



Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 26

April 2025

Making your food budget work without sacrificing flavor

We are all aware of the rising cost of living in the Washington metropolitan area right now. Groceries in the area are hovering around 10% higher than the national average and are expected to continue to rise as the bird flu, droughts and other factors impact food production and import.

That being said, it is still possible to eat well without breaking the budget. And by "eating well" I mean yummy, varied and healthy. Sometimes it just takes a little planning and maybe an afternoon in the kitchen to set yourself up.

I have put together a few tips to get you thinking about how you can continue to eat the way that you want and still keep an eye on your bank balance too.

Gwen



Meal prep gets a bad rap in my opinion. It doesn't have to mean assembly line production managed with military precision. It can simply mean thinking long term when you are cooking. If you are going to make soup, can you make a little more and freeze it for a quick meal later? If chicken thighs are on sale for a ridiculously low price, can you buy an extra pack or two, separate them into single meal portions, marinate or dry rub them and freeze them for a quick thaw and bake? If you need an ingredient that is perishable and you won't be using all of it, can you find a way to preserve it long enough to find another way to use it up? A few issues back, I pulled together a list of kitchen hacks and tips. Take a look at that, (or reach out and I'll re-send it to you) and see if some of those feel doable. I am going to through a few ideas out here to get you going. Please take them and run with

your own ideas, palate preferences and storage space limitations.

So first of all, take a moment to sit down and think about what you enjoy eating. Are you a fan of chicken noodle soup in the winter? Do you love stir fry? Tacos? Once you have a sense of the menu, start to think about the ingredients. What's canned or dried, what freezes well, what has a long life in the refrigerator? Think in terms of things you can buy on sale and have on hand when you are ready to cook. Every frugal shopper will tell you that a well-stocked pantry is the key to quick, easy and cost effective cooking.

While fresh herbs are amazing in the summer, it is important to remember that most spices are dried and keep well in a cool dark cabinet. Keeping a couple of blends that you like, on hand, helps you broaden the scope of your menu.

I take a look at the sale flyers before I shop and pencil out a menu for the week. I also keep an eye on really good prices for things I might not need this week but are shelf stable. I love a good lasagna in the winter, so come fall I start to watch for canned tomatoes & pasta. Summertime light eating means stir fry so canned water chestnuts or corn, and dried fruits and nuts to mix in with farro or rice for a filling salad.

Watching the sales at the meat counter can also be productive. Ground beef can be browned, drained and frozen for quick tacos or Bolognese sauce. My favorite prep is with chicken. I'll buy a large pack or two and when I get home, split them into portions of about the size of two meals. Using a vacuum sealer or zipper lock bags, I will add a marinade or a dry rub, let them sit in the fridge for a couple of hours and then pop them in the freezer. Then, take them out the night before and place in the fridge to thaw out for cooking the next day. The best part is that I use a different seasoning for each bag, meaning I can eat a different meal each time.

Stews and soups are an easy make ahead. For very little extra work, you can create several meals at once. Freezing in serving sized portions is easy. I found these trays online and they work perfectly.



Once everything is frozen solid, you can pop them out and place in plastic bags to save space. They work well for soups, stews, meatloaf, pulled pork or beef, even pastas.

The last big saver is getting in the habit of saving lots of bits and pieces. I keep a couple of bags in the freezer, one for chicken and one for vegetables. All the trimmings or bones, all the end pieces or the just didn't finish it in time leftovers go in and when they get full, I make stock. Store bought stock is not cheap and most of them have a fair amount of salt. Making my own means I can flavor my own way and storing in the same trays above or even ice cube trays, lets me use as much or as little as I need at a time. Even the carcass of a store-bought rotisserie chicken can be the basis of a delicious pasta dish. I have included a few basic recipes below, but spread your wings, get creative and have fun.

Sidebar – If you are like me with a finicky or elder pet, then stocks and stews are a good way to supplement their diets and are way cheaper than pet food.

Be Safe,

Gwen

Vegetable Broth

Ingredients

- 1 Onion
- 4 Carrots
- 3 Celery stalks with leaves
- 1 Parsnip
- 1 Sweet potato
- 1 Leek
- (All vegetables are left unpeeled and chopped into 2" chunks.)
- 10 C Water
- 2 T **Gwen's Blend Seasoning**

Instructions

Place everything in a large stock pot and bring to boil.

Lower heat and let simmer about 2 hours.

Salt & pepper if needed.

Remove large chunks of vegetables and set aside in a bowl.

Strain the broth through a colander lined with cheesecloth.

Add the large pieces to the colander and press to remove as much broth as you can, then discard.

Let cool and store.

Note: You can substitute any combination of vegetables that you prefer.

Our Recommendations: Summer Blend, Tuscan Blend or for a spicier kick, Berbere.

Notes: You can roast the vegetables for a deeper flavor, but it is not required.

Chicken Bone Broth

Ingredients

- 3 qt Water
- 2 lb. Chicken wings, backs, necks (the more cartilaginous and bonier, the better)
- 3 Celery stalks
- 2 Carrots, unpeeled

- 1 Onion, quartered
- 2 Bay leaves
- 2 T Gwen's Blend Seasoning

Instructions

Place everything in a large stock pot. (The vegetables can be placed in whole, just wash them first.)

Bring to a boil and then lower to a simmer and let cook 6-8 hours.

Salt & pepper to taste.

Remove large pieces and then pour through a colander lined with cheesecloth.

Either skim fat while still hot, or wait until it cools and use a spoon to scrape it off.

Our recommendations: Italian seasoning, Tuscan Seasoning, Chili Lime Seasoning, Summer Blend, Garlic Herb Blend, Avo's Portuguese Allspice.

Meatloaf Baseline recipe

Ingredients

- 2 lbs. Protein
- ½ C Flour
- 2 tsp Salt
- 1 tsp Black Pepper
- 2 T Olive oil/Butter
- 1 can Diced tomatoes
- 1 Onion, chopped
- 3 Garlic cloves, minced
- 3 C Broth
- 4-6 C Assorted vegetables, potatoes
- 2 T Gwen's Blends Seasoning

Instructions

Cut your meat into 1" cubes.

Combine the flour, salt and pepper and toss the meat to coat.

Heat 2 T oil or butter in a Dutch oven and brown

the meat on all sides over medium high heat.
Remove meat a from pan and sauté onions and garlic.

Add the 1 cup of the broth to deglaze the pan.

Add the remaining broth and seasoning, and return the meat to the pot.

Bring to a boil and then reduce to a simmer until meat is tender (about 1 hour).

Add the vegetables and continue to simmer for another 30 minutes.

Serve hot.

Slow cooker version

To prepare in a slow cooker, reduce broth to 1 C and place all ingredients in the slow cooker once the meat has been browned. Cook on low for 8-12 hours or high for 4-6 hours.

	Version 1 - Traditional	Version 2 - Lamb	Version 3 - Pork
Protein	Beef – chuck roast is preferred	Lamb – boneless leg of lamb	Pork - Tenderloin
Vegetable	Potatoes, carrots, celery	Parsnips, sweet potatoes, Yukon gold potatoes	Bell pepper, hominy, pinto beans
Broth	Beef	Beef	Chicken
Seasoning	Gwen's House Rub, Adobo. Italian or Tuscan Seasonings	Lamb Seasoning, Gyro Seasoning, Wild Game Rub	Adobo seasoning

Vegetarian version

You can easily sub any of the heartier, sturdier squash or root vegetables for the protein and vegetable or mushroom broth for the liquid. The ratios still work: 2-3 cups broth, onion, garlic, seasoning, and about 4-6 cups of butternut squash, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, etc. Just skip the first four ingredients and the browning step, but consider roasting your vegetables for 15-20 minutes before putting in the broth.

What's New!

Can't wait to see you at my upcoming festivals!

South Riding Mosaic Festival

May 3 2 PM – 6 PM

South Riding Town Square

Old Town Arts & Crafts Festival

June 7 10AM – 5PM

Old Town Alexandria Waterfront at the base of Prince Street

I'll be taking a break from fairs for the summer but will still be working hard filling orders and getting ready for the Fall Season. More details to come. G2