

# Pinching Pennies

## You can cut your gluten-free grocery bill

By Tiffany Shaw-Diaz



**W**e all know the gluten-free diet isn't cheap. But it's worth every penny in terms of maintaining good health. Still, during hard economic times

like the ones we are in now, anything that helps save money is good news indeed.

There are many ways to eat inexpensively while staying gluten free. Here are some tips on how to cut costs.

### *Eat naturally gluten-free food*

Naturally gluten-free foods are an economic best bet. Think of specially produced gluten-free items as only one part of a healthy diet that also includes plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, and lean meat.

Dee Sandquist, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association, recommends rice- and corn-based items to satisfy the grain part of your diet. "They're really some of the cheapest gluten-free grains you'll find," she says.

Rice, in particular, is readily available and easy to cook. It is also versatile and can be used in a variety of ways.

For one-pot meals that are also whole grain, turn to brown rice. Not only is brown rice loaded with more fiber than white rice, but it also blends well with shredded cheese, veggies and a few tablespoons of your favorite gluten-free sauces and mix-ins.

You don't have to have gluten-free bread every day. Look for substitutes—the lowly but cheaper rice cake, for example. Years ago, those who followed a gluten-free diet had few choices and rice cakes were used as a base for many things. Choose carefully because many rice cakes are flavored or have other grains mixed in. You can also find corn cakes on many grocery shelves.

Polenta is an extremely under-used corn product that you can find right in your grocery store. You can mash it with a fork to make a hearty breakfast, slice it and layer it to use like lasagna, or

simply bake some slices with olive oil and fresh herbs for a quick side dish.

Use corn tortillas whenever you can—as a wrap for sandwiches, for example. They are inexpensive and readily available.

Sandquist also recommends eating more beans. "Beans are extremely nutritious and affordable and are also an essential part of a balanced diet."

### *Make your own substitutes*

To save the cost of special gluten-free foods like bread, muffins, and pizza crust, make them yourself.

"It's always less expensive to make substitutes at home," says cookbook author Carol Fenster, PhD. For example, she notes, some gluten-free bakeries charge as much for an individual muffin as you will pay to make a whole batch of muffins yourself.

Of course, gluten-free flours tend to be more expensive than wheat flours so you will want to look for inexpensive sources. Connie Sarros, a gluten-free cookbook author who specializes in creating practical recipes, has numerous money-saving tips for purchasing gluten-free flours.

"Asian markets sell flours for considerably less money than regular stores," Sarros says. "Not to mention their flours are more finely ground, which results in better texture for baking."

Even though it is cheaper to purchase gluten-free flours at ethnic stores, Sarros has a caveat for this method: You usually can't call the processor to see if the product is made in a dedicated facility, a step that many who follow the gluten-free diet like to take to make sure flours are not cross-contaminated.

Sarros has researched flour sources to check on safety. "Most flours that are processed in Thailand are made in dedicated facilities since they process very little wheat, rye or barley in that country," she says.

You do not have to resort to Asian markets for the least expensive flours. "Some flour companies, like Bob's Red Mill,

will sell flours directly to the consumer by the case, which is more cost effective than buying individual bags. However, the extra bags of flour will have to be frozen. If a person does not have the freezer space to accommodate all the extra bags of flour, they may be able to split a case with members of a celiac disease support group.”

### *Shop for the best prices*

It makes sense that baking your own bread, muffins, cookies and other gluten-free food is cheaper than buying these items ready-made. But not everyone has the time and energy to spend hours in the kitchen every week.

Some stores, Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods, for example, have begun packaging less expensive mixes under their own label. Trader Joe’s sells their own brand of gluten-free pancake mixes and bread and many of their regular items are naturally gluten-free.

Trader Joe’s is not a full-service supermarket but they offer good prices on the items that they do stock. The store carries a wide variety of nuts and dried fruits at economical prices. Trader Joe’s has also gone out of its way to cater to the gluten-free consumer. You will find a list of all their gluten-free products in every store.

Whole Foods markets ten private label gluten-free baking mixes, which were introduced last year. “Not only are our private label brands cheap, but they are also made in a 100 percent dedicated facility to prevent cross-contamination,” said Ashley Hawkins, a Whole Foods representative.

However many people do not live near a large store with buy-

ing power to keep costs down. But these days you don’t have to go to a brick-and-mortar grocery to save money. Shopping online has boomed in recent years and become a smart way for those who follow a gluten-free diet to save money.

The Gluten-Free Mall ([glutenfreemall.com](http://glutenfreemall.com)), one of the larger online gluten-free stores, provides tips on how to buy economically: Purchase items from their “specials” page, register an account with them to receive discounts and buy in bulk (buy ten or more of the same item and get a ten percent discount).

In fact, many gluten-free food companies offer discounts on their own websites under certain conditions, so go through each site carefully.



### *Buy in bulk*

One of the best ways to save money is to buy in bulk. If you happen to be lucky enough to have a nearby gluten-free bakery, check to see if they offer group discounts. For example, Mr. Ritts, a New Jersey bakery with a retail store, works closely with support groups by giving them major discounts. According to a representative from Mr. Ritts, support groups can receive a 20 percent discount on an order of \$250 or more with 10 days notice.

If you don’t have a local gluten-free bakery, the Internet is a good alternative for bulk buying. You may be more familiar with Amazon.com as a source of books and other nonfood items, but the company offers hundreds of gluten-free brands. Most come in quantities of six or 12 and give the consumer an average savings

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## *Satisfying your sweet tooth*

It’s fairly easy to find savory foods that are naturally gluten-free, such as fresh meats and vegetables. But it’s much harder to find cheap gluten-free options that will satisfy that inescapable sweet tooth.

Here are some tips on how to put some inexpensive sweetness in your gluten-free diet.

- Buy fresh fruit.
- Try high-quality gluten-free chocolate. It will last a long time because small pieces are so rich.
- Use honey with banana or warm soy milk.
- Spread peanut butter on apples or rice crackers.
- Make peanut butter cookies from the simple recipe in late great Bette Hagman’s “Gluten-Free Gourmet.” Here’s the whole recipe—mix a cup of peanut butter, a cup of sugar and two eggs. Drop by teaspoon and bake for 8–10 minutes at 350 degrees. You can even add chocolate chips to ramp up the sweetness.

# Feeding a GF Family of Four — \$25

A whopping grocery bill is nothing new to those who follow the gluten-free diet. But with the price of regular food rising and the price of gas rocketing, we realized that some cost cutting is a necessity.

So we turned to a chef, a cookbook author and a mom who has celiac disease, and proposed a challenge—come up with a gluten-free menu for a family of four for \$25 or less.

It turned out to be harder than we ever imagined.

Our chef, Clare O'Brien, who develops and tests recipes at the Napa Valley Culinary Institute of America, graduated from the CIA. She became interested in gluten-free cooking after her mother was diagnosed with celiac disease. In true professional style, she moved quickly on her menu. It uses only naturally gluten-free foods. She proposes a hearty breakfast and dinner, with a very light lunch. She didn't include any drinks, which might have helped her come in 53 cents under our limit.

Cookbook author Connie Sarros really shopped for bargains to come in

at \$24.26. "It isn't easy to feed a family of four on a gluten-free diet for \$25 a day, but it certainly is feasible when you comparison shop," she noted.

Her menu includes a lot of familiar foods, from Sloppy Joes to tuna noodle casserole. She did use specialty gluten-free noodles. But her menu is filled out with naturally gluten-free items like eggs, sausage, carrots and apples.

Our mom, Kendall Egan, marketing director for *Gluten-Free Living*, had the most trouble with the theoretical slim wallet we gave her.

"When asked to put together a gluten-free meal plan for a family of four on \$25, I thought 'no, problem,'" Kendall said. "I started out with three well-balanced and nutritional gluten-free meals as my main goal, but soon figured out that my budget was blown by lunch."

Both Kendall and one of her four children have celiac disease, so gluten-free meal planning is an everyday happening in their busy home. When the kids saw Kendall's budget dilemma they

quickly came to the rescue. What about hot dogs without the bun for dinner? What about cereal for breakfast?

Kendall jumped on the breakfast idea, but searched her pantry for items she could cobble into a more interesting dinner suggestion. Her menu uses gluten-free bread, one of the more expensive items on anyone's menu. But after the cereal breakfast, you get a filling sandwich and chips and salsa for lunch. Dinner includes Kendall's own recipe for ham and egg cups (Sorry kids, no hot dogs!) She suggests orange juice for breakfast, but it's tap water for the rest of the meals.

Even so, Kendall could not make the \$25 cut. We attributed the problem to the higher cost of food in the metropolitan New York area where she lives. For example, her eggs cost almost twice as much as Connie's. So we let her go a little over budget at \$31.46.

Kendall said she had one last reality check. "I wouldn't survive the day without my morning coffee, but that wasn't in the budget."

## Easy, economical and delicious dishes

When Chef Clare O'Brien sent us her \$25 menu, she also included the recipes for two easy-to-make, economical dishes. They are so simple and sound so tasty that even the most budget-conscious, kitchen-resistant cook will be tempted to give them a try.

You don't need a lot of money, a lot of ingredients, or a lot of time. What could be better than that. If this is pinching pennies, it really doesn't hurt.

### MUSHROOM FRITTATA

- 4 mushrooms sliced thin
- 3 green onions
- 2 oz cream cheese
- 1 T butter
- Salt and pepper to taste

Melt butter in ovenproof pan for 2 minutes. Whisk eggs and  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup of water until frothy. Add to pan. Cut cheese into small cubes and add to pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes until set.

### PESTO RISOTTO WITH GRILLED CHICKEN BREASTS

- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  cups Arborio rice
- 1 bunch basil
- $\frac{1}{2}$  yellow onion
- 2 cloves garlic
- 3 T olive oil
- 2 chicken breasts, cut in half
- 4 cups chicken broth
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup Parmesan cheese
- Salt and pepper to taste

Chop garlic and place in food processor with basil. Process for 2 minutes then drizzle 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ T olive oil to combine. Place  $\frac{1}{2}$ T olive oil in pan with onion, sauté until limp. Add rice and toast for 2 minutes. Add broth 1 cup at a time, waiting for rice to absorb all broth before the next addition. When rice is al dente, stir in pesto (the garlic/basil mix). Grill chicken until cooked through. Cut in half and serve on top of pesto risotto. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese.

# Planning the Menu — Priceless



Clare O'Brien,  
chef  
**Total cost  
of menu  
\$24.47**

## Breakfast

Mushroom Frittata with sliced bananas and nutmeg

### Ingredients / Cost

4 mushrooms sliced / .80  
5 eggs / 1.50  
3 green onions / .25  
2 oz cream cheese / .50  
1 T butter / .25  
4 bananas / .60  
1 tsp nutmeg / .15

**Total cost breakfast \$4.05**

## Lunch

Lettuce roll ups

### Ingredients / Cost

Green leaf lettuce / 1.69  
4 oz cream cheese / 1.00  
2 Roma tomatoes / 1.00  
1 cucumber matchstick / .89  
2 carrots matchstick / .50

**Total cost lunch \$5.08**

## Dinner

Pesto Risotto with Grilled Chicken Breasts

### Ingredients / Cost

1 1/2 cups Arborio rice / .75  
1 bunch basil / 1.99  
1/2 yellow onion / .25  
2 cloves garlic / .20  
3 T olive oil / .45  
2 chicken breasts cut in half / 4.00  
4 cups chicken broth / 2.00  
1/4 cup Parmesean cheese / 1.50

**Total cost dinner \$11.14**

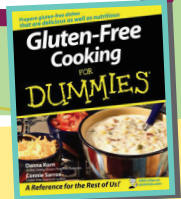
## Dessert

Cinnamon Baked Apple

### Ingredients / Cost

4 small apples / 3.00  
2 T raisins / .40  
2 T butter / .50  
2 tsp cinnamon / .30

**Total cost dessert \$4.20**



Connie Sarros,  
cookbook author  
**Total cost  
of menu  
\$24.26**

## Breakfast

Tortilla stuffed with scrambled eggs, onion, cheddar cheese and salsa. Sausage (2 links per person) Orange juice (4 oz per person)

### Ingredients / Cost

4 GF tortillas / .60  
8 eggs / .83  
1/4 onion, minced / .10  
8 T salsa / .33  
4 T shredded cheddar cheese / .77  
1 tsp butter / .20  
8 links GF sausage / .85  
OJ / .80

**Total cost breakfast \$4.48**

## Lunch

Sloppy Joes  
Jello

### Ingredients / Cost

4 GF hamburger buns / 3.88  
1 lb 85% lean ground beef / 1.85  
8 oz tomato sauce + seasonings / .40  
6 oz box Jello / 1.21

**Total cost lunch \$7.34**

## Dinner

Tuna noodle casserole with peas and cream of mushroom soup. Tossed salad with cucumbers and dressing. Glazed carrots

### Ingredients / Cost

12 oz can of tuna / 4.43  
1 can GF cream of mushroom soup / 2.96  
1/2 cup peas / .37  
8 oz. GF noodles / 1.43  
Lettuce, cucumber, dressing / 1.50  
Carrots / .55

**Total cost dinner \$11.24**

## Dessert

Baked Apples

### Ingredients / Cost

4 small apples / 1.20

**Total cost dessert \$1.20**



Kendall Egan,  
celiac mom  
**Total cost  
of menu  
\$33.37**

## Breakfast

Koala Krisp cereal, milk, orange juice

### Ingredients / Cost

4 bowls of cereal / 1.08  
4 cups milk / .90  
4 cups orange juice / .82

**Total cost breakfast \$2.80**

## Lunch

Turkey and muenster sandwiches, chips and salsa

### Ingredients / Cost

8 slices GF bread / 2.56  
1/2 pound turkey breast / 3.74  
1/4 pound of muenster cheese / 2.92  
1/2 bag tortilla chips / 1.90  
1/2 jar of salsa / 1.15

**Total cost lunch \$12.26**

## Dinner

Ham and egg cups, hash browns, organic salad and dressing

### Ingredients / Cost

10 slices GF bread / 3.20  
1 cup milk / .23  
3 slices ham / .75  
2 oz mozzarella cheese / .96  
5 eggs / 1.00  
2 T butter / .20  
1 bag hash browns / 3.69  
1 bag organic salad mix / 4.99  
3 oz salad dressing / 1.38

**Total cost dinner \$16.40**

of 30 percent. If storage is a problem, try to get together with others who follow a gluten-free diet and share orders.

If you dig deeper on the Web, you'll find other non-traditional online stores that also sell gluten-free products at wholesale prices. For example, vitacost.com, a vitamin company, also sells common gluten-free brands in bulk and at reduced prices. Larabars, for example, are 30 percent off for quantities of 16 and Tinkyada pasta is 20 percent off even if you buy only one package.

There are also numerous smaller, online specialty stores. Jay Berger, owner of Allergy Grocer (allergygrocer.com) offers case discounts of 10 percent in addition to other coupons and specials.

### *Gluten-free shoppers are not alone*

Gluten-free food shoppers are not the only ones facing rising food costs. Gluten-free processors face increasing prices for the ingredients they use. The story is the same for mainstream food stores where all shoppers have to cope with rising prices.

But gluten-free companies say they are aware of the already high cost of gluten-free specialty items and are trying to take steps to curb rising costs.

"Like many manufacturers, we are currently faced with skyrocketing fuel and ingredient costs for some of the specialty gluten-free ingredients we use, like sorghum," says Nancy Curby,

director of marketing for Enjoy Life foods. "Despite the rising costs, we are always committed to giving consumers safe, and most importantly, affordable products."

Some companies have taken more drastic measures to cut costs. Amy's Kitchen, a company that makes a number of gluten-free foods, has cut back on staff and does not spend money on advertising, according to Michelle Erbs, a company representative.

### *A positive perspective*

Sometimes having to reduce your spending can lead to some positive changes. If you can't afford movie tickets for the whole family, but spend the evening with each other watching a DVD, it can be a good thing.

Likewise, some gluten-free cost cutting can lead to better eating habits. If pre-made muffins become too expensive to enjoy as an everyday breakfast and you start eating yogurt and fruit instead, your wallet won't be the only thing to benefit. If you make smart, low-cost choices throughout the day, you might find that your belt is looser even if your budget is tight.

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*Tiffany Shaw-Diaz is a freelance writer based in Dayton, OH. She was diagnosed with celiac disease in 2006, ironically, while working as a restaurant critic for the Dayton City Paper. She has previously written about eating gluten-free on a college budget.*

## *Mixing low cost and good taste*

What can you use to make the most inexpensive all-purpose flour mix? Carol Fenster, well known gluten-free cookbook author, suggests the one below. Although Fenster does not expect everyone to agree on a gold-standard gluten-free flour mix any time soon, she thinks this recipe does a pretty good job with serving multiple purposes. And it won't break the bank.

Combine:

- 1 ½ cups of sorghum or brown rice flour \*
- 1 ½ cups of potato starch or cornstarch \*\*
- 1 cup of tapioca flour

\* Brown rice flour tends to be cheaper than sorghum flour.

\*\* Buy the cornstarch in the grocery store baking aisle where it is the cheapest.

Store this mix in a dark, dry place like a refrigerator or freezer and bring to room temperature when you are ready to use it.