

What America Really Eats

By Lynn Schnurnberger

Have a favorite cheap eat? Share it here.

News about food came in large helpings this year, and from skyrocketing prices to salmonella scares, much of it was hard to swallow. In a new PARADE poll, Americans weighed in on how they're coping.

More than 80% of those surveyed say sticker shock at the grocery store has meant changing their habits. Some 35% are preparing more meals from scratch, and 28% are buying more products in bulk. The rising costs may have a positive result, since fully a third say the one thing they won't give up is eating a balanced diet.

Kitchens around America are getting extra use as 48% of poll respondents say they eat out less than they used to. Publicist Diana Ennen, 50, of Margate, Fla., and her computer-technician husband Greg, 48, are spending more time at home around the dinner table with their three children. "At first the kids were angry that we weren't eating out as much," says Diana. "My 10-year-old wanted to know why we just couldn't get more money from the bank." Thanks to fewer trips to the food court, the family is cooking together, making individual pizzas with fresh dough. They're saving money and eating healthier.



But the cost of healthy foods like vegetables also has gone through the roof. As a result, 21% of those surveyed have joined a national trend and are planting their own vegetable gardens. According to the National Gardening Association, vegetable gardens are now a \$1.4 billion-a-year industry. Art gallery owner Justin McInteer and his girlfriend, Tanya Quinn, pulled out their front lawn in Long Beach, Calif., last year to plant squash, cucumbers, and tomatoes, and even avocado and plum trees. They reaped a bountiful harvest and had fun doing it. "If you're interested in reducing global warming," says McInteer, 36, "you couldn't get your food more locally."

Still, not even Pollyanna would claim that all of the cutbacks have been easy. Where's the beef? Not on the plates of a whopping 59% of those surveyed, who are turning their backs on expensive cuts of meats. "I buy so much chicken, my daughter won't even eat it," says Mount Vernon, N.Y., teacher Nilaja Womack, 38. In addition, like 61% of respondents, Nilaja relies on sales and coupons to cut costs. "I buy the yogurt I have a coupon for," she says. "I'll find deals to buy six gallons of milk and get the seventh one free."

Our survey showed that shoppers have devised many strategies to save. For example, 42% have switched to less-expensive brands. Wendy Rose, 41, a nonprofit manager from Venice, Fla., has given up her favorite cereal in favor of a store brand. Another tactic: 47% are resisting the urge to splurge on nonessentials by staying out of the store. "If I go back to the market after I've bought my weekly staples," explains quality-assurance manager Sherrod Bott, 33, of Littleton, Colo., "I'm more likely to pick up something like an expensive pasta sauce that I want but don't really need."

Our poll also revealed the truth about what Americans do behind closed doors—of their kitchens. More than 70% say they always wash fresh fruits and vegetables before eating, but many admit they consider expiration dates only a suggestion. Some 40% will eat bread, and 30% canned goods, past the stamped date. In fact, a third are willing to eat anything that looks and smells OK, even if the expiration date is past. That's a bad idea, according to the American Dietetic Association (ADA), which recommends tossing milk a week after opening, regardless of the expiration date; getting rid of yogurt seven to 10 days after purchase; and keeping eggs in the fridge for no longer than three weeks.

Poll respondents also take risks when it comes to food that falls on the floor. At least 53% would pick up and eat either hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, ice-cream cones, pretzels, or "anything, as long as I picked it up within five seconds." Registered dietitian and ADA spokesperson Elisa Zied cites new research that food actually can

stay bacteria-free for up to 30 seconds. “Still, depending on whether it fell in my kitchen, in a restaurant, or on the ground outside,” says Zied, “the ‘ick’ factor would probably prevent me from letting my kids eat it.”

Americans also have their own idea of what constitutes adventurous eating: 21% say the most exotic food they've tried is sushi, followed by 19% who cite Chinese takeout or other ethnic food.

Finally, Americans' honesty at dinner is impressive—66% would never try to pass off prepared foods as their own. The others should dribble a mustard stain on their aprons and pray nobody asks for the recipe.

Have a favorite cheap eat? Share it here.

National online survey conducted Sept. 15-17, 2008, by Insight Express for PARADE