

Frugal Cooking & Money-Saving Tips

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Table of Contents

1. Leftover Dinner Magic
2. 5 Kitchen Staples to Help Save Money
3. It's not Delivery, It's Homemade
4. Money Saving Grocery Shopping Tips
5. 5 Frugal Breakfast Ideas
6. Money Saving Lunch Ideas for Frugal Families
7. Save Money & Have Some Fun Drying Fresh Herbs
8. Make That Fruit Last Longer - Dry It
9. Weekend Cooking Frenzy
10. Stretch That Chicken to Make it Go Further

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Leftover Dinner Magic

What do you do when a meal is finished? Most of us wash the dishes and wrap up the leftovers, but what happens to the leftover portions not eaten? Do they get consumed later or do they sit in the refrigerator until they start to smell and you finally throw them out? If you tend to do the latter, how about saving some time and money by learning how to use those leftovers in new ways to surprise your family at dinner time.

Some people like leftovers and some do not. Still then, many will eat them one day out, but quickly get tired of eating the same thing over and over. Here's a way to fix the problem if you or someone in your family is the same way. Let's start with an example.

You prepare a roasted pork loin and rice for dinner one night. The family wants something else for dinner the following night so the pork loin gets pushed to the back of the refrigerator. Normally, that's where it will stay until you clean out the fridge, right? Not anymore. Let's do something to keep that pork loin from going to waste.

Eating leftovers the way they were originally served, is probably what's turning family members off from wanting it again the next night. Your family doesn't have to eat the pork loin as is. So, chop that pork loin up into bite size pieces.

Now you're probably thinking, ok that's great, but what do I do with it now? In a large skillet or wok, stir fry the leftover rice with a bag of frozen veggies, an egg, and some of the chopped pork loin to make pork fried rice. Add a little soy sauce and you've got a whole new dinner for your hungry family.

This is just one way that leftovers can be turned into a new dish with a new flavor. The same can also be done using chicken, seafood, or beef. Let's take a look at beef.

If you have hamburgers left from dinner, chop them up until they resemble ground beef again. The meat can be combined with chili powder and taco sauce to make beef tacos. Or, add some beans, chopped peppers and tomatoes, and sauce to create a pot of chili. If you have the imagination, there are an unlimited number of possibilities of what you can do with meats and side dishes from a previous night's dinner.

Using a little leftover magic can make one meal last for two, three, or even four more days. But, you don't have to eat it all in the same week. Fix a new meal with the leftovers and freeze it until you are ready to have that particular meat again. On that day, dinner will already be made, all you'll need to do is heat it up. Yes, it really can be just that simple.

Your family will be amazed at your ability to transform any meal into a new creation they will enjoy. Besides that, you will save money on your grocery bill and won't be throwing it away in the trash can as spoiled leftovers. Try these and similar ideas to expand your family's palate.

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5 Kitchen Staples to Help Save Money

Ever wonder how our ancestors always seemed to have food on the table even in lean times? When we are visiting the grocery store every week to the tune of hundreds of dollars, we long to know their secret. In fact it isn't a secret at all. It is actually good planning and preparation on their part. Once we realize this and begin doing as they did, we too will see our dollar stretch further.

The items that we have on hand are what determine how far our food will go. Filling your cabinets or pantry with a few useful staples can be the difference between a trip to the grocery store each and every week versus once or twice a month. Stocking just a few choice items is all you need to create wonderful meals.

1. **Flour.** Flour is a starter item for many recipes. You can add it to some water and make gravy in the pan for many meat dishes. Flour is used to make bread (biscuits, rolls, loaves) and to coat chicken. It can also be used to coat a round or square cake pan to prevent the cake from sticking. Of course, one of the favorite uses for flour is in cookie recipes that make scrumptious desserts.
2. **Rice.** My husband loves rice so much that we once bought a fifty pound bag from a grocery store in his hometown. Fifty pounds! Rice is a side dish, but it doesn't have to be plain. It can be jazzed up with veggies to accompany dinner. My mother uses leftover rice for a dessert called sweet rice. Just add evaporated milk and some sugar to a bowl of rice and warm it in the microwave. It is a tasty treat for after dinner. Another popular dessert is rice pudding. Rice can also be mixed with leftover meat and a cream soup to form a casserole. Rice has many uses and your sure to find a few that your family will love.
3. **Pasta.** There are many different pasta choices and all have great uses. Manicotti can be stuffed with tomato sauce and cheeses. Macaroni can be used to make a creamy salad and also is great combined with cheese or spaghetti sauce. Spiral pasta is used in many different pasta salads. Spaghetti can be used in a casserole topped with cheese or in the traditional way with tomato sauce and meat.
4. **Spices.** There are other ways to season food besides salt and pepper. In fact, many spices taste better than salt. Even diehard salt-a-holics won't miss the salt in foods if other seasonings are used. Cayenne pepper, chili powder, nutmeg, cinnamon, oregano, and garlic powder are all useful tools in your flavor arsenal to give foods a fresh new taste.
5. **Beans.** There go those beans again. Beans can top your salad (edamame), make an awesome dip (black beans), and go well with grilled foods (baked beans). They provide a good source of protein with very little fat. Beans are good in soups, stews, and over rice for a simple yet filling meal.

Do you have these staples in your kitchen? You can probably think of several more that will enhance your pantry and save money. Start with these and grow your own list of basic kitchen staples that are versatile and economical.

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It's not Delivery, It's Homemade

How many times have we opted for fast food for lunch or dinner instead of cooking? There's no telling how much money we've spent on that one meal that easily becomes a few (or more) meals a week. Instead of picking up that telephone and calling for delivery pizza, get the family together and make one at home.

Making homemade pizza can become a great new family tradition. Choose a day of the week when everyone can get together and enjoy the experience. You can even pretend that you are in a real Italian eatery and go all out by decorating the dining room table to resemble a pizzeria.

The best thing about homemade pizza is picking the toppings. Since it is your personal pizza, you can have as many different toppings as your heart desires. It's a chance to raid the cabinets and the fridge to find good stuff to top your creation.

How will you prepare the crust? Now, this step can be easy or an adventure. If you wimp out and go easy, you can use an already prepared crust from the store like Pillsbury pizza crust in the pop open can or a Boboli pizza crust.

If you want to treat the family to a high time of flour and dough, choose to make your own crusts. With your own, the size of the pizza can be customized for each person in the family. Making your own dough crusts will also make use of those handy pantry staples. You can find a classic pizza dough recipe on the Internet and in just about any cookbook, so find one that you like and go to it.

When the dough is ready, shape it into a circle of appropriate size. Create a rim on the dough so that the sauce won't bubble over onto the oven rack. Now comes the fun part. The dough is ready to be dressed to the hilt.

For the sauce, we'll let you slide and use the store bought kind if you wish. Spread the sauce over the dough and be sure to cover it to the rim. Next, top the pizza sauce with your favorite cheeses. It's more economical to purchase a block of cheese and use a grater to slice it for pizza toppings. Those already shredded bags have only two or three cups in each which is not going to go the distance for an entire family. Besides, fresh cheese melts better.

Want to have even more fun with your family pizza creations? See who can make the wackiest pizza. Throw a little leftover chicken or hamburger on top. How about jalapenos? They are good for those who like it hot. Don't forget the spices. It wouldn't be a pizza without oregano, basil, and some thyme.

If you have at least two baking stones or pizza trays, you can make more than one at a time. Everyone can help to clean up while you wait for dinner to be ready. When the timer goes off, Bon Apetit!

If there are leftovers of your pizza, enjoy them tomorrow morning for breakfast! (or lunch ☺)

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Money Saving Grocery Shopping Tips

Everything is getting more expensive today. From gas to groceries, our hard-earned dollars are challenged to stretch further. Now, we may be able to ride a bicycle around town if we can't put gas in our cars. But, we have to eat. There's no getting around that. So, we have to find ways to spend less on groceries while still getting the things that we need to feed ourselves and our families. Here are six money saving tips to try the next time you go grocery shopping.

1. **Clip coupons.** They put those in the newspaper for a reason. If there are new items you want to try, use a coupon to get it at a discount. If you like it, you have saved some money. On the other hand, if you don't take a liking to it, you didn't pay full price. For me, coupons save an average of ten or more dollars per visit. That's money in my pocket that I can put towards gas for the car.
2. **Buy more staples than prepared foods.** It is easier to buy a box of macaroni and cheese, but is it more economical? A large box of macaroni and a block of cheese will make more servings for your family than one box of prepared macaroni and cheese. The next time you go shopping and pick up a box or bag of an already prepared item, ask yourself if you can make that at home for less. If you can, then put that item back in favor of less expensive staples.
3. **Buy in bulk.** Consider the food items that you use most often. Cereals, meats, vegetables, condiments, juices, and paper products can be bought in bulk usually at a lower price at food warehouses like Costco, BJ's, and Wal-Mart. If you have a coupon, you'll save even more money.
4. **Don't shop when you are hungry.** This is a definite no-no. Shopping on an empty stomach means that you will pick up more things than you need. You are more likely to pick up that bag of chocolate chip cookies or that box of donuts when the growling gets underway.
5. **Take a grocery list with you.** This is another protection against picking up things that are too costly. Check your cabinets and the fridge to see what you need and write them down. Remember, the goal is to stick to the list as much as possible.
6. **Shop at the same stores.** This is more of a frustration reliever. In a new store, you spend most of your time looking for things and walking up and down every aisle, which oftentimes leads to forgetting an item or two. Going to the same store each time makes you more familiar with the prices so you can estimate your bill as you write your grocery list.

Rising prices don't have to mean a lean dinner table. There are ways to make your food dollar go further and if you take the time to implement the ideas listed above as well as others of your own, you'll see savings each and every time you shop.

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5 Frugal Breakfast Ideas

It is the first meal we eat when we get up in the morning. After a long night of sleep, we can't do without it if we want to get our bodies going. No, I'm not talking about coffee. I'm referring to breakfast. Here are some ideas for breakfast that don't require a drive-thru window.

1. **Have a piece of casserole.** It takes time to cook eggs and bacon for breakfast. No one wants to ruin their clothes with the mess it can create. On Sunday night, get breakfast done early. Put together a casserole using your favorite ingredients. Fewer eggs are needed in a casserole than when frying or scrambling them for breakfast each morning. Depending on the size of your family, the casserole may last two to three mornings.
2. **Yogurt.** Yogurt is a healthy and economical breakfast choice. When you are eating on the run, grab a container of yogurt and some dried or fresh fruit. Cutting up fruit on top of the yogurt adds carbohydrates to fuel you for the morning in addition to the calcium and protein in the yogurt itself.
3. **Breakfast shake.** This is even quicker and can be ingested while driving without taking your eyes off the road or both hands off the wheel. Put together some frozen fruit favorites, ice cubes, frozen yogurt, and unsweetened juice in a blender. Pour into Styrofoam cups to keep it cold. Everyone can grab a cup on the way out the door. The nutritional effect is about the same as yogurt, but without the spoon.
4. **Pigs in a blanket.** This is the homemade version. Whip up a batch of pancakes and freeze them in short stacks of three. A package or two of frozen link sausage is needed to create this quick and economical meal idea. Thaw out a stack of pancakes. Heat up three sausages in the microwave. Wrap a pancake around each sausage. Voila! You've got an instant pig in a blanket. Eat it as you watch the last of your favorite morning show or as you walk to the bus stop. It can be eaten in the car without too much fuss or mess. For a sweeter taste and less mess, add a little maple syrup or honey to the batter when making the pancakes.
5. **Breakfast sandwiches.** In the evening, while you are getting things ready for the next day, grill up a few breakfast sandwiches. Choose whatever you like: turkey slices, ham slices, cheese, tomato, bacon, etc. When the sandwich cools, cut it into bite size pieces and put it in a container. In the morning, just grab a container; pop it into the microwave for fifteen or twenty seconds and breakfast is served.

These breakfast ideas are time saving and money-saving too. They make use of items you buy normally and also whatever you have around the house to create delicious fare for a morning rush. No more excuses for skipping breakfast or swinging into the fast food restaurant every morning.

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Money Saving Lunch Ideas for Frugal Families

Breakfast may be the most important meal of the day, but lunch is what gets you through until dinner time. The price of school lunches rises each year and it is hard for some parents to keep up. This is besides the fact that many lunch menus, not just in schools either, are not as nutritious as they could be. Here are some money saving lunch ideas for frugal families.

1. **Take your lunch.** This goes for parents as well as kids. We are tempted to eat out with the group everyday, too. That adds up after awhile. Those cute insulated lunch bags make it easier to carry hot and cold items. We can throw even throw out the brown bags in favor of reusable options which are more environmentally friendly. When you pack your own lunch, you know what is in it so it is easier to avoid a lot of unhealthy fats and junk food.
2. **Make a sandwich.** I'm not talking about just any sandwich. This can be a wrap, pita, crust less bread, or bun sandwich. Varying the bread each day will help you decide what ingredients to put on it. You may want turkey with alfalfa sprouts, tomato, and onion on a pita or chicken strips with barbecue sauce, lettuce, and shredded cheese in a tortilla wrap. Many kids like bread without crust for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. This makes lunch fun and your kids are more likely to eat it if they have a creative variety. Invest in single packs of condiments. They can be used in lunches as opposed to putting them on the sandwich and saturating the bread before lunchtime rolls around.
3. **Bottled water and drink crystals.** Water has never been the same since they came out with those handy packs of flavorings. You can find them everywhere. Best of all they have five calories or less. You can turn a bottle of water into a drink that is better than soda. Kids love them too.
4. **Dessert courtesy of home.** Stop! Put down that candy bar and walk away from the vending machine. Instead, choose a better option. Homemade granola can be shaped into bars and used as an after lunch snack. How about dried fruit pieces? They are sweeter than candy bars and won't spike your blood sugar. It's okay to have a naughty treat every now and then, but even at those times you can choose a healthier option than chips or candy. Make a batch of homemade chocolate chip cookies and pack a few in your lunch.
5. **Ice packs.** These nifty items will keep lunch from spoiling. The perfect complement to an insulated bag, they allow you to take yogurt or a sandwich with meat and not have to worry about it getting warm before it's time to eat.
6. **Veggie sticks.** Eat them with your sandwich and add some Ranch dressing for dipping.

Lunch doesn't have to come from the school cafeteria or the fast food joint around the corner to be good. Coming from home, it can be healthier, taste better and cost less. Now that's a combination you can't beat.

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Save Money & Have Some Fun Drying Fresh Herbs

Herbs are a great way to flavor almost any food dish, but buying them at the store can be expensive. A more cost effective option that adds money to your pocket and flavor to your meals is to grow and dry your own herbs. It can also be tons of fun, especially if you have children who can help.

Fresh herbs have a benefit over the dried ones you buy in the store. If you have a sunny spot and some good soil, you can grow your own herbs at home. Choose the ones that you use most to season food and grow them in small planters.

When growing herbs, treat them like any other plant. Pruning and cutting back the leaves brings even more leaves. As you cut and use fresh basil, oregano, rosemary, and thyme, they will continue to grow. In fact, the herbs may grow faster than you can use them, so share some with friends and neighbors.

Another alternative to letting the extra go to waste is to dry your fresh herbs. Dried fresh herbs lose their moisture, but still retain the entire flavor of a fresh plant. You'll now have herbs to last for months to come and you can pass them on to others once they are dried as well.

Begin with your equipment. You'll need a place to dry them. You can use wooden or wire racks. That cooling rack you use in the kitchen for cookies and cakes would be perfect for drying herbs. Gather together a colander, some cheesecloth, paper towels, and some string.

All herbs to be dried should be washed and rinsed in cold water. A colander is perfect because the water can drain out the bottom. Use paper towels to pat each leaf and stalk until dry of any visible moisture.

Herbs can be dried in many ways. If you only want the leaves, remove the stalk and lay the leaves on a drying rack. Depending on the size of the leaves, you may need a wire rack for them as opposed to a cooling rack from the kitchen.

Herbs can also be dried in bunches. Tie them with string at the stalks and hang them upside down on a nail to air dry. This can be accomplished outside or indoors, but should be done in an area that is ventilated with no humidity. Humidity will help your herbs to retain their moisture and prevent drying. Use cheesecloth to cover herbs on a cooling rack if you plan on letting them dry outside.

Use the oven for faster drying. The temperature should remain low (around 120 degrees). Gently touch the leaves every half hour to test for dryness. The microwave oven is an alternative, but you will have to be careful not to shrivel them up.

Dried herbs will keep for a six months. After that, the flavor begins to wane. Herbs should be stored in Mason jars or plastic containers, just be sure to label them so you know which herb is which. In order to keep the herbs dry and avoid molding during storage, seal the containers air tight.

Herbs season food in many unique and yummy ways. Drying herbs allows you to savor the flavor while saving money and having fun all at once.

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Make That Fruit Last Longer – Dry It

We try to save money on our food bills but with a family, that is a trick in itself. Fresh fruits and veggies seem to cost more and spoil sooner. If you and your family love to eat fresh fruits, one way to be sure they won't spoil is to dry them.

Dried fruits can serve as a healthy alternative to candy. Instead of reaching for chocolate or a piece of hard candy, the kids will reach for a dried pineapple or apple slices. The sweetness of the fruit is concentrated when it is dried and bursts forth with every bite.

Learning to dry fruit is a fairly easy process. You don't need to buy any fancy equipment. Investing in a few sealing jars would be nice so that storing the fruit will be easier, but it isn't a necessity. Sealing jars can be found fairly inexpensive at many supermarkets.

To start, gather all of the fruits you want to dry. Most fruits make good choices. Some of the more common ones are: pineapples, apples, plums, grapes, apricots, and tomatoes (yes they are a fruit!). If you favor lemons, limes, or other citrus fruits, you will be drying the peels and not the fruit itself.

All fruit and equipment need to be clean and thoroughly dried before beginning. Drying racks are needed if you plan on air drying outside or using an oven. Some pieces may be done before others so rotating the trays in the oven gives you a chance to remove any fruit that is already dried and replace with another.

Slice the fruit into small pieces. Apples need to be cored and peeled before slicing. Tomatoes can be cut into slices or quarters and salted before drying. Grapes and plums are okay as is because the skin doesn't affect their taste.

If you prefer to use the microwave to dry your fruit, place small batches in the microwave on the turntable tray. Fruit pieces should be evenly spaced to allow for air circulation while drying. Set the microwave to the defrost setting in order to dry the fruit. It will take about thirty to forty-five minutes. Check after thirty minutes and gradually add time as needed. It is not recommended that tomatoes be dried via the microwave because they should be dried at approximately 120 degrees for about twenty-four hours.

You can eat some of these tasty treats as soon as they are dried or you can save some for later. If storing for later, let the fruit cool before placing in sealing jars or plastic bags. Dried fruits will keep for up to two weeks in a cool dark place. However, these fruit treats are so scrumptious they may not even last for that long.

Dried fruit has a multitude of uses. It can be eaten as is or as a flavorful addition to ice cream, salads, pizzas, and more. Drying your fruits will save you money because it makes the fruit last longer than normal, avoid spoilage and gives you a reason to eat more of it.

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Weekend Cooking Frenzy

Busy days can lead to frustration when it comes to making dinner. Who has time to fix a meal when they don't get home until 6pm or later? Better yet, who feels like cooking a meal after a hard day's work? So, what's a girl to do in order to avoid frozen dinners or worse yet, fast food? Use your weekends off to prepare all your meals for the upcoming week.

We've all been there at least once and if you're like me, more times than we wish to admit. We go to the grocery store and spend a ton of money so that there will be food in the house. We then make a promise to cook each and every night since the food is already there and ready to be consumed.

But, guess what happens? I come home from work late and I am tired. Everyone else is tired from work and school and no one wants to cook. It falls on me to cook so I suggest that we order take-out food. We spend twenty or thirty dollars on food for one meal when we have a freezer full of food. Have you been there, too? Not a very good choice when we're trying hard to save money, right?

One way I've found to stop this endless cycle is to pick one day on the weekend and have a cooking party. Yes, you read that right - a cooking party. I make a menu for the week and thaw out the food on Friday. Then, on Saturday morning I get to work. The kids can help me if they choose and when they do, they get a say in what we will be eating.

For your weekend cooking party, decide on the menu early. This ensures that everything needed is present and accounted for. Start with the meats. They will take the longest to cook so get that going and try to have a variety so you're not bored with the same meats all week long.

Side dishes should be prepared, too. It seems like such a small thing to cook the main part of the meal and save the rest for later. What usually happens is no one feels like cooking anything. Avoid the drama by cooking everything at the same time.

Cooking that much food for later requires containers to hold it all. There are two ways this can be done. One way is to use containers that are large enough for each side dish and the main meat courses. Each day, take a meat and two sides out of the fridge and heat it up for dinner.

The second way gives the family a little more of a choice each day of what they want to eat. When the food cools (everything needs to cool before placing it in containers), have each person scoop what they want to eat into a serving container. Have one meat and two sides per container. In the absence of the family you can do it yourself. Label each with what is inside. During the week, everyone can pick from a variety of dinner combinations.

Each works, but it is up to you to decide which is better for your family. Cooking on the weekend saves time and money because you'll be less tempted to go out when you're tired from working all day. Not to mention, for once you're sure to use the leftovers!

If your food makes more meals than you could eat in a week, freeze several of them for another time. Simply thaw each meal the day you plan to serve it. Yes, you will have to make an investment in dinner size containers, but it pays off the more you use them. Once you see how much stress you relieve and healthier your family is eating it will be well worth the initial cost.

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Stretch That Chicken to Make It Go Further

Chicken is routinely eaten at evening mealtime in American households. We each have our favorite ways of preparing it. When cooking a whole chicken, you can do wonders with what you don't eat for dinner. Here are some ways to make that roasted chicken appealing to the family.

Learn to slice a whole chicken. Slicing one properly makes it easier to remove the rest of the meat from the bone. The skeleton can be used to create broth. Boil it in some water until the rest of the meat falls off.

You can season the broth with herbs and spices. After it cools, pour it into jars for storage. You'll be able to keep the broth for a few weeks. Use it to flavor soups and casseroles.

Do your kids carry their lunches to school? Instead of buying lunch meat, slice leftover chicken breast for sandwiches. It will be a nice change from the usual lunch fare.

On the weekends, instead of ordering a pizza or going to McDonald's, use that chicken. Cube a few pieces to toss on top of a salad with some cheese and croutons. Combine with peppers and onions in a skillet to make filling for fajitas or soft tacos.

Does your family like chicken pot pie? Add some of that chicken, along with vegetables (canned or frozen) and a can of creamed soup to a pie crust and you've got an instant dinner that takes less than an hour to prepare. It is a quick meal idea perfect for busy families. A salad on the side will make a complete and healthy dinner.

Chicken based casseroles can be made and frozen for future meals. The family may be all "chickened out" for the week, but that doesn't mean you can't make the most of the chicken you have left for future weeks.

Do you still have more chicken? Well let's keep going with more ideas. Hey, our mothers and grandmothers learned to use chicken in many ways and so can we. What tastes the best when you have a cold and are feeling under the weather? Why, chicken noodle soup of course.

Don't settle for canned soup with small noodles. Make your own soup with juicy chicken pieces and wide egg noodles. That broth you jarred up will serve as a nice base and best of all it is already seasoned.

Add wide egg noodles and sliced vegetables like carrots, celery, and onions to your soup. When the noodles are tender, add the chicken. Since it is already cooked it just needs to warm up. Ladle up a bowl for the sick and the healthy as a light weekend lunch.

What are you doing with your chicken after dinner tonight? Try some of these ideas to make that chicken do double and triple duty to save on your family's grocery bill. The best part is that the new meals are just as tasty as the original dish.

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