

# POOR GIRL GOURMET

eat in style on a bare-bones budget

AMY M<sup>C</sup>COY

author of [poorgirlgourmet.blogspot.com](http://poorgirlgourmet.blogspot.com)



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To JR, the love of my life—*ti amo per sempre.*

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## what is poor girl gourmet?

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Well, the gourmet—or lover of good food—part came pretty easily. My mother was a scratch-baker, homemade-meals kind of woman—in fact, we still laugh about how my three siblings and I banded together to demand a never-before-experienced-in-our-household meal of TV dinners around the time I was twelve or thirteen. My first taste of junky baked goods came in second grade. I didn't even know what those yellow, frosting-filled cakes were before grade school. My mother saw to it that my childhood was full of wholesome food—and inexpensive food at that, for we were not wealthy by any stretch and there were many mouths to feed.

My mother was influenced, of course, by her mother. My grandmother was a fabulous cook, and owned an Italian restaurant for which she created all of the recipes. That my grandmother, who was not trained as a chef, had an Italian restaurant was a source of great, sometimes gloating, pride for me as a child. I'd like to think it was because I was duly impressed by her determination as a woman in the late 1960s opening a restaurant without any training, but something tells me it might have been more about free spaghetti and meatballs at that time. Now, it's most definitely about her being a home cook who followed her dream at a time when that wasn't the easiest path for her to take. Those early dining experiences at her restaurant impressed upon me the joy that sharing food with family and loved ones brings, as our entire family would often gather there on Sunday for a six- or seven-course dinner.

By the time I was an adult with a proper professional career—for thirteen years I produced promotional campaigns and graphic packages for television clients such as A&E, The CW, Evening News, Discovery Channel, History, and ESPN—my love of food was well established. Fortunate, then, that my income allowed me to travel and learn more about food—at home and abroad. My husband, JR, and I fell in love with Italy—not terribly surprising, given my Italian Nana's influence, of course—and it was there that I learned more and more about fresh, local foods, as each region of Italy has its own cuisine. Wild game and earthy truffles inland, the freshest of seafood at the coast, and cheeses unique to their own locale throughout the countryside. With good food comes good wine, and I do love me some wine. JR and I have been lucky enough to visit wineries in Italy and France—you should know that this is something that anyone can do: you simply need to contact the winery in advance and ask for a visit; many are happy to comply—and over the years, I have read up on wine when I very likely should have been reading up on television industry news. I don't consider myself an expert; I'm just a dedicated, and possibly too enthusiastic, fan.

As you might imagine, advertising spending directly impacts the television industry, so when the economy began to sour for everyone else, its toll had already been felt in my world of television promotion. I had been a freelancer for most of those thirteen years, which meant that despite having no work, I could not collect unemployment benefits and so JR and I needed to plan out our spending carefully, including—and probably most importantly—food spending. While I was trucking along, making a good living in television, I routinely spent between \$160 and \$200 per week on groceries. For two people. I shopped at Whole Foods, bought fancy cheeses, imported prosciutto, and generally anything that struck my fancy while I was in the store. I did not shop sales, and I often bought food that we did not need (I admit

this in the event that the mere mention of fancy cheeses didn't expose me). I thought nothing of cooking up a standing rib roast on any given Sunday in the cooler weather—hey, rib roast goes well with football, you know—and lamb chops, osso buco, and Delmonico steaks made regular appearances on our menu. I have an image of me—purely imaginary—with a loaded grocery cart, and I am grabbing just about any food I see, while dancing and singing obliviously to the obscenity of my spending ways.



However, even in those heady days of willy-nilly food spending, I did embrace much of the food known as *cucina povera*, literally, the poor kitchen. *Cucina povera* arose from peasant cooking in Italy, though every culture has some version of this style of cooking, as it was historically a necessity for the majority of people. It also happened that the food I most enjoyed while traveling in Italy was the simple country cooking, and so I incorporated some of those dishes into my repertoire as well.

Thus, it was a short jump from luxury-food girl to this new food-shopping paradigm. I already had the tools for cooking good food on a budget, I simply hadn't employed them—nor had it been required of me—until my television work evaporated. Needing a creative outlet—sitting on my hands is just not my way—I took the sudden and mammoth gap in my work schedule as an opportunity to start a food blog—Poor Girl Gourmet—based on the way JR and I had started eating.

Over the years spent as this dancing, singing, cart-filling fool, I had developed a shopping routine, one that included shopping at Whole Foods, my local farm stand, and also at my favorite Italian specialty market. I didn't want to change this routine. It was important to me that food not become a source of stress, and that shopping not become depressing. I didn't want to chide myself as I walked those formerly gilded aisles. Food shopping still had to have some magic, because there is nothing more magical than taking raw ingredients and creating something that gives yourself and others pleasure. I also developed relationships with the people who work at those stores and stands. I love chatting with my favorite butchers at Whole Foods, or my artist and writer friend at the farm stand, or the folks at each department of the Italian specialty shop who all are so sweet and helpful.

So I kept shopping at my usual spots, but I adjusted my approach. I made a shopping list and stuck to it—no unnecessary items make it into my cart these days—and I may miss fancy



cheeses, but now, when I do splurge for them, it is usually a special occasion and I enjoy them even more. We eliminated our fit-for-a-Renaissance-erapope meat purchases, and we also greatly reduced the amount of meat we eat. On these pages, you will find a number of meat-free or low-meat dishes. I am a carnivore, and it would be an understatement to say that JR is a big fan of meat—at one point he raised his own Black Angus cattle at our house—oh, and the property isn't quite big enough for cattle, by the way—so it was vitally important that these low- or no-meat dinners be delicious.

While it was important to me that I rein in my food spending—significantly—I didn't want my food values to be compromised. I don't want to eat junk, and so I had to figure that out well. I rely heavily on Whole Foods 365 Everyday Value brand products. I find that they are less expensive than comparable store brand products at my regional grocery chain, and Whole Foods—they aren't paying me, by the way; this is just how I choose to shop on a budget—promotes food values that I also embrace. I do not want bovine growth hormone in my milk. I'd like not to eat genetically modified meats. I am a carnivore, yet I still want to know that the meat I'm buying comes from animals that are treated humanely. I prefer that the people producing my food are able to make a living. For this reason, I spread my produce shopping around, and frequent farmers markets and my favorite farm stand. That farm stand provides JR and me delicious produce, and it's generally less expensive than at Whole Foods. This is not to say that I do not buy produce at Whole Foods, because I do. I am just very cognizant of what's on sale, and plan accordingly.

The changes I've made to the way I shop are painless, and, more than that, they've reduced our weekly food bill by more than half. Now, I spend between \$65 and \$90 per week—and this is for all three meals, every day of the week. I'm sure that you, too, have your own techniques for how to save money on food spending. For me, the key is to cook at home. Even when I was doling out cash like it was going out of style, our meals were usually of restaurant quality for significantly less money. Wow. I just had a scare thinking about how ugly my food bill would have been if we ate out all the time. Yikes. Cooking is not difficult, nor is it complex, and is most definitely not more expensive than purchasing prepared food. There is more than one study out there in the world indicating that inexpensive prepared food—think of the freezer section of your grocery store—is bad for our health, that the chemicals and trans fats in these foods are increasing disease and obesity. My hope is that this book will help debunk the myth that fresh, healthful food is expensive or difficult to prepare. Fresh, healthful options *are* available for less; you just need to shop smart and put a little effort into the making of food. It's easy. I'm telling you: If I do it, anyone can.



Now, speaking of inexpensive and good, that brings us to the pricing. Each of the meals on these pages serves at least four people for \$15 or less. I am not a mathematician—in fact, I had to take a remedial math class during my freshman year of college—however, I have done my best to price each recipe on these pages down to the penny. I employ my own shopping strategies in the pricing, but in order to be absolutely certain that you aren't cursing me later for requiring you to clip coupons, buy meat only on sale (ahem, although, honestly, you should really *only* buy meat on sale unless that meat costs around a few bucks a pound), or make eight pounds of beans in your pressure cooker on Sunday and use them in every meal all week long, I have made sure of a few things.



For one, I kept the price of meat at the non-sale price, though I do *only* shop for what's on sale, unless it's something like the ground meat I use for my meatballs, which costs \$3.79 per pound. I do use canned beans in addition to dried, though I do not think that we can live on beans alone.

I include the cost of every ingredient in the pricing here, save for salt and pepper. Remember, I am a big, huge fan of Whole Foods 365 Everyday Value items, so most of the pricing is based upon the cost of those products, especially pantry items.

In most cases, you can do better than the price estimates on these pages, but I firmly believe in under-promising and over-delivering, and I do not want you to think (and be annoyed) that these prices are difficult to achieve. Quite to the contrary, in fact; and there is generally enough leeway between the meal price and our \$15 limit that you'll still be under even if the prices of a few ingredients vary slightly, as they are likely to do from my area to yours.

It's important, too, to have a number of tools at your disposal when trying to eat well for less, so I've included suggestions for alternate uses of sauces so that if you aren't in the mood for, let's say, chicken one night, you know that the honey-balsamic sauce will go well with pork. It's always good to have some mix-and-match options.

If you have the space, I do highly recommend growing your own food—any food at all, even just a lone potted herb on the windowsill—for it will cut down on your overall food bill. And by the mere mention of “windowsill,” it should be obvious that you do have at least a wee bit of space upon which you can grow your own. If you have more space than a windowsill and can plant a kitchen garden, in addition to saving you money, it also allows you to keep your food free from pesticides. And then, there is nothing quite like having a still-warm tomato in your salad, or beans that were on the vine minutes before you're eating them.

I do hope you'll enjoy the recipes on these pages. They've done the trick at my house, and the transition from shopping fool to parsimonious gal—or Poor Girl Gourmet, as it were—has been painless. And most important, it has been delicious. For it would all be for naught if the food weren't good.

*Buon appetito!*

### Tips to Help You Conserve Some Coin

To get us all on the proverbial same page as we work toward feeding four people for \$15 or less, I want to share with you some of the ways that I endeavor to cut back on my food bill.

One of my primary goals when I realized that I had to rein in my spending was to be certain that creating meals and shopping didn't feel like punishment—I didn't want to have to radically change what I was doing in terms of where I shopped or the quality of what I was purchasing—so my recommendations here reflect that. I could not think of anything more depressing than to go to a store that didn't have good produce or meats in the name of saving money. I do not expect you or me—food lovers that we are—to subsist on beans and rice or MSG-rich packaged noodle meals.

Instead, I adapted my existing habits—shopping at my local farm stand, Italian market, and grocery stores where I enjoy the shopping experience, and employed one of the basic tenets of *cucina povera*: Use good, fresh ingredients, prepared with care and attention to detail, and your meals will never disappoint.

So let's get started on our low-budget, high-quality food adventure.

#### Learn to cook at home.

Okay, so there could be no more obvious bit of advice, could there be? But really, if you can't make a good meal at home—and I intend to help you do that with the recipes in this book—you might find that restaurant meals can be a bit disappointing from time to time. Don't get me wrong, your favorite restaurant still rocks, but those random meals out “just because” are never as good as you hope, am I wrong? And home-cooked leftovers make for great workday lunches, further helping stretch your budget. Add to that, cooking is *easy*. Really. It is. I promise.

#### Do not waste food.

This also sounds obvious, I realize, and you are probably well aware of this yourself—we all routinely throw out food that has gone bad awaiting its use. When shopping, purchase only what you need, and if you have leftovers that freeze well, freeze them. If you have stale bread on your counter, make breadcrumbs or croutons. Store leftover wine in the refrigerator for use in sauces or stews. Compost vegetable and fruit scraps, or save vegetable scraps and freeze them to make Vegetable Scrap Stock (page 1). Consider what other purpose your leftovers could serve before tossing them in the waste bin.

#### Plan meals for a week.

Or even for the next three or four days. But do plan in advance. This will help you not to waste food, and to avoid buying what you do not need—which you know will then be wasted if it's not eaten before it spoils.

#### Shop sales.

This is a technique that my mother used consistently when I was a child and it helped her

stretch her dollars while feeding four chowhound kids. Check store fliers or Web sites before making your grocery list for those pre-planned meals, and plan around what meat you can get for the least amount of money.

### **Have I mentioned, “Buy what you need”?**

Once you’ve planned your meals for the week, make a shopping list, and stick to it. And, yes, sometimes I *do* have to talk myself down from that impulse purchase, but I do, and my bank account thanks me for it.

### **That said, buy in bulk.**

Buy items that you know you will use frequently in bulk. If you know you will use twelve cans of crushed tomatoes in short order, buy them by the case, either at a wholesale club or even at your grocery store. Some grocery stores will discount a case of any one product. If you eat spaghetti all the time, and no other type of pasta will do, purchase a case and stow it away. You’re going to use it anyway, so you might as well save some cash in the process. And do not be afraid to buy meat in bulk, or family packs, and freeze what you won’t use. Just be sure that you use the frozen meat within a month or two. Too much time in the freezer does not improve the flavor, my dear. But if your family loves chicken legs (or pork cutlets, or whole chicken, or ground meats, or sausage, or bacon, or pancetta ... you get the idea) and you’re getting a good price, by all means, stock up and freeze away.

### **Cut coupons.**

But for the love of all that is good in this world, people, only for things that you actually use. It is just not a savings if you would never have spent the money in the first place. Truthfully, I am not much of a coupon clipper, but when I see a coupon that makes sense for me, I am a little over that bad boy. I especially like coupons that offer a certain dollar amount off of the total purchase price, because you cannot go wrong with that. Those tend to be available around store grand openings, seasonally, and through mailings from stores with which you hold a customer loyalty card.

### **Shop in ethnic markets.**

Or at least the ethnic aisle of your grocery store where items like beans, olives, and spices are sold at a lower price than their more mainstream brand name counterparts. If you need turmeric, why buy it for double (or more) in the baking section of the market when it is available in the ethnic aisle? Or, for me, the Italian market is a regular stop. I find higher quality imported meats and cheeses there than I can find at my regional grocery store, and the prices are generally better than those of the regional grocery store. If you adore Indian food, try to find an Indian market to source ingredients—they’re buying more of those products because that’s what their customers are after, so it stands to reason that they can sell them at a lower price than a grocery store that has a lower demand for the same product.

### **But supplement those imported goods by buying as much locally produced food as possible.**

This means so many things, but starts with this general charge I lay unto you: Buy foods that were produced near where you live. This cuts down on shipping costs, and also benefits the



environment by cutting back on fossil fuels used to transport goods long distances. Purchasing foods at farmers markets—you know the foods are fresh, you might learn about a new food in the process, and you help support a local business. Buy from farm stands; the prices tend to be less expensive than the supermarket because the foods are produced on the premises. There we are again with those transportation costs. If the food doesn't leave the property, it's going to cost less—buying local is good for your community, good for the environment, and good for your wallet. Don't get me wrong, I still like Italian wines and cured meats and cheeses from overseas, as well as coffee—which doesn't grow in New England, where I live—but for produce and proteins that do grow nearby, it saves you and me money and strengthens our communities when we choose to purchase those locally raised items. Oh, and did I neglect to mention: Fresher tastes better? Well, then, now I have.

### **Right, so fresher tastes better. Buy in season.**

Seasonal fruits and veggies are plentiful at that happy moment in time when it is *their* season. Hence, the cost is lower, and—get this—you are more likely to, *without even trying*, buy locally produced food. Another thing about purchasing foods during their natural season is that it gives you something to anticipate, to look forward to. You don't really want that pasty-tasting tomato in January, do you? No, you want the sweet, juicy, bursting-with-flavor, kissed-by-the-sun-that-shines-on-you August tomato. That's what you want. It's about quality as well as cost, our little mission is.

### **How much fresher can it get? Grow something yourself.**

Even if you live in a fifth-floor walk-up, you can make room for a basil, thyme, or parsley plant. Or whatever herb is your very most favorite. While I am fortunate enough to have a garden at my house, I live in a cold climate. So to fend off the winter blues, I keep thyme and rosemary in my house all throughout the cold season. These are the two herbs I use most frequently, and not having to purchase them every other week saves me money and frustration. If you have a deck, porch, or landing, you can grow a tomato plant in a pot and enjoy your very own fresh, warm-from-the-sun tomatoes at harvest time. Okay, so you have tomatoes. Fine. Select another vegetable that is a favorite—lettuce, beans, peppers, or peas—and plant that in your container garden.

### **Establish a relationship with your grocer/butcher/farmer/wine merchant.**

Perhaps you're bashful, or a full-on introvert, but you are missing out if you don't form relationships with the people who produce or procure your comestibles. First, it's plain old good manners to be friendly to these folks. Second, you are sure to learn something from them because it is quite likely that you are not yourself a grocer, butcher, farmer, or wine merchant. These folks are experts in their field. A good butcher can help you decide just how many people you'll be able to serve with that chuck roast. A greengrocer or farmer will know what produce is at its peak and can let you know what crop will be available next. Not only that, the farmer probably has a serving suggestion or two for his or her crops. A wine salesperson will eventually get to know your taste and can help you find quaffing wines that will expand your knowledge of wine and help keep money in your bank account. There is no shame in being smart with your money, and these hard-working people know just when you're coming from when you're looking for the best value for your money.

### **Buy meat on the bone.**

Have you ever looked at the price of boneless skinless chicken breast versus a whole chicken or even skin-on, bone-in chicken breasts? No? Well, I suggest you do. Trust me, for the cost savings, you most certainly can learn to bone and skin your own chicken breasts. Yes. You can. And when you seek out meat on the bone, you will find many a scrumptious cut—whether it be lamb, beef, pork, or chicken—that have the added benefit of not costing very much. And that is a good thing.

### **And while we're on that theme, buy less expensive cuts of meat.**

I, too, used to love me a rack of lamb or a standing rib roast whenever I happened to be in the mood for it, but I've found that less expensive cuts of meat are equally—and sometimes more—tasty than those expensive cuts we all got used to when we were busy rolling around in money. Cuts like shanks, shoulder, and legs are inexpensive, and are easily dressed up for company or dressed down for comfort. While we're at it, do not dismiss the potential of the chicken—it is versatile and not at all boring. Particularly when you follow the next tip.

### **Use sauces to gussy things up.**

There is no faster way to make a meal seem more fancy than to add a sauce. And while you may be sitting there thinking, “Egads—how many calories is *that* going to add?” rest assured there are just as many possibilities for wine- or juice-based sauces as there are milk- and cream-based. I'll share recipes for both types and will be sure to let you know if the sauce will work well with another type of meat. A little bonus for you, my friend. For we like versatility and bonuses, yes, we do.

### **Now, how about a garnish, too?**

Garnishes are also inexpensive ways to add flair to your dinners. Whether it's a dollop of sour cream, a drizzle of olive oil, a grating of cheese, or a sprinkling of herbs, garnishes take meals to a fancy-pantsy level. And for not much money per serving.

### **Hey, and sometimes, use less meat, or no meat at all.**

Cutting food costs is aided if you reduce the quantity of meat you use as well as the frequency with which you eat it. Perhaps instead of meat all seven nights of the week, you have one night that is meat-free or nearly meat-free. And if you're going nearly meat-free, cured meats, like bacon, are a great addition to dishes that are composed mostly of vegetables; they pack a flavor punch that belies their sparing use.

### **Purchase vegetables in their whole state.**

You already know that you pay a premium for pre-cut vegetables. If you have less time than money, that's all good, but if you are trying to conserve your financial resources, spend just a little extra time peeling and seeding that butternut squash, cutting that broccoli into florets, or peeling and trimming carrots.

### **Do not forsake your freezer.**

When you find a great deal for meat on sale, go ahead and stock up, freezing meal-sized portions for future use. I nearly always have meal-sized stacks of pancetta in my freezer for

staving-off-the-temptation-of-takeout Pasta Carbonara (page 38). Likewise, many of the recipes on the following pages call for fresh herbs, but don't use an entire bunch of that herb. Have you noticed that some clever marketer came up with the idea of selling frozen packages of herbs at the grocery store? Do you see the lightbulb above your head? Simply take the unused portion of the herb, rinse it, dry it completely, and chop it as though you're preparing it for its next use, then freeze it in an airtight container until the next time you need it. *Voilà*—freshness and no waste. We love that, don't we?

### **Buy store brands.**

But only store brands from a store you trust. My sister once purchased store brand salsa from a store that was convenient, but of which she wasn't terribly fond, and found it completely unappetizing. She had to go back out and purchase the name brand. But when it works, it really can save you money. I was an aficionado of an expensive imported Italian pasta brand in the days when I was a shopping fool, but the cost got to be prohibitive once my income was scaled back. Whole Foods Market, a market that I trust, stocks a store brand pasta that is comparable to the fancy brand I used to buy, and for less than half the price. So choose wisely. If you shop at a store like Trader Joe's you are already purchasing store brands. And stores like Costco, BJ's Wholesale, Whole Foods Market, and regional chain supermarkets also offer store brands—if you love the store, you are likely to love the store brand flavor. *Arrivederci* to the store-brand savings.

### **Do not forget about those rewards cards.**

Not only do you get a better price on many items week-to-week with grocery store rewards cards, some grocery stores even partner with gas stations to take a certain amount off of your next fill-up, provided you earn a certain number of points—by spending money at the grocery store. Is this a carrot that is being dangled? Yes, it is. But the tradeoff is that you will save money on your grocery bill, and perhaps land an additional reward for your pocketbook. Who doesn't like that?

### **Pick your battles.**

And by this, my friend, I mean *do not be afraid to splurge if there is something you cannot live without*. You cannot live by parsimony alone. No, you cannot. So if you love fancy chocolate or Parmigiano-Reggiano, or some imported cheese, buy it. But do follow the next tip, won't you please?

### **Use expensive items sparingly.**

As you can see, no one—certainly not me—is saying that you should never again purchase fine imported olive oil, or cheese, or even a rare fungi that costs more than gold per ounce. Think of these as items to be used sparingly. You'll still be able to enjoy them, and won't have to purchase them as frequently as if you used them as a main ingredient.

## **Basic Techniques**

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Some techniques are going to be repeated in lots of recipes, so to make it easier for you and for me—all that repeating will wear us down, you know—I've explained a few here; others you'll find peppered throughout the book.

## **Cleaning Leeks**

Leeks are notorious for hiding dirt within their layers, the rings seemingly suctioning up soil as the leeks grow, so it is imperative that one always washes them well. We'll be using only the white and light green parts of leeks in the recipes in this book, and the way I clean these parts is by first cutting the leek crosswise into two- to three-inch lengths. I then cut those half lengthwise, and place the cut pieces into a small mixing bowl full of cold water. I agitate the leeks in the water to expel the dirt, then change the water, and repeat that process until no more dirt appears in the bowl. Once that's all done, simply dry the leeks with a kitchen towel, then proceed with preparing them for the recipe.

## **Kneading**

While some people may look at kneading dough as work, I truly, unabashedly love it. It is an amazing experience each and every time to bring dough from its nascent, rough stages to the smooth and silky dough we desire. I have taken shortcuts in the past, and I can assure you that it is well worth your while to knead for as long as the recipe requires.

I generally bring dough to the point of just coming together in the mixing bowl—I use a stand mixer, but dough can also be formed by hand or in a food processor—and then roll it out onto a lightly floured countertop to knead it by hand. Kneading is a lot like upper-body exercise, as you alternate folding the dough into itself from right hand to left hand—or left hand to right hand, depending upon how you look at it.

Place the dough on your countertop. Rub a little flour on your hands. Starting with whichever hand you prefer, pull a corner of the dough up from the countertop and push it back into the middle of the dough. Move the dough a quarter turn, and repeat the process, pushing and turning for the amount of time specified in the recipe. And in so doing, you are elongating the gluteins within the dough, forming what I like to think of as silken threads of gluten that build the body of the bread or pasta.

There is nothing quite like a well-kneaded pasta dough—so supple that it can be rolled out thinly enough to remind you of a silk scarf—and likewise, a well-kneaded bread rewards you with bakery-worthy nooks and crannies. If that weren't enough, I find that kneading also helps soothe the mind—pushing out the stress as you form the silken gluten threads. So very Zen, really.

## **Pureeing Hot Liquids**

*Hot liquids do not like to be pureed in large quantities.* Early on in my cooking endeavors, I was in a rush (note: I had not yet learned that cooking is not a race), and tried to puree a couple cups of corn chowder at once. Approximately three seconds after I started the blender, I was dripping with hot, pale yellow, partially blended chowder. All over my face, in my hair, on my clothing, and on the walls and ceiling—yes, ceiling—of my very tiny kitchen.

I would not wish this on anyone else, and so I must warn you: Be sure to let the hot liquid cool to lukewarm before starting the puree, and always work in small batches— one cup at a time.

less—when pureeing liquids that have been heated. For ease of execution on the return of the pureed soup to the saucepan, pour the little puree batches from the blender into a batter bowl with a spout and a handle while you work your way to the bottom of the saucepan.

### **Reserving Pasta Cooking Water**

Many of the recipes in the Entrées chapter call for reserved pasta cooking water. It's used to add moisture to sauces, and the glutens transferred from the pasta to the cooking water help to thicken a sauce slightly.

It is best to do this in the sink so as to avoid water overflowing onto your countertop. Drain the pasta into a colander placed over a bowl (an 8-cup heatproof mixing bowl should do) to collect the cooking water, and then you can measure out the amount you need, until you feel comfortable judging the quantity without measuring.

### **A Rather Handy Egg Separating Gadget**

There's no need to run out and purchase an egg separator—eggs happen to have one built in. It's known as the shell. You will need two bowls, however.

Simply crack the shell as close to the halfway point as possible, and, holding the broken egg over one bowl, transfer the yolk back and forth between the shell halves, allowing the egg white to fall into the now-designated-for-egg-whites bowl. Once all of the white has been removed from the yolk, place the yolk into its special yolk bowl. Save the whites for another use; they'll keep for two days in the refrigerator, or six months if frozen, or you can whip up a quick egg white and veggie scramble straightaway if you need a snack.

### **Toasting Nuts**

Toasted nuts add textural and flavor interest to many dishes, and are extremely easy to make. Simply place the desired amount of whole, shelled nuts on a 9 by 13-inch rimmed baking sheet and bake them at 350°F until lightly browned, 10 to 12 minutes. Or you can use chopped nuts, and it will take about half the time. Remove them from the oven, allow the nuts to cool, and remove the loose skins by rubbing them between two kitchen towels—you don't have to go crazy trying to pick off every last bit of skin, by the way. Store them for no more than two weeks in an airtight container until you're ready to use them, lest they become soft, and you'll have them at the ready any time the toasted nut craving strikes.

### **Making Croutons**

This is a great way to extend the life of bakery or homemade bread—particularly if you're taking the whole don't-waste-food directive to heart, as you should. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Cut the bread into 1-inch cubes. Toss the cubes with 1 to 2 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil or more, depending upon the amount of leftover bread you have. Season them with kosher salt and freshly ground pepper and bake on a 9 by 13-inch rimmed baking sheet, turning the bread cubes over once, until they're golden brown, 12 to 15 minutes. I like to use croutons in soups such as Ribollita (page 16), and, of course, on salads whenever the urge strikes. And, of course, you should seal these up in an airtight container where they'll keep for up to two weeks.



## **Making Breadcrumbs**

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Another good way to extend a bakery loaf's life is to make breadcrumbs of the remainder. Cut the bread into 1-inch cubes and allow to dry on a 9 by 13-inch rimmed baking sheet overnight. In a food processor or blender, chop the cubes until they become crumbs. I like mine a little more robust, so I stop when they've just become crumbs, but if you want them more finely ground, go ahead and keep processing until you have a texture you like. Like croutons, these bad boys belong in an airtight container where they will keep for two to three days, or up to six months in the freezer. The freezer is our friend, after all.

## **Roasting Garlic**

One of the tricks of eating well for less money is to have an arsenal of low-cost, big-flavored ingredients, and roasted garlic is certainly one of those items. You can add roasted garlic to soup, stew, pasta, stir-fries, or any number of potato or rice dishes. It also makes for a wonderful condiment spread on fresh bread, or combine it with sour cream and thyme or parsley, or oregano for a tasty dip, or serve it as an accompaniment to goat cheese—I could go on and on, but you get the idea.

# ROASTED GARLIC

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**1 head garlic, outer skin removed**

**1 teaspoon extra virgin olive oil**

**Kosher salt**

**Freshly ground black pepper**

**1** Preheat the oven to 375°F. Trim the top quarter inch of the garlic cloves off the head of garlic. Place the garlic on a piece of aluminum foil just large enough to wrap the bulb up snugly for baking. Bend the foil up around the garlic to create a rim of foil to catch any drips, then drizzle the olive oil over the cut side of the garlic head, and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Wrap the foil tightly around the head, and roast on the middle rack until the garlic is softened and has started to brown, about 45 minutes. Remove the garlic from the oven and allow it to cool for at least 5 minutes before removing the roasted cloves (if you're using them right away), or refrigerate it in its foil package for use within a week.



**ESTIMATED COST FOR ONE HEAD OF ROASTED GARLIC: 54¢.** One head of garlic costs 50¢. A teaspoon of olive oil will run us 4¢. There. That's it. And for 54¢, you have a secret flavor weapon at the ready for any use necessary. From the preceding list, you can see there is many a necessary use.

Alrighty, now that we're all well versed, let's get cooking!

# soups and salads

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Vegetable Scrap Stock

Roasted Fennel and Carrot Soup with Honeyed Mascarpone

Pea Soup with Mint

Spicy Carrot Ginger Soup

Chicken Orzo Soup

Roasted Butternut Squash Soup

Hearty Pasta Fagioli with Kale

Ribollita

Chicken, Sausage, and Kale Soup

Orzo, Sun-Dried Tomato, and Walnut Salad with Feta

Summer Romaine and Corn Salad with Chicken

Lime Corn Cream Dressing

Blue Cheese Wedge Salad with Grilled Sirloin Tips

Panzanella (Italian Bread and Tomato Salad)

Harvest Salad with Honey-Balsamic Dressing

Green Tomato Chutney



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# VEGETABLE SCRAP STOCK

{Makes 8 cups, pretty much free}

*The three primary vegetables used as the base of many soups, stews, and sauces are carrots, celery, and onion. Conveniently, these are also the three primary vegetables used in stock—including meat stocks. Once you're cooking at home more often, you, my friend, will have scraps from peeling carrots, trimming celery, and removing layers from those onions. Each time you make a dish that calls for these ingredients, save the scraps. Rinse the carrots and celery before trimming and peeling, then save those carrot peels and trimmings, the celery tops and bottoms, and the outer rings of the onion—not the brown, papery onion skin, though. Save them in the freezer in a one-gallon-capacity plastic food storage bag (or other gallon-sized storage container), and when you have packed the bag full, make some stock. We're trying to keep our costs down, and we also want to be able to season whatever dish we're preparing as we like, so this recipe doesn't call for seasonings. However, if you do have a bunch of parsley, thyme, or sage that needs using up and you want that added flavor, by all means, toss it into the pot as well. By employing scraps for stock, you're being both thrifty and less wasteful. These are good things. Here's how it works:*

## **1-gallon bag vegetable scraps**

### **8 cups water, or enough to cover the scraps completely**

**1** Place the vegetable scraps into a large stockpot (at least 8-quart capacity) and cover the scraps with water. Bring the contents of the pot to a simmer, then cover and continue to simmer for 2 to 3 hours. Let the stock cool, then strain the solids out. Save the stock in the freezer if you have no immediate plans for it, or in the refrigerator if you're going to be making soup in the next 2 to 3 days.

NOTE: If you are ambitious, you can also save meat bones from your delicious homemade meals (separately) in the freezer and make meat stocks as well. Just add the chicken carcass or the turkey carcass (honestly, if the host of Thanksgiving is only going to toss it, it would be a shame not to make some stock; you can use it in place of chicken stock), or the pork, beef, or ham bones to the mix and simmer away. Same procedure. Free stock. Frugal you.





For the purpose of pricing the soups in this book, I base the vegetable, chicken, or beef stock cost on the Whole Foods 365 Everyday Value per-cup price. And I like their product. It's not salty, it tastes good, and it's convenient. But if we are to emulate our forebears who lived on less, we all need to know how to make stock at home. Particularly vegetable stock.

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