

## My “What if” Food Challenge: Saturday, October 1

Elizabeth Archerd



*This article is part of a month-long series courtesy of The Wedge Co-op. Find details on the challenge parameters in the [introductory article](#).*

Breakfast: 1/2 c. of Breakfast Beans (delicious), one poached egg. My husband hosted our son on eggs and beans, with some bacon he found in the freezer. It cost \$2.49 on a half-price sale several weeks ago. Now that it is thawed and open, I'll deduct it. (It wouldn't have been there if not for the sale.)

The beans more than doubled in volume to 5 cups cooked, or ten 1/2 cup servings, a per serving cost of 35¢.

The bread machine comes out of hibernation today. It's a luxury we've had forever. No machine? Make [quick, easy and delicious no-knead bread](#).

### Shopping at the Wedge

Menu plan includes lasagna and looking for inspiration from the produce.

Veggies for lasagna, to use with the homemade tomato sauce. I wanted red bell pepper, but as it is more expensive than green bells, I bought a green and roasted it on the stove to sweeten it.

Cottage cheese was on sale, two for almost the price of one ricotta. One container for lasagna, the other for weekday breakfasts. (On Monday I realized there was a coupon for 55¢ in the Co+op Deals booklet! Argh!)

Smoked mozzarella is \$2/lb cheaper than the same cheese packaged as string cheese, a favorite afternoon snack with fruit. Cutting slices to save is a no-brainer.

Organic eggs on sale—\$2.99/dozen. Bought 3. Eggs keep well. 25¢ per egg.

My big doubt about this purchase is the organic coffee, \$11.29 even on sale. I'll probably switch to tea before the end of the month.

The [scanned receipt](#) (pdf) shows some corrections. Since I don't usually use the member discount, mine have been accumulating since July. I've added back in the difference between what the register gave me and what I planned to use as part of the challenge.

Adding the cabbage I picked up later and the found bacon, this trip was \$87.83

**Remaining budget available for the month: \$186.00**

### Cooking

1. Roasted chicken and the whole beets for borscht in oven at same time.

2. Put 2 pork steaks in slow-cooker with a little homemade tomato sauce.
3. Chopped and sautéed veggies for lasagna, sliced and salted eggplant then wiped off the liquid, placed on cookie sheet on low rack in oven.
4. Measured ingredients for bread into bread machine
5. Mixed cheeses and grated mozz for lasagna
6. Cut up cooked chicken and put in fridge – will freeze tomorrow.

Took a break to head out to Riverbend Farm to see the fields and listen to Greg Reynolds talk about the complex planning it takes to manage an organic farm. Everyone should spend an hour with an organic grower on the farm. It may be the only way to understand the pressures and the risks.

Stopped at Wedge on way home to pick up half a cabbage for borscht but we didn't need it! I rescued a sliver of older cabbage from the compost bowl, a rinse and a few cuts and it was perfectly good. We got 2 cups of shredded cabbage and saved the new piece for other uses.

I was shocked at both how much came from what seemed like a tiny piece, and by how wasteful I (almost) was...

7. Back at home late afternoon, turned on bread machine, constructed lasagna.
8. While lasagna baked, mixed corn meal with buttermilk to soak overnight. Will bake muffins on Sunday and freeze them.
9. After supper, put bread dough up for second rise in bread pan, then baked.

**Total time** 3.5 hours

Son stayed for dinner, ate 2 pcs lasagna. Even with a guest there is plenty for several days. When borscht is complete we'll have quite a few dinners made for the week.

**Truth in advertising:** The more I look, the more I find opened, half-used foodstuffs. The lasagna was made from two partial boxes found in the cupboards, so the pound I bought remains unopened.

I considered myself an occasionally indulgent thrifty shopper, but I see food hoarding tendencies. Squirrel-stashes are everywhere.

*This article is courtesy of [The Wedge Co-op](#) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. For more info about The Wedge, or to view other articles from them, please visit [www.wedge.coop](http://www.wedge.coop).*

## My “What if” Food Challenge: Sunday, October 2

Elizabeth Archerd



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Breakfast: last 1/2 cup of remaining cooked oatmeal from pre-Challenge leftovers, with 1 cup of leftover ratatouille and a half a Wedge chicken sausage, also left over.

Husband finished the ratatouille and made himself an egg and one pork sausage. We are nearing the end of leftovers—I think there are a few pieces of homemade pizza that hubby can finish while watching the Vikings.

### Cooking

1. Make borscht using one of the pork steaks purchased and slow-cooked yesterday. (Freeze the other for future use.) I combined a Laurel’s Kitchen (from herein to be called LK) Whole Beet Borscht recipe with the Joy of Cooking classic borscht. LK’s recipe makes use of the stalks and the beet greens. Used 2 carrots, 1 onion, 1 potato, 6 beets + stems and greens, 1 pork steak, 3.5 cups chicken broth (from freezer), bit of vinegar, salt and the remaining teaspoon of dried dill on the shelf.
2. Make a slow-cooker batch of overnight breakfast cereal at bedtime (wash, soak and roast grains between other tasks in kitchen). Will use whole oats, unhulled barley and some soaked and roasted quinoa left from pre-Challenge.
 

1 cup dried grain yields 3 cups of cooked—1/2 cup/serving, 6 servings. Cost \$1.15, 19¢ per serving. Add an egg (25¢) and cereal and a poached egg breakfast costs 44¢. Just need some fruit, if available.
3. Make corn muffins and freeze them. The corn meal cost 77¢ – the recipe did not quite use it all, 2 eggs, 50¢, leftover buttermilk (a scant cup)—I could have used 1 T. yogurt left in fridge from a homemade batch with water, salt, soda, honey, melted butter or oil—3 T. Yield: 17 muffins.
 

(Now we have three quick breakfast “foundations” to choose from: beans, cooked grains or muffins.)
4. Wrap and freeze sections of the chicken to use in dinners after lasagna is gone.
5. Froze several servings of the lasagna for next week. There are still 2-3 servings for each of us for dinners this week.
6. Roast onions and carrots for breakfast veggies as a side to breakfast beans. Used 3 carrots, 1 onion, 1 T. canola oil, sprinkle of salt. Smells sweet. Will use 1/2 cup on side with 1/2 cup beans.
7. Pack my lunch for Monday before going to bed.

Note: I saved the fat from both the pork steaks and the chicken broth and the whole chicken. They are in containers in the fridge to use as cooking fat. Don’t cringe! Pork fat is in the same category as olive oil—largely monosaturated fat. Betcha didn’t know that. Chicken fat is the “schmaltz” prized by Jewish cooks for generations. I

also scraped the gelatin from both chicken and pork and put it into the borscht. Too good to waste.

**Total time:** 2.5 hours (side note: a friend was over watching football, so cooking not as focused at it could have been).

Browsed Wildly Affordable Organic for inspiration. Her menu plan sections are divided into seasons for convenience. We'll be eating more coleslaw and less lettuce this month. Organic Wisconsin cabbage is \$1.29/lb right now, nutritious and versatile.

Settling down after lasagna dinner, I realize I don't have a plan for lunch yet.

Grabbed a container of frozen broth from the freezer and while it thawed I chopped an onion and crushed a garlic clove.

The French green lentils in the stock-up shop had oil spilled on them during transport, so I had soaked and dried them. Pre-soaked lentils to the rescue! Added them to the broth with onion/garlic and went back to our TV show. During ads I'd check it, finally salting and adding a squeeze of tomato paste concentrate from the fridge and a little tamari. It's soup.

Packed 1.5 cups of it for lunch with 2 oz. smoked mozzarella, an apple and a carrot, 2 crispy rye crackers and some grapes.

**Total time to cook soup:** 10 minutes, maximum, in 1-2 minutes segments during ads.

I started to feel anxious about doing this in public. If I fail, is it a reflection on the Wedge? (That had me up at 1:00 AM, packing breakfast beans in 2-serving containers for freezer. Don't want to waste it because the batch was too big.)

I'm remembering how I managed back in the 90s. I always shopped to a plan, buying only exactly the amount of product needed for the week's recipes. Maybe the "stock up the pantry" idea got overblown. Maybe I didn't need \$9 of spices just to prove it could be done (pride and all that). And what about the coffee? Maybe the chicken didn't need to be purchased this week at all. It is in 5 freezer bags to be distributed sparingly in meals that consist largely of grain and veggies. That should work out, right? And that pork steak...

It's only the first weekend and I'm stressing.

We'll see. We won't starve, but the goal is to do better than that. More cabbage is in our future. That is clear. (And celery—now on Member Special 88¢/lb.)

I'll be at conferences and meetings Tuesday—Friday. I'll write again next week about how it's going and the plan. We're leaving town to see a relative in the Pepin, WI area, so will have to arrange food plans with her. That may mean more cooking in advance on Friday night.

## My “What if” Food Challenge: Tips from Real Life SNAP-User

Elizabeth Archerd



A dear friend who has exhausted unemployment benefits and remains jobless was interested in my project. She receives the monthly maximum SNAP for one person, (\$200) as her only “income.” During the decades she worked, she shopped for raw ingredients, cooked and saved up, so she was already a budget shopper. Now she’s honed it so that many months she has money left over.

She jotted down her strategies for thriving on a limited food budget. They will sound familiar.

- Shop the sales and stock up.
- Think in terms of the entire year (taking into account space limitations.) Buy lots of what’s in season. Clean, chop and put in a zipper bag. Store enough in the freezer to last the year – this is the cheapest, freshest,

most flavorful way.

- Cook from scratch. Everything gets cheaper each step closer to cooking from scratch, and the ingredients in your recipes are totally wholesome and without added chemicals.
- Cook up large quantities of food on your days off. Portion out serving size containers, label and put them in the freezer. On days you come home late, tired and /or hungry you simply choose a meal from the freezer.
- There is no such thing as freezer burn. Try your own experiment. Thaw out meat with freezer burn and cook it up. See if the freezer burn doesn’t disappear (rehydrate). You never need to throw out frozen meat!
- Mostly everything can be frozen. Bananas can be mashed with lemon juice, frozen and used later for banana bread or smoothies.
- Onions, green/red/yellow peppers, celery, carrots and more can be cleaned and frozen (cheese too). They lose crunchiness but they’re good with stews stir fries.
- Carry your own food and drink whenever you go out, to prevent situations when you might use a vending machine or be tempted to go out to eat.
- Buy food in as large a quantity as you have room for storage. It’s most cost-effective. If needed, portion out useful sizes before freezing.
- Even potatoes can be frozen if they’re mashed first. Don’t be worried when they thaw out watery. They thicken up again when heated.

## My “What if” Food Challenge: Saturday, October 8

Elizabeth Archerd



- Colcannon-like dish (spuds and cabbage)
- Hummus
- Root veggie bake
- Roasted squash
- Pasta sauce
- Bread

### Cooking

#### 9:51am-10:30

Rinse off black beans Rich soaked yesterday. Put in slow-cooker with water, covered 1" above surface of beans (check with finger – first knuckle is 1 inch), two bay leaves. Turn on High. For spicy burrito beans.

Remove pork steak from freezer (cooked up last week) and thaw for chili.

Combine ingredients for 1 loaf of whole wheat honey bread, put in bread machine on dough cycle.

Chop 2 onions and 5 big cloves garlic for pasta sauce. Sauté onion in olive oil, leave chopped garlic on cutting board for 15 minutes while doing other tasks (per Linda Watson, garlic forms healthful chemicals in response to being cut, the longer it's left to sit, the more good stuff it makes).

Open 3 cans chopped tomatoes (28oz. cans)

Measure 1 c. garbanzo beans and 1 cup mixture of pintos and black beans for hummus and chili on Sunday. Wash and cover with water to soak.

Washed a few dishes.

10:30-11:05 Left for errand.

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We'd expected to be out of town, but my husband got sick so it's another full day of cooking!

Breakfast: 1/2 c. cooked cereal from fridge, nuked with roasted veggies, and served with 1/2 c. low-fat organic cottage cheese, 1 cup coffee

### Menu Plan

- Spicy black burrito beans
- Chili

### **11:05-11:15**

Brew another cup of coffee. Rich won't be drinking any today so I'll drink his.

Add chopped garlic to the covered onions, add 3 bay leaves, Herbs de Provence and dried basil (from stocking up shopping trip). Add chopped tomatoes & salt. Stir, cover, turn down flame after mixture starts bubbling. Pasta sauce.

Left to shop at Wedge, estimate 1 hour for travel, shopping and conversations with co-workers and a group of Italian cooperators at the juice bar.

Shopping decisions made on the fly:

Local organic winter squash are on sale for .89/lb. Bought one small Red Kuri. Organic turnips and golden beets looked great, bought two of each and one parsnip, to add to veggie bake this week.

Onions – red ones on member special! Bought as many red as yellow ones. Savoy cabbage looked beautiful, Mark said it wouldn't be around long. Asked Mandy to cut one in half.

Country Natural Beef ground beef was .50/lb. off (some packages). Had planned to buy 1 lb, bought a little over 2 lb.

Total trip: \$37.60. Rich shopped for \$17.28 on 10/6 and our two other little expenses were \$3.15 (his gas station hot dogs and my string cheese)

### **Remaining budget available for the month: \$127.97**

**1:00pm-3:35** (Didn't cook the entire time—sometimes dishes.)

Remove dough from bread machine, shape and place on baking sheet for second rising. Put pan of water on oven bottom. Started oven shortly before rising was done.

Cook the ground beef, drained and weighed: 1lb. 9-7/8 oz.

Measure 2 c. cooked gr. Beef into simmering pasta sauce Packaged remaining gr. Beef into two plastic containers of 1.5 c each and froze.

Put bread in oven for 28 min.

Put finished pasta sauce into 4 containers of just under 3 c. each – one in fridge, 3 to freezer.

Chop 3 carrots and all roots from today's shop with one red onion, oiled with melted 2 T. saved pork fat from last week (pork steaks) and salted. Covered and placed in oven after bread came out.

Place whole Red Kuri squash, unaltered, in oven in small baking dish, uncovered.

Wash and cut up 4 potatoes from last week's shop and the 1/2 savoy cabbage from today's, dotted with butter and sprinkled with salt. Covered and put in oven.

Oven at this point has veggie bake, squash and colcannon-like dish in it.

Did dishes for 8 minutes.

Chop onion, sauté in bacon grease from can on stove (just like my parents used to do) add chili powder, cumin, smoked paprika, oregano, and cook.

Check black beans in slow cooker. They're done. Scoop out with slotted spoon and add to frying pan of onion and spices. Add 1/4 c. bean juice, a couple generous squirts of ketchup, spoonful of honey, cover and turn down low for 15-20 minutes.

Freeze black bean juice for bean gravy, per Linda Watson.

Check oven. When squash done (knife cuts through easily) remove and cool until can handle, cut in half, remove seeds with grapefruit spoon, put in fridge. Soak the seeds in water to remove later from pulp and try to figure out how to get edible seeds out of the thick white protective covering. (Anybody know?)

Put away root bake and potato-cabbage bake, in fridge and larger container in fridge freezer.

Late light lunch. 1 c. leftover lentil soup with last of carrots and veggies.

5 minutes in the evening – drained soaking the chili beans and garbanzos for hummus, and put in slow cookers. Covered with water – 1 inch above surface of beans.

**TIME TOTALS:** 3.5 hours cooking. 1 hour traveling, shopping, yakking.

## Food Inventory

I figured I'd better list everything in freezer and fridge. Wow.

Upstairs freezer now contains:

- Corn muffins
- 2 containers borscht (dinner for 2 in each container)
- 3 containers pasta sauce (3 c. each)
- 4 containers (3.5 c.) chicken broth
- 2 chicken breasts and 1 chicken leg (Rich dined on the other last week).
- 2 containers cooked ground beef
- 1 2-cup container of burrito beans
- 7 servings of Breakfast beans (serving is 1/2 c.)
- 1 serving lasagna

Refrigerator proper holds

- 3 c. pasta sauce
- 1 c. burrito beans
- corn muffins
- 3 servings cooked mixed grain cereal (leftover)
- cottage cheese
- cheddar
- smoked mozzarella
- Parmesan
- 20 eggs (purchases 3 dozen on sale last week)
- bacon
- chicken fat, pork fat and beef tallow from various meats this week and last.
- Fresh produce: 1 head lettuce, bag carrots, 3 apples, 1/2 red cabbage, celery

On counter: bananas, onions, garlic and a fresh loaf of bread, cooling.

For lunches this week I plan to use canned tuna with celery, pickles and mayo on rye crackers with smoked mozzarella, carrots and celery. I may break out a container of borscht for lunches later in week, with rye crackers or bread, and carrots and hummus.

Food is piling up! After making chili and hummus tomorrow—much of which will be frozen, we will have a plethora of choices for dinners and lunches.

Last week we spent no more than 10 minutes per night making dinners.

I packed lunches (for the days I carried them) at night.

Breakfasts for me were a few minutes of measuring and nuking cereal or Breakfast beans, measuring cottage cheese or poaching an egg (4 minutes). I ate a banana or 1/2-1 c. thawed berries with cereal and roasted veggies with beans.

*Full disclosure:* We each had "stomach flu" for a day so food intake was reduced. Lacking any white bread in the house on Friday, I ate 2 toasted bagels at the conference, from the hotel buffet, with black tea.

## My “What if” Food Challenge: Sunday, October 9

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### **7:45am**

Chopped onion, celery, garlic and added to slow cooker beans to start chili. Pulled out pork steak and took meat off bones, added to cooker with chili, paprika, cumin and a chipotle pepper with adobo sauce from a jar in the back of the fridge.

Drained other cooker of garbanzo beans, put 1.5 c. in food processor. Added tahini, lemon juice (zested first as per Linda Watson, saved and froze with unused juice), salt, bean water. It's hummus!

Froze remaining beans and the bean water—it is highly nutritious and makes terrific gravy.

Even making coffee in between other tasks, I was done by 8:25.

40 minutes

Breakfast was 1/2 c. cooked cereal, nuked, with thawed berries, 1/2 c. low-fat cottage cheese, coffee.

Husband ate white rice and toast.

Lunch: remaining lentil soup heated up with a cup of roasted root veggies.

Rich ate the potato-cabbage dish for lunch.

Supper: chili and corn muffins.

## My “What if” Food Challenge: October 10-14

Elizabeth Archerd



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We’ve continued to eat great meals from the weekend cookathons as well as making some easy dishes up on the spot. It’s great to have so many components for meals on hand, so each meal can be a mix and match decision on the fly.

The breakfast components include: Breakfast Beans, cooked whole grains, eggs, pork sausage, roasted root veggies, fruit, cornmeal muffins and cottage cheese. Making breakfast takes less than ten minutes, and it is only that long if cooking an egg is involved.

Lunches for work have included lentil soup, roasted root veggies, chili, corn muffins, tuna, crispy rye crackers, leftover fried rice (Monday dinner), smoked mozzarella slices, hummus, carrot and celery sticks and apples. Rich eats the same things or other leftovers.

Monday dinner: Rich whipped up a healthy recipe for easy fried rice, all from ingredients on hand: grated carrot, minced onion, cooked rice two eggs, garlic. He used one of the chicken breasts from the freezer and we added the broccoli purchased on Saturday as well for a complete (and savory) one-dish meal.

Tuesday dinner: We ate separately as Rich was out of town. There was some cooked pasta in the fridge that Rich had cooked up early in the week, so I used a cup of that with a cup of the homemade tomato-meat sauce made on the weekend. Grated some parmesan cheese over it. Served with one half of the Red Kuri squash cooked on Saturday, steamed. I ate it with the skin on.

Rich heated up leftover fried rice when he came home.

Just before going to bed Tuesday night, I washed 1 cup of mixed whole grains (quinoa, barley and oat groats) and put them in the little slow cooker with 3 c. water, a cinnamon stick and 10 whole allspice. In the morning there will be 6 1/2 cup servings of cooked cereal to eat and save in the fridge.

Did the same thing Thursday with beans. I soaked the beans for 4 hours after coming home from work, and made a double batch of Breakfast Beans overnight. The house smells so good in the morning—the basil and slow-cooked onion get very sweet. I thought of adding carrots to future batches, as they also get super sweet from slow-cooking.

Wednesday supper plan: burrito-bean and ground beef salads.

I’ll pick up a few items before leaving work today. Milk and a tomato, for sure. (\$7.79 – 1 tomato and 1 gal. organic milk)

**Remaining budget for month: \$120.18**

## Reflections on the experience thus far

The experiment is having quite an impact. Our kitchen garbage output has reduced to a bag a week and there may even be fewer trips to the compost pile as we are wasting nothing if we can avoid it.

While our big freezer is full of dinners, I still feel anxious about the remainder of the month. There is a learning curve involved. I have the luxury of thinking about how I'll do things differently next month, but if I were on SNAP with children to feed, I'd need to learn very fast.

The overall plan remains sound but would require tweaking. I'm sure there will be food left at month's end, even some from the initial purchase, but still wondering if we'll get a varied diet during the last few days. As the rhythm of this style of food preparation becomes more familiar, maybe it would allow more room for improvisations in the produce department. I miss all the fruit I'm used to eating, but I'm getting plenty of produce from carrots, celery, and cabbage in addition to the seasonal roots and squash.

When I shopped for milk I noticed right away that I'd made a mistake by purchasing a half-gallon before. The full gallon brings down the price.

While walking the aisles of the store, my mind has become a little calculator. Sale organic rice by the registers is cheaper per pound this month than bulk organic rice. Too bad I don't need rice! We have barely touched the stock bought on October 1.

A side note: when you don't overeat you have more energy and sleep better. Appropriate portion size addresses some digestion problems, as well. Good to know.