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Will Shop for Food: A Grocery Battle Plan

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I don't have many qualifications for the presidency, but I can tell you the price of a gallon of milk or a loaf of bread. Bill Clinton was grilled about them when he rattled off the correct prices and wowed some voters. I might give Bill a run for his money when it comes to grocery-store prices. That's because I do the shopping in our family. This week's column is a cheapskate's guide to grocery shopping. Consider it an early Christmas present. (Notice how it's not costing me anything.)

First, the bad news. Food prices have soared and aren't likely to get cheaper anytime soon. Soaring commodity prices were the culprit the past couple of years. But now that prices have dropped for everything from wheat and orange juice to beef, food makers aren't lowering prices much in turn. They know Americans aren't going to stop eating in a recession. Indeed, we may shop more at supermarkets as we cut back on restaurant meals to save money.

Even in this tough terrain, it's possible to cut your food bill. But you have to approach shopping strategically. Where you shop depends on what you eat. I employ the following multipronged approach, which could work for many households:

Focus on the basics. It's key to have one store that has reasonable prices for most everything. That's going to be your first stop most weeks, and if you're pressed, it may be your only stop. **Wal-Mart Stores**, of course, is hard to beat on price, and it has a surprisingly good selection these days.

Buy one, get one free. Supermarkets can run some astounding specials that can make Wal-Mart look expensive. In my new home state, New Jersey, my local supermarket will sell strip steak for \$3.99 a pound or grapes for .99 cents a pound or chicken breasts for \$1.29 a pound.

Think ethnic. I'm a big produce hound, and in most of the places I've lived, the best buys can be found at ethnic grocery stores. They serve customers who eat lots of produce and aren't willing to pay an arm and a leg for it. Good chance there's such a store in your area.

Read the labels. I usually do, and I'm often surprised what I find. Stores generally give you a volume discount – but not always. Sometimes smaller boxes actually have a lower per-ounce price.