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Ideas abound for budget-friendly holiday meals

With so many people looking for alternatives to costly holiday fare, newspapers, magazines and online cooking sites are overflowing with great ideas. But, the key to hosting a successful seasonal meal is not simply finding interesting recipes and purchasing lower-cost foods, but in creating and organizing a menu that works from start to finish. The easiest way to do that? Make a plan and stick to it.

Share the cooking and the cost. Rising food costs

and tighter budgets have prompted many people to

host potluck holiday dinners. As the host, you might

prepare the main dish and have your guests fill in the

rest of the menu. Either ask participants to contribute

their signature salad, side dish or dessert, or plan a

meal along a particular theme and give guests choices

Simplify: There is no rule stating that holiday

dinners have to be fancy, so don't be afraid to plan a

menu that has fewer and less costly components. For

example, serve a hearty and flavourful turkey stew or soup in place of a more expensive roasted turkey.

Pair it with a simple salad and loaves of crusty bread,

then finish up with homemade apple cobbler. Your

guests will leave happy and well nourished, and you

will have served up a flavourful and frugal holiday

from among a list of menu items.

Cook and freeze: Another option is to build your menu around a few dishes that can be prepared ahead and frozen. Cooking ahead saves money by spreading out food expenditures and avoiding lastminute shopping, which often leads to spending more

Go meatless: Vegetarian dishes can be far less expensive, especially when feeding a crowd. Consider

replacing the turkey or roast with a pasta or risotto dish, roasted vegetable tart or veggie lasagna. Great

sources of vegetarian recipes include vegkitchen.

com, epicurious.com, vegetariantimes.com, and

Go ethnic: While tradition tends to rule at

Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's menus are

wide open. How about a Mexican fiesta or an Italian

prepared foods from the grocery store or a restaurant.

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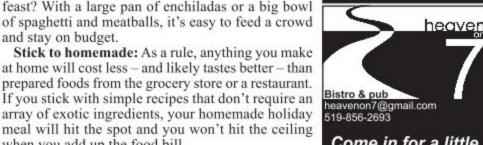
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