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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.

**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 last-minute shopping, which often leads to spending more money.  
**Go meatless:** Vegetarian dishes can be far less expensive, especially when feeding a crowd. Consider

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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 from among a list of menu items.  
**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 feast.

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, vegetarianimes.com, and allrecipes.com.  
**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 feast? With a large pan of enchiladas or a big bowl of spaghetti and meatballs, it's easy to feed a crowd and stay on budget.  
**Stick to homemade:** As a rule, anything you make at home will cost less – and likely tastes better – than prepared foods from the grocery store or a restaurant. If you stick with simple recipes that don't require an array of exotic ingredients, your homemade holiday meal will hit the spot and you won't hit the ceiling when you add up the food bill.

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