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My Budget Rules!

home-cooked beats restaurants every time

Yes, it makes a pleasant change to do the restaurant thing once in a while, particularly for the family cook who can, at last, have a night off. Having booked a table and being greeted by the maître d makes one feel quite special; and the ambience of the place adds to the promise that a good pampering is about to be had. Ensuring his newly-arrived patrons are comfortably seated, the penguin-suited individual snaps his fingers and two flunkies come a-running. One places menus on the table beside each diner – Wow, your very own menu! Another waiter with a white tea towel over his or her arm presents the wine list, produces a notebook and pen, then enquires: “Would you care for a drink before you order?” Hey, is this going to be great, or what?

While pre-dinner drinks are on the way, the menu can be perused. A few frowns kink foreheads – the dishes available seem to be in some foreign language. What are coq au vin and pommes frites? Where’s the chook and chips? A glance to the right of each offering raises eyebrows even more. The prices are out of this world. Whoever is paying might need to take out a loan! The saving grace, however, should be the food; always assuming the recommendations of the waiter can be trusted. The filet mignon looks okay, if a little lost; sitting as it is in the middle of the plate with only some sprigs of green stuff for company. The poulet à l’estragon is supposed to be some sort of chicken which presumably is lurking surreptitiously beneath the sauce. At least the vegies look almost normal.

I think that’s enough of the tongue-in-cheek criticism. Most restaurants do provide a quality experience with a price tag to match; yet, in general, their dishes are nothing that you couldn’t produce yourself. The basics can be bought from the supermarket; most home cooks have the knowledge and means to prepare the ingredients, plus similar pans, dishes and a stove capable of turning out a restaurant-type meal for a fraction of the cost. The real bonus is the challenge and fun of doing it yourself.

At first, it will probably take longer than usual, so a certain amount of planning is essential. If you are willing to accept that, why not give it a go? There is probably one of those old cookery books of Grandma’s yellowing with age somewhere. The recipes will have been tried and tested over the years; and the beauty is that, when they were published, the ingredients were plain, common-or-garden, good wholesome food. Have a scan through and don’t be intimidated by some of the names. A few may well be in French, but boeuf is still beef, and quiche is really just a flan.

Taking the time to read through the recipes in these books will confirm that they are within the scope of anyone who can fry, bake and knock up a casserole. Some of our recipes were borrowed from an old “Good Housekeeping Book”, and I make no

apologies for this because they were great and helped me get back to grass roots. In some instances, the methods might appear long-winded; but they usually detail how to prepare and cook the particular dish in the time-honoured way. Should the cooking temperatures not cater for modern ovens, just go to our Handy Hints page and scroll down the “In the Kitchen” category for a conversion table.

There are also plenty of modern cookery books with recipes from many different cultures, and these will add variety to meal times. Then there are ideas from the cooking shows, some of which feature normal food cooked by a pretty normal chef. Others like My Kitchen Rules are less about fancy dishes the contestants try not to screw up, than they are about TV ratings and a bunch of wannabes who really do fancy themselves. As for the ingredients used, some may be unavailable locally, and a fair few are probably too expensive for the household budget.

There is a way to compensate for this by thinking outside the box. I keep a stock of different meats in the freezer so that I have the means on hand to try something new if I get a sudden urge. I buy these from the supermarket when prices are right, either items on special, or marked down. Provided the use-by hasn't passed, bagging and freezing them as soon as possible ensures they will stay fresh and edible until needed.

Certain cuts of meat such as Scotch fillet or rump steak can be very costly; but when it's on special, a rump roast doesn't have to be roasted in one piece at all. I slice it into steaks, dice the odd smaller bits or cut them into strips; then bag, label and freeze the lot. Admittedly there are only two of us; but with a bit of canny purchasing, the cost of meat per individual serve rarely exceeds \$3. With vegies and a sauce, I can turn out a tasty, restaurant-style dish for about \$5, sometimes less. So, we can eat like nobs for no more than \$70 a week, about the cost of one night out! Much of the time I double the quantity so that I can freeze half to be de-frosted and re-heated later. Why would I do that? Because power costs to cook the extra aren't much more than for a single meal.

There are some buys, even specials, that I steer clear of. Meats that are marinated, crumbed, or processed by someone else, competent butcher or not, I won't touch. I prefer to know how good the meat looks, and exactly what goes into the coatings or filling. I can only ensure this if I do it myself. It really isn't that hard; and, despite just being an ordinary cook, I reckon I could have charged a small fortune for some of my meals. I think if I had tried that, though, my wife would now be eating somewhere else!

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