

# 22 Days to a Fresh Start



A simple guide to a cleaner kitchen  
and a leaner grocery budget.

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# Introduction

"[22 Days to a Fresh Start](#)" was originally written to give guidance to those seeking to create a clean slate in their kitchens. It's been re-vamped to include even more new content to keep the momentum going, to keep "doing something" on your real food journey after the series was completed. Thank you for being a part of the [Don't Waste the Crumbs](#) community. I hope you find this series to be encouraging and helpful as much as I did!

## DAY ① Clean Out the Fridge

Every big goal begins with a small step. The big goal of a cleaner, fresher and healthier kitchen and grocery budget may sound daunting, but it begins with a small step today - clean out the fridge. Sounds, simple enough, right? It is!

The fridge is home to roughly one-third of all our food, including leftovers from dining out or dinner at home two nights ago. Most people have good intentions to eat leftovers, but too often food gets pushed to the back where it stays unseen. That is, until it wilts or gets soggy or grows fuzz, and then it's promptly thrown away.

In order for us to make the best use of what we have, we need to know what we have!

Start with the fridge door and look at every single item, even if you think you know what it is. Open every unsealed container to see what's inside. Verify that the re-purposed jar of barbeque sauce really contains barbeque sauce! Look for the following while you're sorting through the contents:

- expired foods
- food you know you or the family won't eat
- spoiled and/or rotten food

If you find anything falling under either of those categories, throw them away. Expiration dates are set by the manufacturers for their own protection. It's tempting to keep foods beyond the expiration date, using as much as we can before the item fails the sniff test. However, we don't know how long the food was in its package *before* the expiration date, and we don't know how long the

item has been open. Plus if the food is sitting in your fridge expired, there's a good chance you won't finish it anyway.

If you're tempted to keep foods that are expired, thinking they're still safe to eat, follow this simple rule: If the item has an expiration date of over six months ago, throw it away.

Even the most food-waste conscious family, at some point in time, will have food in their kitchen they know they won't eat. For example, we made refried beans for company last week. After dinner we packaged up the leftovers and put them in the fridge. Those beans have been sitting untouched in the exact same place for over a week, because my family doesn't like refried beans. It simply makes no sense to keep the beans if we're not going to eat them!

Spoiled and/or rotten food should be thrown away without question. Our digestive systems are built incredibly tough, but even the healthiest digestive system can fall ill given the right dosage of bad bacteria. It's just not worth the risk.

While cleaning out the fridge, keep an open eye for glass jars. They can be [re-purposed](#) for a variety of reasons and [removing the labels](#) is easy. Instead of throwing the entire jar away, empty the contents into the trash, rinse out the jar and set it aside for cleaning later.

Once you've deemed your fridge door "safe," wipe down each shelf with warm soapy water. Dry it with a clean towel and re-stock your door.

Repeat the purging and cleaning process with the main area of the fridge, starting at the top and working your way down one shelf at a time. Pull the produce drawer out all the way to make sure nothing is left hiding in the far back.

With the fridge clean, organize it in a way that best suits you and your needs. Here are some ideas to spark creativity:

- Store fruits and vegetables in a clear storage bin on a shelf in plain sight, instead of in a drawer, so they aren't forgotten.
- Put milk and cream on the bottom shelf, at the far back. This is the coldest area of the fridge and it will keep your dairy fresher, longer.
- Group similar items together, like leftovers, and store them in the same location. For example, we keep all the leftovers on the top shelf. This helps us to remember to use them and containers don't get pushed behind or lost in the fridge.

Once you've cleaned out and re-organized the contents of the fridge, take out the trash and pat yourself on the back - you've completed day 1.

## DAY (2) Eat the Old Stuff (leftovers)

Cleaning out the fridge gives us a good idea of what we have to eat. The next step is to make the best use of it. By eating what is already in our homes and everything that we prepare, we become good stewards of the food we bought and the money we used to buy it with.

The frame of mind is very important with regards to leftover food. After dinner, many dishes often have just half to one single serving left. Whether it's half a chicken breast, one serving of pasta or just a small handful of mushrooms - it's all still food!

Quality ingredients can be expensive - organic chicken can sometimes cost three times as much as conventional. As you live out your real food journey you'll see that food can cost time as well. We must value *all* the food we buy and waste as little as possible. Even one single dollar worth of waste each week adds up to \$52 each year. Would you willingly throw away that if it was cash? Think about this in terms of time - would we willing to waste more than two solid days worth of our hard work?

Open the fridge again and make a list of the contents that needs to get eaten or else it will spoil. It could be produce, leftovers or a condiment with just one serving left. Whatever it is, make an effort over the next couple days to do one of two things: Eat it, or do something with it.

Below is an example of what you may find in your fridge. Included are some ideas with what you can do with each item, if eating it outright isn't an option.

- 2 1/2 heads of romaine lettuce: Tear off the edges that are wilted and throw them away. Wash and chop up the remaining lettuce. Dry the

lettuce with a [homemade salad spinner](#) and store it in a container in the fridge with a paper towel to absorb any residual moisture. Eat salads for lunch and/or with dinner until the lettuce is gone. Use up the salad dressings that have the least amount left first.

- 1/4 jar red curry paste: This is an expensive ingredient and should not go to waste. Edit the meal plan to use up what's left over the next one to two weeks.
- mushrooms: Add to salads, or sauté with butter, salt and pepper and freeze for a future dish. These would be an excellent addition to a [healthy baked ziti](#) or in a frittata.
- pancakes: Make a point to eat them for breakfast, serve breakfast for dinner or freeze them for another week.

The goal of day 2 is to not let the food you already have go to waste. If you have so much food that it will go bad before you can eat it all, make it a point to eat leftovers more often. Also consider cooking less food when preparing meals and if all fails, freeze it!

Once you've made plans for all the food in your fridge, you've completed day 2.

## DAY ③ Create a Grocery Budget

Having an established grocery budget is absolutely critical to eating real food without breaking the bank. Quality foods can be expensive and the costs will quickly add up. Designating a certain amount of funds for food forces us to make choices between what foods are necessary for growth and sustainability, versus empty foods that do not provide any nutritional value.

Budgets are not the enemy; they should not be viewed as bars on a cell, restricting you from doing what you want. Rather a budget provides parameters to work within, opportunities to put thought behind every purchase and the ability to decide what is best for your family and what is really worth the money.

Take for example [olive oil](#). There are many varieties on every store shelf to choose from: from Spain, Italy, California... cold-pressed, first-press, organic... dark bottles, light bottles, glass bottles... and each of them come with a different price tag. Smaller bottles priced at \$13.99 *appear* to be better for you because of the packaging, but [are they really?](#)

Unless you have a grocery budget, you truly won't know the answer.

Everyone falls into one of two categories: You either have a grocery budget, or you don't. Today's task will look different depending on which group you fall into.

**For those who already have a grocery budget established:**

Verify that your budget is accurate. Are you allowing more than you really spend? Are you spending more than you allow? Review the receipts from

the past month to see what you've been buying. If "splurges" have become habit, attempt to cut those out of your budget for the next two weeks. Be confident about your expenditures and certain that your return is worth your investment. Adjust your numbers accordingly.

**For those who do not have a grocery budget established:**

First, [subscribe to the Crumbs weekly newsletter](#) to gain access to five pages worth of free printables that will walk you through the budget process step-by-step. At the end of these pages, you'll have a clear guideline of how much to allow for groceries.

Then, finish the steps outlined in [this short series](#). There's only six steps altogether, and if you did the worksheets, there's only three left.

**Whether or not you have a grocery budget, here are a few additional guidelines you can use to tailor the numbers.** Even the most seasoned budgeters should read and consider these ideas, as budgets should be evaluated often for effectiveness and accuracy.

- Know that processed food costs more than real food. Despite what culture says, this statement is true. [A simple loaf of homemade bread costs 25¢](#) and it will be made entirely with real food, nothing artificial and no preservatives. A store-bought loaf meeting similar criteria will cost at least \$3. One pound of seasonal produce will cost only \$1 where a "family size" bag of potato chips will cost more than four times as much.
- Know that we pay for convenience, not food. Convenience foods are more expensive because there is very little work involved on the consumer's end. A [four-count box of Jimmy Dean](#) biscuit sandwiches will cost \$7.19 at Groceries-Express, making each sandwich \$1.80.

Buying the ingredients separately and making them at home would take 30 minutes and cost 56¢ each.

- Make your budget match your dinner plate. The average dinner plates is 1/4 meat, 1/4 starch and 1/2 should be produce. Consider how well your budget reflects this. For a monthly grocery budget of \$400, \$100 should be spent on quality meat, \$100 towards starches and \$200 towards nutrient-dense and organic produce.
- Look at your budget in terms of percentages. Financial advisor Dave Ramsey recommends the average family's food budget (including dining out) to be 5-15% of their monthly income. Your own unique situation - size of family, where you live, dietary restrictions, etc., - should be taken into consideration, but Mr. Ramsey's estimate is a starting point for comparison.

After establishing a grocery budget, record your grocery expenses daily and tally them up often. This will help keep your budget at the forefront of your mind and aid in successfully staying within budget each month. With a grocery budget in place, you've completed day 3.

## DAY 4 Ditch the Trans Fat

A few of these challenges will have lasting impacts beyond tomorrow and today's tasks is one of them. Ridding your kitchen of trans fat will cause you to read labels in stores and even second guess how your food is prepared at restaurants.

If you're not familiar with trans fat, it's vital to know how dangerous they truly are. They're created in a lab by a chemist, not in nature by God. Trans fats are chemical reactions, the product of mixing metal with oil. Under a microscope, they look more like plastic than food, which is very scary considering they can be hidden foods that are been approved to be labeled "trans fat free."

Why is that? The FDA requires products to be labeled according to the amount of trans fat per serving. If the amount is less than 0.5g, then the item can be labeled "trans fat free." If the amount is more than 0.5g, then it must be labeled so on the nutritional label.

To work around this requirement, companies have begun reducing the serving size. This enables the product to be labeled "trans fat free" on the front and "0g" on the nutritional label, all the while these toxins still remain inside.

You have to be smarter. You need to read the labels and mark and avoid any item containing the following words:

- hydrogenated
- partially hydrogenated
- shortening
- interesterified

These are all fancy words for "trans fat." Even though the manufacturer can get around the per serving loophole, they are still required to label every ingredient used. It doesn't matter how those words above appear on the label - sometimes even the healthiest [coconut oil](#) can be hydrogenated to suit the needs of the company. Any item containing any of those words should be thrown away.

The total list of health ramifications from consuming trans fat is unknown, but it has been linked to diabetes, heart disease and high cholesterol. At a minimum, our bodies set it aside and store it as fat because it simply doesn't know what to do with it!

Leave no cabinet unchecked and clear your kitchen of this fake food. Do not assume any food as safe unless you have read the label with your own eyes. Trans fat can hide in saltine crackers, microwave popcorn, crackers, salad dressings, flavored mayonnaise, "healthy" breakfast bars, girl scout cookies, hot chocolate and even in [coffee creamer](#).

Once you find them all and throw them away, commit to no longer buying food with trans fat and you've completed day 4.

## DAY 5 Clean Out the Freezer

Cleaning out the freezer has a similar purpose as cleaning out the fridge - we must know what we have in order to make best use of it!

Begin by removing everything from the freezer door and wiping it down with warm soapy water. Repeat with the main area of the fridge, starting at the top shelf and working down. (It may be necessary to completely finish cleaning and restocking the door before moving on to the main area if you have a large freezer. Food should not be out long enough to thaw during the cleaning process.) Don't forget to go through any drawers too. Throw away any food that is:

- expired
- food you know you won't eat
- spoiled and/or rotten

Carefully look at everything before you put it back. Frozen food generally does not run the risk of being rotten or spoiled, but freezer burn can be a problem. While [it is safe to eat freezer burned food](#), it can affect the taste. Decide whether or not your family will eat any damaged food and toss or keep accordingly.

Before re-stocking the freezer, label every container with the contents and quantity. Packages in the freezer are sometimes hard to read and since the freezer isn't opened as often as the fridge, it's very easy to forget what is inside each package.

With each container is labeled, organize the food as you put it away using the same tips given for the fridge. Some examples include grouping meats

together in one area and frozen vegetables together in another. Here are a few more ideas to help get your freezer organized and functional.

1. Use clear plastic storage containers to keep like items together. If the containers have lids, stack the items to create more room. Labeling the outside of the storage container, in addition to the individual contents, is highly recommended.
2. Sort, measure, cut, portion and freeze items separately instead of packing them all together. This speeds up food preparation during meal time, and allows you to grab only the portion needed for the meal.
3. Store smaller meal components together in a larger container. An example would be storing individually packaged chicken, garbanzo beans, black beans and corn for [tortilla soup](#) together in one larger bag. Or storing ingredients for [heartly spaghetti sauce](#) in the same bag as well. When it comes time to make soup or sauce, grab the single bag for efficient meal preparation. This also reduces the likelihood of single portions and specific items set aside for a purpose, getting lost.

With a cleaned and organized freezer, day 5 is complete.

## DAY 6 Eat a Simple Meal

The purpose of eating a simple meal is to spend less time in the kitchen and more time with our families. Preparing foods in a traditional manner nourishes our families, but this often requires significant time spent in the kitchen. Simple meals give our bodies and minds rest, while rejuvenating us to keep plugging away on other, more labor intensive days.

A nice side bonus to eating simple meals is less dishes and more wiggle room in the grocery budget. A bowl of rice with leftover meats and vegetables from various meals is very frugal. Even if an entire loaf of [rosemary olive oil bread](#) is used for [grilled sandwiches](#), the total out of pocket is just a quarter. Eating simple, yet nutritious, meals often is what allows us to buy [organic chicken and pastured eggs](#).

Each family will have their own preferences for simple meals, but things like sandwiches, soup, oatmeal and leftovers come to mind. Most simple meals have five ingredients or less, but that doesn't mean dinner has to be boring! Take a classic dish and put a new spin on it. Here are some ideas (and our favorites) to get you started:

- Combine a specialty cheese like brie or havarti with pears or apples and make grilled cheese. This is EXCEPTIONALLY delicious on [buttermilk potato bread](#)!
- Serve up breakfast for dinner. Try scrambled eggs, toasted [oat bread](#) and [homemade fruit butter](#). Or bake a crust-less quiche with a Greek flare, using eggs, kale, kalamata olives, sundried tomatoes and feta cheese.
- Make a fresh pot of rice and toss all the random leftover in for rice bowls. Add Italian or taco seasonings for a new flavor!

- The old PBJ stand-by: serve with a salad or [soup](#) and call it done!
- Snack for dinner by slicing carrot sticks, celery sticks, fresh fruit and serve with a dollop of peanut butter or [homemade yogurt](#). Toss a few almonds and sunflower seeds in there for added crunch.
- Got pizza toppings? Either make [your own pizza dough](#), or place the toppings between two [tortillas](#) and serve the sauce on the side to dip. English muffins, bagels or thick slices of toast work well too!
- Pasta! Boil noodles and combine whatever sauces you may have on hand. Liven the dish by [browning butter](#) and adding quality [olive oil](#), garlic and a generous sprinkle of cheese and freshly ground pepper.

Just to clarify, opening a cardboard box, pulling out a frozen pizza and setting the timer for 12 minutes is not eating simple. Not only are you selling yourself short on nutrition, but those are not even remotely close to real food! Besides, after cleaning out the fridge and freezer, those packaged items should be long gone.

If thinking up simple meals is a challenge, keep a running list of the simple meals that your family enjoys, as they occur. Keep a separate list of meals that only require ingredients that you typically have on hand. Post both lists to your fridge, inside the door of your pantry or inside your homemaker binder so you can refer to it easily.

Finish your dinner and enjoy the extra time with your family - day 6 is complete.

## DAY 7 Make Money

The mission of Don't Waste the Crumbs is to eat real food, on a real budget. You can clean out all of your cabinets and rid your kitchen of chemically-laden foods until the cows come home, but if you don't have the money to pay for better quality food, you'll just be left with empty cupboards. There's only two ways to afford the cost of good food:

1. Increase what comes in, or
2. Reduces what goes out.

Your task is to focus on number one. The health of your family is worth the price tag of food, but you shouldn't sacrifice time with your family or sanity in an attempt to make hundreds of extra dollars each month. In fact, *please* don't sacrifice either of those for a few extra bucks. Time is a precious and limited resource.

However, there are many ways where just a few minutes each will add up to a nice dividend at the end of each month. The small amount of extra income should be enough to cover the cost of upgrading a few pounds of beef to grass-fed, a dozen or two pastured eggs or switching from vegetable oil to [real butter](#).

My brain is trained in mathematics, so I thoroughly enjoy crunching numbers. However, I am not the most fluent with every single money making or money saving resource available. Here are the tools I personally use, or have used in the past, to boost our income.

**Swagbucks:** [Swagbucks](#) is hands down, my number one favorite way to make money. It's a search engine that rewards for searching, but also for smaller

tasks like voting in a daily poll or watching short videos. You can easily earn 20 [Swagbucks](#) in a matter of a few minutes each day and earning 80 or more is not uncommon. The most efficient prize redemption is a \$5 Amazon gift card for 450 Swagbucks, but there are many others to choose from. Use these gift cards on food or other household essentials that would otherwise be purchased with cash. Often times buying in bulk off Amazon is cheaper than buying individually in a store (which is especially true with [specialty flours](#)).

**Secret Shopping:** Secret shopping is a fun way to earn a little bit extra by doing things you may not ordinarily do when you live a frugal lifestyle, like riding the train at the mall, going out to eat, visit family amusement parks and even test driving cars. Consider the opportunities a fun adventure! Start with [MSPA](#) to choose a vendor that's reputable. Shop, or don't shop, according to you and your family's schedule. Take on more if you have the time, or don't sign up for any if your plate is full.

**Mobile Apps:** Jingit, Shopkick and Ibotta are the most popular saving/earning apps out there, but MoneySavingMom has a great [compilation of apps](#) that allow you make money while doing something you'd already be doing. Not all require purchases and some don't require a Smartphone!

**Garage Sales/Craigslist:** Priced right, anything will sell on Craigslist. Sell large items individually and bundle smaller, related items together. For example, sell an old laptop by itself; bundle duplicate kitchen utensils, cookware and towels together and advertise it as a "college or new apartment" all-in-one set-up. Sell smaller ticket items through a garage sale. Set aside all revenue and use it to stock up when pasture-raised chickens go on sale, to buy a quarter or half a cow, or to try out a new sweetener like [stevia](#), [sucanat](#) or [organic coconut palm sugar](#).

**Sell Old Books:** Check on-line sites first list Amazon, MyBookBuyer.com and Cash4Books.com. They all offer gift cards or cash in exchange for used books and their buy-back offers are pretty high. If the online sites don't make an offer for your book, check local stores like Half-Price Books. It makes more sense to sell books you've already read than to let them take up precious room in your home!

**Sell to Consignment:** Consignment shops will buy gently used items off your hands: baby gear, jewelry, clothes, electronics - you name it! Some stores offer cash and others give store credit. In either case, that little bit will help take the pressure off when you need new pants AND milk.

None of these ideas will make you rich, but that's not the goal. Aim to earn \$5-\$15 a month, or earn a larger amount less often (from a big garage sale twice a year) just to help off-set the costs of some of the more expensive foods.

Decide how you will earn extra money this month and start bring home some bacon. Congrats! Day 7 is complete.

## DAY 8 Bake Bread

Of the top five changes that have impacted my grocery budget the most, meal planning is number one and baking bread is number two.

There are a lot of unnecessary additives in store-bought bread. Chemicals to make it fluffy, to hold its shape, to rise during baking, to prevent it from molding... and the substances are really to ensure that nothing bad happens between the unknown time from the manufacturer's baking and you buying it off the shelves. Those additives are necessary for bread, and what is requires is likely already in your kitchen.

Making your own bread also puts starches in perspective. It takes effort to knead the dough and patience to wait for the rise. It's not difficult by any means, but it does require planning and sometimes that planning doesn't happen. If there are only 15 minutes until dinner and you can't decide whether you want to make vegetables and rice or a sandwich, whether or not you have bread available will make that decision for you.

There's a good chance that committing to making your own bread will reduce how much bread you actually eat, while at the same time increasing the enjoyment you get out of bread. Both are good, but the commitment must start with today's task of baking one batch of bread. Making the long-term switch will come after you've eaten the fruits of your labor.

Many people have a phobia of working with yeast. I was included in that group until I made my first batch of bread and tasted the wonderful yeasty baked dough that came from my oven. Working with yeast can be daunting, so here are a few general tips that will help you succeed.

1. "Warm water" means 105-110 degrees. Water boils at 212 degrees. Use a thermometer if you have one, otherwise aim for really warm bath water. Boiling is too hot and you will kill the yeast on contact.
2. Warm water + yeast + sweetener = beer-like foam. If you do not get beer foam, your yeast is either dead or not activated. In either case, your bread will not rise. Cut your losses and start over. Adding any other ingredients to non-beer-like foam is a waste.
3. The more you knead, the better the end result will be. Allow your mixer to work the dough for a full 10 minutes if at all possible, or add a few extra kneads by hand.
4. Allow the bread to completely cool before you slice it. Bread continues to cook even after it's pulled from the oven and a cooled loaf not only slices better, but also has an overall more consistent and fluffy texture.
5. "Bad" loaves make great breadcrumbs. Don't get discouraged and keep trying!
6. Bread doesn't have to take all day. [Even the craziest days have room for bread.](#)
7. Recipes designed for bread machines can be made without the extra equipment. [Here's how.](#)

There are lots of recipes on the web for bread. Here are a few of my own that have consistently produced excellent results:

- [Easy Dinner Biscuits](#)
- [Soaked Whole Wheat Bread](#)
- [The Best Pizza Dough Ever](#)
- [Homemade Tortillas](#)
- [Focaccia, plus Four Variations](#)
- [Potato Buttermilk Bread](#)
- [Rosemary Olive Oil Bread](#)
- [Dinner Roll, plus Four Variations](#)

- [Beer Bread](#)
- [Hamburger/Hot Dog Buns](#)
- [Maple Oatmeal Bread](#)
- [Homemade Pita Bread](#)
- [Very Little Bother Oat Bread](#) (may use all white flour instead of oat and omit the vital wheat gluten, or even use half white and half wheat flour)

Besides ridding excess ingredients, homemade bread gets rid of the markup of convenience.

A [comparison of store-bought buttermilk bread versus my homemade version](#) showed store-bought bread ringing up at \$3.19 per loaf. One loaf from the [buttermilk recipe](#) cost \$0.99. The cost could be reduced even more [making your own buttermilk](#) using vinegar and milk. Skipping the potato and milk and one loaf can cost as little as a quarter!

Consider this scenario for a family of four:

- One loaf of [sandwich bread](#) for a week worth of lunches
- One loaf of [jalapeño Focaccia](#) for a [minestrone soup](#) dinner (plus leftovers).
- One package of [hamburger buns](#) for grilled [tri-tip](#) sandwiches.

Total cost if made at home = \$1. Total cost if purchased at the store = \$8. Saving \$7 on bread can add up significantly long-term. Consider repeating the above scenario every two weeks. There would be \$14 each month in your pocket, or \$182 over the course of one year. That will certainly cover the cost to upgrade real food items!!

Choose a batch of bread to make over the next few days and reward your hard work with a big slice and quality [butter](#). Day 8 is complete!

## DAY 9 Plan Your Meals

New Year's resolutions have a tendency to fail shortly after January 15th, so for 2012 I made a commitment instead to plan meals one month at a time. Completing the actual task of meal planning every four weeks was fairly manageable, and the infrequency reduced the likelihood of failing. Little did I know that this small commitment would change my life.

Meal planning changes how you view the money in your grocery budget, and in turn, the food in your kitchen. It teaches how to manage food, stretch dollars and enjoy making dinner again. It gives purpose behind purchases and removes the "What's for dinner?" stress.

Meal planning also allows you to see the bigger picture of what you're eating. With one glance you can see how much meat and produce you're eating. You can see if your meals are heavy on starches and light on greens. You can strategically plan [grilled vegetable sandwiches](#) to coincide with leftover soup - eating both a simple meal AND leftovers AND not eating meat, all at the same time (although going meatless won't be an official task until day 21.)

With all the meals lined up, you can see that Tuesday needs a bit of extra nutrition since dinner is on the run with baseball practice Monday and Awana on Wednesday.

You cleaned out your freezer not too long ago. Today's task is to go back and take an inventory of what you have. Plan dinner for the next seven days around your inventory, supplementing with the fridge and pantry. It may be necessary to pick up fresh produce to make well-rounded meals, but do try to keep spending at a minimum.

If you're new to meal planning, you'll probably find the tips and menu ideas on [this page](#) helpful.

Include meals that your family enjoys and that are easy to prepare. Use my own [real food meal plans](#) as inspiration, or just copy them! [The Nourishing Home](#) is an excellent resource for gluten-free meal planning as well.

If you're already meal planning dinners, try planning for breakfasts, lunches and even snacks. Top it off with planning desserts!

Plan your meals for the next seven nights and day 9 is complete.

## DAY 10 Clean Out the Pantry and Cupboards

Today's task is the last of the "clean out" series. The fridge and freezer have already been sorted and scoured, but make sure they are still in a state to which you would allow company to open the doors. If they're not, go back and clean as necessary.

When you're ready to tackle the pantry, start with the top shelf and take every single item out. Repeat with the remaining shelves and when all the shelves are empty, vacuum out the crumbs and wipe the shelves clean.

Review each item that now sits on your counter and throw away food that is a) expired, b) something you know you won't eat and, or c) spoiled or rotten. Again consider the quantity left of each item. Adjust your recently penned meal plan to include jars with only one or two tablespoons left to allow a more spacious pantry.

There may be items that were originally bought with a particular meal in mind, but now that the meal has been made, the item is just sitting on the shelf with no clear purpose. If the item is real food, not tainted with chemicals nor created through a crazy process in a lab, find another recipe that uses it. Nuts and fruits can become [granola bars](#) or toppings for an oatmeal bar. Turn cereal and stale crackers into breadcrumbs. Stale cookies can become crumbs too for [dessert crusts](#) or crumble toppings. Think outside the box and try to use it for *something*.

For the items that are not considered real food, are highly processed or just plain junk, throw them away. The food we eat can only do one of two things: help or hurt the cause of nourishing our bodies. There is no need to consume food that does not help our bodies.

Once you've sorted through the remaining items, re-stock the shelves in an organized and meaningful way. Instead of putting things away based on the size, store items together that are used together - like [the beans and corn example from my freezer](#). You will find sunflower seeds, pepitas, almonds and coconut oil on the top shelf of my pantry because more often than not, I use them all together to make [seed salad](#) or [granola bars](#). Storing items based on how they will be used will make time spent in the kitchen more efficient.

Another avenue is storing "like items" together, such as various flours, oils and sugars (all required for baking).

If you use glass jars for storage, be sure to label them! Different ingredients look similar and our minds will not remember over time. Vital wheat gluten looks a lot like pastry flour, but switch those up in a recipe and your results will NOT be what you expected!

Put things away in such a manner that nothing can get shoved and lost in the back. Store extra glasses, extra plates or the once-a-year china in the back of these shelves so that the food is always towards the front. The more often you see the food, the more likely you eat it.

Lastly, always make it a point to check the pantry when planning meals and before any trips to the store. Try to make substitutions in recipes with what you already have on hand, or at least verify that the item on your list is really needed (and not already on a shelf).

With a clean fridge, freezer AND pantry, day 10 is complete.

## DAY 11 Create a Signature Company Dish

Hosting company and balancing a frugal real food lifestyle with friends who may not be on the same journey isn't always easy. We often eat meatless meals and thoroughly enjoy simple rice and vegetable dishes (like [vegetable fried rice](#) with [coconut rice](#)). But many of our friends and family prefer meat and potatoes type meals - like meat and potatoes!

Being hospitable includes considering your guests likes, preferences, sensitivities and allergies. Guests should feel comfortable in our homes and the atmosphere should invite good fellowship and conversation.

Today's task is to create your own signature dish(es). Arm yourself with good dinner ideas that can easily be made for company, both unannounced and planned in advance. Here are a few guidelines that make choosing a suitable company dish easier.

**Choose a dish that's easy to make.** There's ALWAYS something to do around the house when preparing for company. Cleaning a toilet, changing a towel, vacuuming the floor, taking out the trash, setting the table, brushing the kids' hair, brushing your OWN hair... choosing a dinner that requires hours of preparation, including the time leading right up to dinner, is more than necessary. Be wise with your time and choose a dish that is easy. "Easy" can be defined in a few ways:

- can be prepared ahead of time (hours or days)
- doesn't require constant monitoring of the stove
- is well within your level of cooking experience
- requires one or two pans to prepare
- has only two steps: "dump" and "bake"

Define what “easy” means to you and choose a dish that IS your easy.

**Choose a dish that is palate pleasing.** Company dishes should taste good though and pass the kid test, picky test, spicy test and strange-ingredient test (as in the ingredients should be well known, not strange). If your dish doesn't pass these tests, save it for another night when you aren't hosting company.

**Choose a dish that makes clean-up easy.** Think about what makes cleaning up after dinner difficult. Is it the quantity of dishes? The type of dishes? The food that won't come off the dishes? Know the answers when hosting dinner and plan accordingly. Use disposable plates, start the night with a clean dishwasher and sink full of hot soapy water for soaking. Post-meal time should be spent with your company, not with your kitchen sink and dish scrubber.

**Choose a dish that can be made frugally.** We often use individual prices to gauge whether something is frugal or not, but we must also look at the big picture. Consider the following meal and related thought process: barbeque baked chicken, coconut rice, steamed broccoli and Asian salad.

- \$1.99 for organic drumsticks is a good deal, so we pick up a package of five at Trader Joe's for \$7.50, plus barbeque sauce (without the icky chemicals) for \$2.99
- there's plenty of rice in the pantry (bought in bulk at Costco), but we need one can of coconut milk from Trader Joe's for 99¢
- broccoli is on sale at Savemart for \$1.27/lb so we pick up two crowns
- pre-mixed bag of Asian salad is advertised for \$3 at Safeway and includes the dressing

Looked at individually, we've paid decent prices for everything listed. However, the meal as a whole costs over \$15. This is much better than dining out, but it will only feed a maximum of five people, assuming we limit our company to how many pieces of chicken they can have. It also wouldn't work well if company brought additional and unexpected guests too. Consistently creating exceptions for company is a slippery slope - it is very easy for exceptions to become the rule. That slippery slope of \$15 per dinner for four weeks gives a total of \$420, and that only covers one meal each day.

Here are some delicious meals that can be made for \$5 or less, and while not complicated, they're perfect for family or company dinners:

- [stuffed peppers](#)
- [tacos](#)
- [healthy baked ziti](#)
- [pasta primavera](#)
- [cheesy-mexi lentil macaroni](#)
- [slow-cooker salsa chicken](#)

**Choose a dish that allows ingredients to be interchanged according to the produce in season and sales on meats.** Shredded meat goes further than whole pieces and adding a vegetable or beans to the meat will stretch it even more. For example, I recently altered my [hearty spaghetti sauce](#) by halving the meat and adding 2 cups of cooked black beans instead. No one noticed, nutrition was *increased*, and the meat I bought on sale will now last me for another batch of sauce.

Bulk prices are more up front, but are less per serving and will therefore last well beyond the one dinner. Skip the pre-packaged items and sauces whenever you can. Chop up produce you already have on hand and spend \$1

on a head of lettuce for a fresh salad. Top with [homemade dressing](#) and [barbeque sauce](#), both of which can be tailored for small and large groups.

**Choose a dish that's made with real ingredients.** It's easy to whip up a casserole with a can-of-this and a can-of-that, but you'll be missing out on a lot more than nutrition. Preparing a meal consisting of real food for a family that may not know much beyond cans and boxes could be a life-changing evening. Think of how great it would be to share your personal story of trying to eat healthy and improving your health with food! *(Plus don't forget, that can-of-mystery is YOUR dinner too.)*

Write down a few of your favorite go-to meals and see if they fit into the categories above. Can they be modified slightly to be company-worthy? The goal is to come up with one dish, but having a few to choose from allows for greater flexibility with your budget and your own family meals. Plus if you end up having company over twice, they'll get to have some variety too!

With a list of signature company meals, day 11 is complete.

## DAY (12) Use Food Twice

Twenty-five percent (25%) of the food we buy doesn't get eaten. If 25% of the food we buy goes straight to the trash can, the same correlation can be said of our grocery budgets. Are you willing to write a check for one quarter of your grocery budget each month and throw it in the trash?

Your task today is to take your food to the opposite end of wasteful by devising ways to use it twice. This is one trick that seasoned meal planners use to pull meals together so easily. It's also one of the most effective ways to reduce the grocery budget.

Consider paying \$2.69/lb for pasture-fed organic chicken. At nearly \$13, it's an expensive bird to willingly waste. Even if only 1/8 cup of shredded chicken that comes off the bones while making broth or leftover from taco night – save it. It will only take a few taco nights before there's enough chicken for a whole pan of enchiladas (which becomes a bonus meal of sorts since you didn't account for the meat in the budget to start with).

Below are a few practical suggestions to get you started and is no means an exhaustive list. Remember that the goal is to avoid the trash can at all cost!

### Asparagus

- add an extra 1/2" to what you would normally trim off the bottom and reserve for [soup](#)
- add last-minute to stir-fries, pasta dishes or [fried rice](#)

### Broccoli

- use tiny florets for [salads](#)
- use large florets for a side dish
- chop stems for omelets, quiches and pasta dishes

## Carrots

- save tips and ends for flavoring bone broth (see “Veggie Pot” below)

## Celery

- dry leaves for [homemade celery seasoning](#)
- save tips and ends for flavoring bone broth (see “Veggie Pot” below)

## Orange and Lemon Peels

- reserve for [citrus vinegar](#)
- in a small pot, cover with water and simmer to freshen the air
- if organic, peel the zest and freeze for future recipes calling for it

## Edible Fruit Peels

- add to [smoothies](#)
- natural source of pectin when making [fruit butters](#)

## Leftover Cooked Veggies, Whole

- add last-minute to stir-fries, pasta dishes or [fried rice](#)
- use in a dish that requires the same vegetables (i.e. using leftover [southwestern corn](#) in [hearty minestrone soup](#))

## Leftover Cooked Veggies, Mashed

- make [pancakes](#)
- add to [smoothie](#) ([sweet potato can be substituted for pumpkin](#))

## Leftover Cooked Meat

- freeze unused portions; option to slice to chop for [sandwiches](#), stir-fries or pasta dishes

## Leftover Bones from Stock and Meals

- freeze all organic bones and use for stock

## “Veggie Pot”

- a storage container in the freezer where you put tips and ends from root vegetables, to be used in broth or soups

### “Chicken Pot”

- when having meals including shredded chicken (i.e. tacos), save all leftover chicken and keep in the chicken pot; use for [tortilla soup](#), stir-fry or enchiladas when you reach two cups
- add miscellaneous shredded chicken as the result of making broth

### “Pasta Pot”

- store unused random portions of pasta in a pot in the freezer; pull out to use in soups or [pasta bakes](#) when you reach desired amount

### Potato Peels

- use on [spider bites](#)

### Cheese

- save Parmesan rinds for [minestrone soup](#)
- freeze small amounts of random cheese; make macaroni and cheese when reach desired amount (double bonus: use leftover pasta pieces!)

Once you've planned a way to use food twice, day 12 is complete.

## DAY 13 Budget Check-in

No good grocery budget lies dormant. Budgets are always evolving and should be evaluated frequently. Today's task is to evaluate the grocery budget you established earlier in the series and determine how it should be changed (or if it should be changed) to better suit your needs.

*Note: If you've been working through this series and somehow missed day 3, please stop and go back. It is imperative to have a grocery budget. A real food journey is all about baby steps - one foot in front of the other, choosing one area to improve in and starting from there. Creating a grocery budget is the first step.*

Where you stand now with your budget will look different than everyone else. It's the halfway mark of the challenge so it would be fair to guess most are halfway through their budgets. However, [on any given month](#) I've spent close to 75-80% of my original budget at the two week mark. I also buy in bulk at the beginning of the month and supplement as the month progresses. Those with different shopping habits will likely have a different percentage left. Evaluate your established budget and your expenses thus far and ask yourself these questions:

- Is there enough left in your budget to account for purchases for the rest of the month?
- Have you spent your budget yet seem to have nothing to show for it?
- Did you allot enough in the budget at the beginning?

Consider your answers and learn from them. Knowing where failure lies allows us to avoid it. There are three major causes why budgets fail. Let's talk about these and make changes to our budget accordingly.

**Unrealistic Goals.** Unrealistic goals are based on an improper foundation. Numbers chosen randomly out of the sky because they sound good, or copying a number that works for another family is not the ideal way to create a budget and in the end will likely fail. How did you decide on your grocery budget?

- Did you randomly pick a number because it sounded adequate? Or did you account for how much food, the type of food and your own shopping habits to account for your budget?
- Did you take the budget of another family and adopt it as your own without giving it much thought? Or did you account for the size of your own family, the type of food your family needs and the area in which your family lives?

If you've found yourself in a position where you won't be able to meet your original grocery budget, it's possible that your goal was unrealistic and that's okay. Re-evaluate and devise a better, more realistic target that's better suited for you and your family.

**Quitting Too Soon.** Despite having a monthly grocery budget, I [was over budget for six of the eight months that I accounted for last year.](#) Some would say that's a 75% failure rate. I view it as a 25% success rate and a reason to keep up the hard work.

These months of consistently spending too much caused my husband and I to re-evaluate our grocery budget based on the nutritional goals of our family. If it weren't for these months, we wouldn't know how to adjust our plan and which direction to direct our efforts.

Again, if you're in a position where you don't think you'll make your budget goal this month, take the opportunity to re-evaluate and adjust the plan. You

will know how to change your efforts (both budgeting and spending) so that you will be better equipped to reach the goal next month.

**Misunderstanding What a Budget Really Is.** My [how-to-budget](#) series explains that a budget is not meant to imprison – it's meant to be freeing! Knowing how you spend your money is incredible power. It's with this knowledge that you can strategically lower your monthly expenses. For example, if you see that your family eats eight loaves of bread on the average month (two loaves each week) thus costing \$24 out of your grocery budget, you can make the decision to bake your own bread for a net cost of one quarter each loaf. You'd save \$22 in bread alone!

Take this approach when you evaluate your budget. You should not feel confined to a certain number and sense lingering defeat. Take reign of your budget and make it work for you. When you look at your spending with objective eyes, you will see clearly how well you are, or are not, spending your money. Allow this knowledge to empower you to change and make improvements.

After re-evaluating your grocery budget, day 13 is complete.

## DAY 14 Try a New Fat

Did you know that saturated fat (i.e. butter, lard, coconut oil) is good for you? Did you know polyunsaturated fats (i.e. canola oil, safflower oil, grape seed oil) are bad for you? Did you know that not only does your body need fat to build and repair itself, but that it's *required* in order to properly carry out the functions it's been designed to do?

We covered fats extensively in Spring 2013 with a total of fifteen informational posts, three tutorials and four recipes featuring fats. If those statements above are completely contrary to what you've been raised to believe, I encourage you to start at the beginning of the [Truth About Fat](#) series and read through the posts. You will be amazed at how we've been wrongly educated about this all important nutrient!

Once you've grounded yourself in a firm understanding of fats, your task today is to try a new healthy fat. At this point in time you've tossed the margarine, the sticks of shortening and the yellow vegetable oil. You bakers especially are likely wondering how you're going to make those cookies and pies without your pantry staples. Let me assure you - for every hydrogenated oil and polyunsaturated fat filled item in our kitchen, there is an applicable and more than sufficient substitute which in many cases, is better than the original.

**Baking.** Instead of margarine and shortening, try [butter](#) or [coconut oil](#). Both can be substituted with a 1 to 1 ratio. (Find quality sources for both grass-fed butter and coconut oil [here](#).)

**Stir-Frying and Deep Frying.** Tallow, lard, ghee and palm kernel oil are all good choices for cooking at high temperatures. It's probably best to [make your](#)

[own tallow and lard](#), as well as your own [ghee](#), since most varieties sold in stores are hydrogenated. Start keeping the bacon grease and reach for that when sautéing vegetables at a medium temperature.

**Direct Consumption.** Most fat-free or low-fat foods have unnecessary additives, sugar and preservatives - none of which increase the nutritional profile of the food. Instead opt for the versions with full-fat since eating good fat can actually help you maintain, if not lose, weight! Common low-fat or fat-free items that sneak into our kitchens include milk, cheese, yogurt, eggs, cream cheese, sour cream, cottage cheese, nut butters, mayonnaise, soups and salad dressings.

Set out to try a new healthy fat. This [chocolate cake with coconut oil](#) is divine, as is the updated version of the [ultimate chocolate chip cookie](#). Everything tastes better with bacon, even if it's just the grease, and buying whole milk instead of skim is a great first step in the right direction. After you've chosen and tried a new healthy fat, day 14 is complete.

## DAY 15 Make Something From Scratch

When it comes to eating healthy, real food, there's pretty much one thing everyone can agree on: pre-packaged mixes, boxes and meals are bad. Either bad for you nutritionally, or bad for you financially. What if you found a way around both?

The challenge at hand is to take something you would ordinarily buy in a box or package, nearly ready to eat – pizza, sandwiches, cake mix, brownies, baking mixes (i.e. Bisquick), boxed dinners, etc. – and make it from scratch. Anything whose directions look like this...

- 1. preheat oven*
- 2. remove outer wrapper*
- 3. bake for xx minutes*
- 4. careful contents will be hot*
- 5. serve warm and enjoy*

... are targeted and considered fair game. This may take some trial and error and it's okay if you don't master a recipe in the first try. However, you won't know how great the dish could be if you never tried making it yourself.

Dishes you normally order when dining out are also fair game. Just because someone else cooked it doesn't mean it's any better than a box. Orange chicken? Lemongrass vegetables? Look up the menu of your favorite restaurant and get cooking!

Do you think that the "good" convenience items (Kashi, Annie Chung, etc.) are the exception? These foods still have stuff added to the box so that the contents won't spoil while making the transition from the factory to your

home... among the various shipping trucks, loading and unloading pallets and store shelves. If we don't HAVE to ingest these additives and preservatives whose [long-term side affect is unknown](#), then why do it? For convenience?

I know it's easier to open a box for dinner instead of cooking from scratch. It is *very* convenient to not have to think about what spices go with what meats, or to ponder if \$7.99/lb is a good price for organic chicken breasts (which it isn't by the way, when you can buy a whole chicken and [cut it up yourself](#)).

Transitioning from boxes to scratch cooking isn't easy, and there are great tools if you need help. The eBook "[Better than a Box](#)" is filled with over 200 pages of recipes and methods to transform family favorite recipes into whole food favorites. Create Velveeta, cream of mushroom soup and even cheeseburger helper - all from scratch - without the added chemicals and processing.

I own, use and would highly recommend this book if your family is used to eating from boxed, ready-to-prepare meals. It takes the guess work out of "what goes with what," plus your family still enjoys their favorite meals, but now they're packed with nutrition!

Choose a dish to make from scratch and make it- day 15 is complete.

## DAY 16 Ditch High-fructose Corn Syrup

High-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) listed on a lot of labels we never would have thought to read and [the dangers are astounding](#). It's been linked to heart disease, diabetes and even obesity. Many "experts" hold the view that high fructose corn syrup is just another form of sugar, and that sugar – in moderation – isn't that bad for us.

This is absolutely not true. HFCS is created by man in a lab, like trans fat. It is not found in nature and it is certainly not food!

Any time we consume something that is different from its original, found-in-nature source, we cause our bodies to work more. Our bodies were created to digest and absorb nutrients, enzymes and minerals from food. They were *not* designed to digest and absorb man-made chemicals and foreign cell-attacking entities.

HFCS is a relatively new science, created about the time when sugar cane was expensive but corn was plentiful. Scientists found a way to extract the sugar from corn and use it in place of the more expensive sugar cane. The health effects above are recent discoveries - HFCS hasn't been around long enough for us to truly know the long-term effects of this chemical.

Notice that it's a derivative of corn, and 88% percent of corn has been genetically modified in some way.. to either grow faster, or bigger, or to be resistant to pesticides. Everything about genetically modified food is against the natural food cycle.

You've cleaned out the majority of the kitchen by this point, but take some time today and review what's left in your fridge, freezer and pantry. Look for

labels containing high fructose corn syrup and throw them away! I've personally found HFCS in jelly, cereal, canned soup, steak sauce, tortillas and salad dressings. If your pantry looked like mine, substitute these with homemade versions instead. Recipes for fruit butter, oatmeal, soup, tortillas and salad dressings can be found on my recipe page, and they're all pretty simple to make.

When you've cleaned out your kitchen from toxic high-fructose corn syrup, day 16 is complete.

## DAY 17 Create a Back-up Plan

We all have good intentions when we plan, but even the most well-laid out plans can fail. Today's task is to create two back-up plans in case dinner fails. One back-up plan usually suffices, but two is even better. And if we're planning back-ups *anyway*, we might as well plan two.

**What a Back-Up Plan Is.** A back-up plan is something that you can prepare in place of your originally planned dinner in 20 minutes or less. Know that back-up plans are usually called in at the last minute - when meat has burned or vegetables have spoiled - so they should be easy and simple, but still healthy and nutritious. It should also use ingredients that you would ordinarily keep in the kitchen.

**What a Back-Up Plan Is Not.** A back-up plan should not take more than 30 minutes from start to table. It is not extravagant, nor complicated. It is not take-out or dinner from a box. It is also not a phone call to the nearest pizza shop.

The best back-up plans can be easily tailored to fit the current situation, including serving company. Here are some ideas to get your back-up list started:

- spaghetti & [homemade sauce](#) (If there isn't enough sauce for company, stretch it using canned tomatoes or tomato sauce. Stretch pasta by adding chunks of chopped vegetables.)
- stir-fry (A dish that can be made with little meat, and stretched with vegetables and beans.)

- [grilled sandwiches](#) (Reduce the cheese to a half slice per sandwich when you don't have enough to cover all the sandwiches. The cheese will melt anyway and guests won't notice the difference,.)
- [vegetable fried rice](#) (Another dish that doesn't require much meat and can be stretched with beans. One batch of rice can easily serve a family; add a salad and it will feed a crowd!)

If it doesn't add to the burden of a last-minute meal, back-up plans can easily be spruced up with a garden salad and baked bread. Keep a stash of baked [dinner rolls](#) in the freezer so they can be pulled and warmed before serving. Back-up dinners aren't going to be perfect, so it's normal (and often delicious) if the meal is lacking on some ingredients. However, make it habit to check the kitchen once a month to verify that you still have everything needed for your back-up plans.

After creating two back-up plans, each that can essentially be made today, day 17 is complete.

## DAY (18) Save Money

The challenge of saving money is really a mind set and it goes beyond the kitchen. Every purchase should be evaluated - do I really need this? Is it really the best deal out there? Big purchases like cars, appliances, vacations, and small purchases like shoes, clothes and toys should all be scrutinized beforehand. We often get hung up on the price of a food item, like \$6/lb for grass-fed butter instead of its \$3/lb conventional counterpart, but we're willing to spend those extra dollars on shipping, items that are a "want" rather than "need" and upgrades to electronics. We tell ourselves "Oh, well it's only \$3," when we compare two similar shirts, but we complain about those same \$3 when we're deciding how to feed our bodies the best food we can.

Today's task is to push the frugal mind set outside the kitchen and consider other ways you can save money in your lifestyle. Here are some ideas to get you started:

**Use Coupons.** When used ONLY on items you will in fact eat and use (i.e. whole grain pasta, brown rice, toilet paper, razors etc.), they can be a useful tool and add up to significant savings over time.

**Shop Sales.** You may only save a dollar or two by shopping the sale this week, but this is a very easy way to save that will pay off exponentially over the course of time. Make it a rule of thumb to only buy what you need and never pay full price.

**Don't Shop.** Before making trips to any store (food or not), delay the errand by a day or two. This gives you an opportunity to think about whether or not the item really is necessary. Learn to adapt to what you already have and being creative with your given resources.

**Buy in Bulk.** This requires more money up front, but can create significant savings over time. Check warehouse stores like Costco and even [Amazon](#) for items you need in large quantities.

**Try New Stores.** I've found great deals at stores that are not preferred by the ordinary consumer, including many organic and specialty items! Be willing to go outside your comfort zone and you may be pleasantly surprised.

**Buy Used.** Always consider buying used first. Vacuum cleaners, video games, clothes - many items we buy new would suit our needs just as well if they were used. Shop thrift stores, Craigslist and garage sales. Someone else cleaning out storage may provide just what you were looking for at a fraction of the cost.

**Shop Ebates.** [Ebates](#) is like [Swagbucks](#), but you're rewarded with cash back for shopping instead of [Swagbucks](#) for searching. Before you buy ANYTHING online, go to [Ebates.com](#) first. Type in the store you want to buy from and see if they're offering cash back. Sometimes it's as high as 6%, and sometimes it's as low as 1%, but the cash back from little purchases add up over time. If you are buying necessities online anyway, make money off them! Cash back percentages tend to increase around holidays (Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, etc.) so take advantage; either hold off of purchases until then, or buy ahead to benefit from the an extra percentage or two.

**Ship to Store.** Those who prefer to shop locally can benefit from [Ebates](#) too. Check to see if your store offers free shipping to your local store. Larger stores like Wal-Mart and Target have this feature and most items are available that day for pick-up. Shop through [Ebates](#) first, choose site-to-store and then pick it up later that day. You get the bonus of having it in-hand, AND cash back from the purchase! Another twist on this tip is to consider the cost savings of

shipping to the store and picking it up yourself, versus paying for shipping to your home.

**Double Dip.** Taking advantage of two programs at the same time is excellent for maximizing your savings. For example, [Ebates](#) does not prohibit two people living in the same house to each have their own account. The last time we made a purchase online, I referred my husband from my own account. He made the purchase and earned the cash back and my account was rewarded for his successful referral. We won't be able to do that again, but we saved \$35 on that purchase!

Saving money is a frame of mind. Take it beyond food to see where else you can stretch your dollars and day 18 is complete.

## DAY 19 Make Yogurt and Eat It

80% of our body's immune system rests comfortably within the workings of our intestines. Why wait until we're sick before considering changing our diet? Incorporating food with healing properties into our regular routine is like visiting the doctor for a yearly check-up - it's preventative maintenance.

Yogurt contains two of the biggest hitters when it comes to maintaining a healthy digestive system - lactobacillus Acidophilus and Bifidobacteria. These two strains of good bacteria help the intestines to destroy toxins and foreign substances, but they're not immortal. This small army has enough ammunition to last a week or two on its own, but without continuously replenishing them and eating more probiotics, the army will be overtaken by the bad bacteria also found naturally in our intestines.

The first portion of your task today is learning how to make yogurt. The task sounds daunting, but it really is easy. If you have a heating pad (which is my preferred method), follow my step-by-step tutorial [here](#). Other methods include using a cooler, the light inside a stove and a slow cooker. The full process takes about 24 hours, so plan accordingly.

With finished homemade yogurt on hand, work on the second part of today's task and start eating it! Use it to make your own [ranch dressing](#) or in place of store-bought sour cream and mayonnaise in recipes. Of course you can eat it as-is, or with fruit and granola too. I've found that when there is homemade yogurt in the fridge, we're more apt to eat it - and our bodies thank us for it!

In addition to keeping our digestive systems healthy, there is another benefit to making your own yogurt - the savings! Buying quality (i.e. full-fat and organic) yogurt is expensive – \$4.78 for 32 ounces. If you prefer the thicker

Greek yogurt, the bill is even higher – \$9 for the same quart! Making your own full-fat, organic yogurt costs merely \$1.75 per quart, a savings of over \$90 if you bought one quart every week!

Choose a method and make your own yogurt - and then eat it! Day 19 is complete.

## DAY (20) Address Health & Beauty Items

Once you become conscious of the foods you buy and the foods you eat, you'll begin to question everything you put in your mouth, including medicine.

Drug interaction warnings seem standard, but they should be taken seriously. Every single one of those "minor side effects" could happen to any one of us at any given moment. Stimulation, insomnia, nervousness, excitability, dizziness, anxiety, upset stomach, severe abdominal cramping, vomiting and even stroke were the side effects listed on medicine I once thought was safe for my family. We would never intentionally feed our families food that did this. Medicine shouldn't be the exception.

Your task today is to open up your medicine cabinets and review what's inside. I am not a doctor and I cannot tell you keep or toss. However, I do have three questions that deserve at least a few minutes of your attention as you peruse those meds.

Is the drug expired? "Medical authorities" across the board believe that it is safe to take drugs past their expiration date, but they are also the ones that say it's safe to take drugs that can cause strokes and heart attacks in the first place. One of the few studies conducted on the potency of medicine found that expired drugs may lose anywhere from 5% to 50% of their effectiveness over time. ([source](#)) Either make the conscious decision to risk that 5% chance and blindly trust the umbrella group of "medical authorities," or seek alternative ways to heal your family.

Is the drug necessary? Not even high-powered drugs can beat the common cold. Instead rest, hydration and nutrient dense foods are far better at healing the body from the inside. Many drugs mask the symptoms to make coping

easier, but in some cases the drugs can make your symptoms worse or offer a cloudy head in exchange for a runny nose. Natural methods may take longer, but they're easier on your body and don't come with deadly side effects.

Is the drug effective? We think many drugs provide relief, but do they really? Think especially about nighttime medicines. Obviously they include an ingredient to make you fall asleep, but how do we know the medicine is working if we're knocked out cold? I've often wondered if nighttime medicines are really designed to make you fall asleep, and it's the sleep that heals your body, not the medicine itself.

These same questions should be asked in terms of beauty items too. Do you recognize the ingredients in your face wash and shampoo? Are you sure fluoride is healthy, or are we just going with the flow with what dentists believe? Be willing to hear the other side of the story, and start questioning the ingredients in your beauty products.

In our quest for natural health, we've created the following natural items to replace conventional beauty products:

- [lotion bar](#)
- [tinted moisturizer](#)
- [powdered foundation](#)
- [toothpaste](#)

We've also healed our body naturally with the following remedies:

- [healing a spider bite with a potato](#)
- [digestive rest and resetting blood pressure with a water fast](#)
- [healing gum disease](#)

Not quite ready to rely completely on nature just yet? Through personal experience, I've found that homeopathic drugs (plant-based) are far more effective than their chemically laden counterparts. Building a natural medicine cabinet takes time and can be expensive. Until you're ready for that step, read for homeopathic drugs instead of the typical over-the-counter drug. They may take longer and it may be more cumbersome to take the medicine more often, but the side effects are minimal (if there are any at all) and they'll provide true relief while your body heals.

At the same time, start looking at more natural beauty items too. They're usually priced a little higher than conventional beauty products, but you can often use less and make the single purchase last longer.

Congrats! Day 20 is complete.

## DAY (21) Go Meatless

The two biggest budget busters are quality meat and fat. Both average \$6 per pound, which makes just a pound or two each week take up a large chunk of your grocery budget each month.

For example: Assume the average family of four eats two pounds of meat every night for dinner. If each pound costs \$6 and we're eating 28 nights worth of meat (the equivalent of four weeks, the length of my own grocery budget cycle), we're spending \$336 on meat alone. That figure is bigger than my entire grocery budget!

Today's task is to go meatless and cut back on the amount of meat you consume. Besides being expensive, there's nothing nutritionally "special" about meat. It is definitely an excellent source of B vitamins, iron, zinc and magnesium, but you can also get these same vitamins and minerals by eating a variety of fruits and vegetables. When it comes to protein, meat will give you the most grams per serving, but other dairy products like milk and cheese are excellent sources of protein as well.

While cutting back on the meat, consider substituting more of the incredible frugal bean. They're often less than \$1 per pound, one cup offers as much protein as a single serving of meat and it's also one of the best sources of fiber.

Whether you eat meat seven nights a week or only twice - make one of your meals this week meatless. To aid in your quest, here are four reasons why you should consider going meatless more often.

**It Lowers the Grocery Bill.** Eliminating meat from only one meal each week in the above example saves \$48 in one month alone. I know that money could go towards a better quality of meat, or grass-fed butter or cheese.

Meat doesn't have to be an all or nothing situation to make an impact either. Reducing the amount served at meals will make a big difference over time. For example, instead of serving one chicken breast per person, try serving half. Shredded meat will go further than whole pieces and adding beans to the dish will make it a side-show instead of the main attraction. Reducing the meat in one meal each week by half, while completely eliminating meat on another night, you would save another \$24 each month for a total of \$72 in one month.

**It Broadens our Horizons.** Eating a variety of food exposes us to things we probably wouldn't try under normal circumstances. Unless there's a plan to cook and eat them, the bag of beans in my pantry will always be runner-up to the chicken in the freezer. Certain vegetables like broccoli and carrots will always be preferred over others, like beets. Eating meals filled with a variety of foods other than meat allows our bodies to harvest the variety of nutrients that fruits and vegetables have to offer. And you may end up finding a new favorite!

**It Offers Our Bodies Rest.** Breaking down and digesting plant-based foods is much easier on our systems than its animal-based counterpart. That's why you'll hear of juice fasts, raw fasts and even smoothie fasts. Have you ever heard of a beef fast? Complete rest is only granted when we completely abstain from food, but skipping meat at one meal will give our gut a small reprieve.

**You May Even Like It.** It's been well over a year since we've implemented the "one meatless meal" rule. In fact, we enjoyed it so much that six months

into the challenge we started eating two meatless meals each week. Some of the meals we've created on meatless nights are now family favorites. [Hearty minestrone soup](#) and [tortilla soup](#) are both winners every time they're served. This [simple salad](#) and [lentil macaroni](#) are both must-haves on the monthly menu. Can you imagine roasted sweet peppers, caramelized onion and a thick slice of portabella mushroom in between two pieces of homemade [beer bread](#), smothered with herbed cheese and grilled? Served next to baked sweet potato French fries? [Grilled sandwiches](#) are on our menu at least every other week. Give them a try and I'm willing to bet you'll like them too!

Commit to going meatless one meal this week, see it through and day 21 is complete.

## DAY (22) Don't Give Up

Your final challenge for today - and for the rest of your real food journey - is to not give up. Eating wholesome, nourishing foods in today's fast-food and convenience-oriented society is not easy. Whoever says otherwise is deceived. There are roadblocks at each meal planning session, fake food at fellowship pot-lucks and times where you feel defeated for buying tortillas with trans fat.

Your friends may not understand why you threw out an unopened jar of jelly and your family may think you're crazy when you make clean-out-the-fridge soup for dinner instead of buying more chicken two days before payday.

But that's ok.

Simply don't give up. Remember why you started this journey 22 days ago in the first place:

- Nutritious Food
- Better Health
- Leaner Budget

Every step hits each person differently. What was easy for one was very difficult for another. Your strategy now? Keep your eyes focused on the prize and continue to move forward. Do your best to make as many best choices as you can, as often as you can. Don't worry if a poor decision slips in there. If it happens (and chances are it will), serve yourself a scoop of grace and keep going. A bad choice is not failure – it's an opportunity to do better next time.

Don't let your travels stop at day 22!

## Conclusion

There is always room for improvement, and that's why a real food journey is such a challenge. Just when we think we've reached the peak of the enormous mountain, we realize it was just a tiny foothill in comparison to the one that lies ahead.

One day we will achieve our goals and reach the very tippy top of that mountain range, but we can only get there by putting one foot in front of the other.

I encourage you to [subscribe to Crumbs](#) to continue receiving positive encouragement on eating real food on a budget. Each newsletter contains exclusive content never before published on the blog, and will help you continue taking one baby step at a time.

~Tiffany

## About the Author



I'm Tiffany - blessed wife, mother of two, born to a chef and schooled in numbers. I've always loved food too, so I guess you could say I've been a bean counter since birth.

When my husband and I decided to stay at home to raise our kids, we cut our expenses by 50% to match our income. We've kept our minimalist lifestyle to this day, but maintaining a positive balance in the checking account presented a new set of challenges when we committed to eating only real food. I had to learn how to eat real food without going broke.

I'm passionate about feeding my family healthy food while being a good steward of our finances and believe eating real food is truly a journey. It never ends, there's always room for improvement and needs grace and encouragement. You'll find this, plus the lessons I've learned among our everyday struggles and victories at [DontWastetheCrumbs.com](http://DontWastetheCrumbs.com).

I hope *22 Days to a Fresh Start* inspires you and your family to eat healthier through adopting a real food lifestyle. If you have any questions, feel free to visit me at my site: [DontWastetheCrumbs.com](http://DontWastetheCrumbs.com), or email me at [tiffany@dontwastethecrumbs.com](mailto:tiffany@dontwastethecrumbs.com).

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