

The Extravagant Gourmets

Why the food press rarely talks about dollars and cents.

By Sara Dickerman for Slate Magazine (April 16, 2008)

Sky-high gas prices partnered with record-setting corn and wheat prices have led to what the AP calls "the worst case of food inflation in nearly 20 years." In combination with a looming recession and the deflation of the real-estate market, these high prices mean that the everyday grocery bill is overwhelming Americans. And yet a happy hedonism still dominates the food media; turn to the food section of your city paper and you'll learn where to spend \$120 a pound on *jamón ibérico* or where to taste a flight of pricy olive oils. When such outlets deign to consider cost, they tend to produce "frugality stunts": Think of the recent New York Times articles on cooking with 99-cent ingredients or the countless Top Chef challenges in which contestants turn out high-end fare from tin cans and vending machines. Even a "cheap eats" restaurant review, when defined at "less than \$25 a head," exceeds the national daily average spent on food by about \$18.50.



As an industry, we rhapsodize about *la cucina povera*—that is, "poor food" like polenta, beans, and braise-worthy cuts of meat like short-ribs and pigs trotters—but we rarely talk about cooking in terms of dollars and cents. When food writers and producers advocate economy, they're usually talking about time—churning out recipes for fast, easy, everyday weeknight meals that can be prepared in minutes. The dollar-savvy recipe is far less common. Why, even as the economic news turns grim, is it so unusual for the food media to take cost into account?

In part, it's because we assume our readers are looking for a window into the epicurean life, not a mirror of their own kitchens. And, of course, there is the subtle or not-so-subtle pressure to sell advertisers' expensive food products, travel packages, and restaurants. But a big factor, I think, is an aesthetic concern—a fear of taking the hectoring tone of the much-maligned home economist. Cutting your food budget requires systemic organization: cooking foods from scratch (roasting your own chicken rather than buying it at the grocery store); shifting the focus of your meal away from animal protein; using your leftovers; and, perhaps most importantly, planning ahead to take advantage of economies of scale and grocery bargains. That's a hard sell for the food press of today, which tends to linger over fast and spontaneous rewards rather than strategic planning.

Finally, there's a political element to the food press' shyness about pricing—most of us followers of the food revolution believe that industrially produced cheap food is not actually cheap. It might not cost much at the checkout line, but it hides a raft of government food subsidies and externalities like pesticide and methane pollution, not to mention the inhumane mass production of animals. So it can be hard to get to the bottom of the bottom dollar.

Writers weren't always so reluctant to tackle the economic component of home economics: Until the mid-1980s—when the fancy-food revolution really took hold and works like the iconic *Silver Palate Cookbook* helped Americans discover costly specialty ingredients like morel mushrooms—there was a steady stream of American cookbooks that focused on how to run a household efficiently and within a budget. A very quick sampling includes works like *The Frugal Housewife* (1829), *Practical Sanitary and Economic Cooking Adapted to Persons of Moderate and Small Means* (1890), *Ida Bailey Allen's Money-Saving Cook Book: Eating for Victory* (1942), *The Southern Living Low Cost Cookbook* (1971), and the very thoughtful *More-With-Less* (1976), a collection of Mennonite recipes gathered by Doris Janzen Longacre that focuses on moving down the food chain, reducing processed foods, and simply eating less.

Perhaps the most famous piece of writing about stretching food dollars is *How To Cook a Wolf* by MFK Fisher, the patron saint of all sensualist food writers. *HTCAW* was written in 1942, during a period of rationing and scarcity in the U.S. food market and with an eye to the even more desperate situation of homemakers in England. Fisher provides a progression of recipes from modest to truly subsistence fare (a paste of grains and vegetables and a wisp of meat she piquantly names "sludge") but urges readers to hang on to the humanizing experience of pleasure at the table and in the home. She even provides a final chapter of rich, expensive recipes to dream about while scrimping. The wolf that Fisher wrote about may have slinked off—our wartime hasn't confronted us with the same kind of home-front sacrifices that World War II did. But there are other unpleasant creatures outside the door—recession, overconsumption, and escalating food costs.

There is a market for money-saving cooking ideas that the food media is simply failing to fully exploit. *Cheap. Fast. Good!*, a plucky guide to stretching food dollars published by Workman in 2005, has been a moderate success. The authors of *Dining on a Dime* claim to have sold 130,000 copies of their comb-bound cook book. Budget-minded discussion boards have sprung up all over the Internet. There are Web sites for "once-a-month cooking" enthusiasts (homemakers who make 30 days worth of freezer-ready meals in one marathon cooking session). And there's the 99-cent chef, who, since 2006, has kept a regular blog devoted to the Times' one-off premise: hip recipes sourced from 99-cent stores. "Russ Meyer Lemon Chicken," anyone? The time seems right for a mainstream voice (better yet, voices) to marry the pleasures of the table with the reality of a reduced budget, perhaps by using what we've learned from the food revolution. Michael Pollan has already made a big splash this year by recommending that people shy away from packaged products and eat less meat—two steps that are not only a grassroots vote for a new kind of food system but that will help save money. It's possible, after all, to economize without reverting to a freezer full of Tex-Mex lasagna (one of those "mock-ethnic dishes that American dieticians love," as Jeffrey Steingarten puts it). A new home economics could harness seasonal ingredients and real ethnic flavors; it could weave a lusty appreciation of food with a sober appreciation of the grocery dollar.