

Cooking Corner

Cost, Nutrition And Convenience: Raising The Bar On “Value” Meals

(NAPSA)—A burger and fries for under \$5? This is one type of value meal featured at fast-food drive-thrus. Sure, saving money makes us feel good about the foods we purchase, but value means much more than low cost.

If you're looking to get the most value from your meal, remember three things: cost, nutrition and convenience. These are key elements that, combined, create a valuable meal you can feel good about.

So how do you prepare a meal that is budget friendly, convenient and nutritious? The secret is knowing how to get the most out of your foods and your wallet without making your taste buds and bank account suffer. And it's easier than you may think.

Following are a few low-cost ways to get the most from your meal without cutting corners on taste and nutrition:

- **Turn one nutritious meal into two.** Transform leftovers into flavorful lunchtime delights. Wrapped in a flour tortilla, the remaining meats and veggies from a classic stir-fry make delicious fajitas or stuffed quesadillas. Sprinkle with cheese for added calcium or top with a few more greens, such as peppers or spinach, for an extra boost of essential nutrients.

- **Eat fresh. Shop local.** Check out your local farmers' markets for fresh produce. Farmers' markets provide a large selection of the freshest produce and generally have low prices because farmers are able to set their own prices—allowing you to get more for your money.

- **Plan ahead.** Prepare a variety of pasta noodles—macaroni, fettuccine, spaghetti and rigatoni—and store in plastic containers to be used later in the

week. Showcase noodles in a pasta bar format with a variety of mix-ins, such as lean ground beef or turkey, tuna fish, chicken, asparagus or zucchini. Top these with marinara, melted cheese or a dash of Parmesan and you can have a delicious meal in less than 20 minutes.

- **Power up with pumpkin.** Keep an extra can of pure pumpkin in the pantry for a quick and easy way to boost nutrition. Pumpkin can be added to homemade chili, pasta sauce and even mashed potatoes. The added pumpkin in this Easy Pumpkin-Pasta Bake recipe provides an excellent source of vitamin A and fiber. And at 10 servings, this family-style dish can be prepared for under \$1.40 per serving—perfect for a potluck or weeknight dinner.

EASY PUMPKIN-PASTA BAKE *(Makes 10 servings)*

- 1 box (14.5 ounces) whole wheat penne or other short-cut pasta, prepared according to package directions
- Nonstick cooking spray
- 1 pound (about 4 links) sweet or spicy lean Italian turkey sausage, casings removed
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped garlic
- 1 jar (24 to 26 ounces) marinara sauce
- 1 can (15 ounces) LIBBY'S® 100% Pure Pumpkin
- ½ cup water or dry red or white wine
- 4 tablespoons (0.75 ounce) shredded Parmesan cheese, *divided*
- 1 cup (4 ounces) shredded low-moisture part-skim mozzarella cheese



When you wish for a nutritious, delicious main meal to feed plenty for less, pick pumpkin.

PREHEAT oven to 375° F. Spray 3-quart casserole dish or 13 x 9-inch baking dish with nonstick cooking spray.

COOK sausage in large skillet over medium-high heat until cooked through. Stir in garlic; cook for 1 minute. Stir in marinara sauce (reserve jar). Add water or wine to jar; cover and shake. Pour into skillet along with pumpkin and 2 tablespoons Parmesan cheese. Stir well. Stir in prepared pasta. Spoon into prepared dish. Sprinkle with remaining 2 tablespoons Parmesan cheese and mozzarella cheese; cover.

BAKE for 15 minutes. Carefully remove cover; bake for an additional 5 minutes or until cheese is melted and bubbly.

Nutritional Highlights Per Serving: 7g dietary fiber, 18g protein, 130% of your vitamin A DV, 6% of your vitamin C DV, 15% of your calcium DV, 15% of your iron DV.

For more budget-friendly and nutritious recipe ideas, visit Meals.com. And for more “Plus Pumpkin” tips and complete nutrition information for the recipe above, visit VeryBestBaking.com.