a big pot along with the ground beef, some organic onion and tomatoes, and lashings of garlic and chili powder; the result smelled as good as meatier versions. It also found a place, in divided portions, among the containers of my now-crowded freezer.

The last of my initial challenges was bread. Before the experiment, I purchased our loaf bread -- that "natural" kind with about 30 ingredients in 12 perfect slices and three layers of plastic packaging -- but my experiment proved that it's not hard to fix something with better flavor and the same approximate shape for a lot less money. It doesn't take much energy, either; by now, all those who can type the words "no knead" into Google have probably discovered the time-saving revolution of hands-free loaves. I froze mine in slices, which kept it convenient without letting it go stale.

Bird, beans, bread: I felt better already. It took a lot of time to fix that much -- most of the month's first Sunday. Yet after this bout of shopping and chopping, I spent no other concentrated stretches on food preparation in the remaining four weeks. The biggest change in my culinary efforts wasn't the amount of time but its placement; I was always working ahead. I found this rhythm less stressful, ultimately, since it ended my previous 5 p.m. habit of wondering what was for dinner. Now, I could walk in the door at the end of my workday sure of what we would eat.

So what did we eat? Breakfasts were easy: One tutorial, and my husband agreed that cooking organic quick oats in the microwave was nearly as easy as pouring out cold cereal. Add raisins and a dash of cinnamon sugar and it tastes even better. Fair-trade, organic coffee and tea allowed us each to maintain our caffeine injection of choice. Lunch, too, was straightforward; we ate dinner leftovers, sometimes, or went with a standard sandwich of organic peanut butter on homemade organic bread. I also made several big batches of spicy black beans and rice that I kept in a pot in the fridge and spooned into single-serving Tupperware for midday meals.

Dinners demanded more variety and thought. I got help from blogs and stories about schemes similar to mine (Rebecca Blood's is the best I found) and looked especially closely at the USDA's brochure of "Recipes and Tips for Healthy, Thrifty Meals," since I assumed it would provide the most accessible advice. The government recipes proved disappointing, though, since they often presumed larger economies of scale than I could manage and relied on processed items or factory cuts. I also disliked the sense of compromise in USDA recommendations, which

supposed that those on a budget should be satisfied with a bland "noodle casserole" that would never aspire to the flavor of real lasagna.

I set the government recipes aside, then, and copied out inspirational passages from two other sources. One was M.F.K. Fisher, who began "How to Cook a Wolf" during WWII rationing. The book is my favorite from her shelf because it links her sometimes self-satisfied gourmandism to a stubbornly practical spirit. A little problem like poverty is not going to prevent Fisher from enjoying her meals. Her homage to a piece of whole-wheat toast is a lesson in how to savor the basics, and her advice about preserving vegetable juices recommends pouring them into an old gin bottle: I loved the idea of a low-cost lifestyle that depends on such bottles just lying around.

I loved, too, the equal and opposite approach in my second nourishing source, the "More-With-Less" cookbook. Its author couldn't be more different than Fisher; Doris Janzen Longacre, a Mennonite church leader in 1970s Ohio, would probably have found the remains of Fisher's liquor cabinet as strange as the course of Fisher's love affairs. Like Fisher, though, Longacre presents thrifty eating as a deliberate, intelligent decision -- in her case, choosing a world with more justice and less anxiety. The two authors both refuse the idea that cheap cooking bespeaks concession; to them, frugal eating can mean sophisticated tastes or developed morals.

Frugal eating can also be a course in cosmopolitanism -- not the worldliness that comes from fusion cuisine at wine-paired prix fixes but the kind in which you learn more about how the rest of the world actually eats. Once I put aside make-do recipes, I had to seek out dishes that are inexpensive in their genuine forms, a search that took me around the world as it provided a plethora of options. It's more heartening to prepare a spicy biryani than it is to assemble the nondescript "bake" of economy cookbooks, even if both are built of rice and vegetables. And it's more pleasant to announce a biryani as you serve up plates, or to sit over its final forkfuls as you talk through your partner's day. You're not getting by, all of a sudden, so much as having dinner. The dinners I have in mind all use the common, cheap staples of global cuisine: Almost every culture has one or two time-tested options based on beans, whole grains and pasta as well as several versatile methods for cheap vegetables and several adaptably thrifty types of soup or stew. The lentils of Indian dal, for example, are not those of the Middle Eastern mujadarra, but they both do wonderful, easy things with a sustainably grown legume that goes for about \$1.50 a pound. I simplified a lot, and I ignored some specific ingredient directives; the same organic brown crop grown two states away made both my Chinese fried rice and Italian risotto. But that's the point: a kitchen of cosmopolitan simplicity lets a cook employ the often repetitive offerings of farmers' markets and local production without going out of her mind with monotony.

There were tribulations, naturally. I missed some baked goods, though we had a small bit of fair-trade organic cocoa for treats. Even more painful was our decrease in dairy; buying ethically meant cutting back to just a sprinkle of cheese on the top of dishes or a few shavings on a sandwich. We found, though, that good local cheddar really is more flavorful than the cheap supermarket stuff; so is organic whole milk -- a small splash on hot oats provided more uplift than the soggy skim lake that once drowned our cereal pellets. Plus our discovery of better flavors was accompanied by revelations of new ones, as we tried and enjoyed things like anchovies, parsnips, polenta, sardines and scapes. Eating sustainably and frugally forces you to challenge preferences and resist ruts, since you pretty much have to buy any available item that's cheap and well-grown. Thrifty habits thus helped my husband and me to dine more adventurously, and we felt pleasantly surprised more often than deprived.

Our test methods wouldn't work for everyone, I know: I relied on the sort of reasonably flexible schedule that is a luxury in far too many households, and I started with some basic cooking knowledge. (As Salon critic Laura Miller recently suggested, food advocates may need to think more about the skills as well as the funds that are required by ethical eating.) Yet our four-week hypothetical did provide a feasible way for my husband and me to eat sustainably long-term: When the month finished -- with a magisterial \$1.20 left in the cache -- we decided to stick with most of our experimental changes. We now eat slightly larger quantities of meat, fruit and cheese, and pepperoni pizza is back in the menu rotation. But apart from that pepperoni (and I'm still looking for an ethical source), I've yet to purchase any recurring items that aren't SOLE-justified, and our grocery bills have stayed lean.

Our meals have stayed varied, too, as sustainable grocery shopping pushes me toward regular minor novelties: making tortillas from scratch with organic flour, toasting the seeds I scooped from my local pumpkin, bringing home the variety of farmers-market kale with the super-crimped leaves. These sorts of practices no longer seem like a statement or an effort. In fact, they seem natural enough that the one question I'm left with is: Why didn't I start cooking and eating this way sooner?