

SNAP Challenge Day #1: Prepping for the Challenge

September 13, 2013



On Wednesday night, after a long work day, I got into my car and headed in the opposite direction of my home. I needed to pick up groceries for my [SNAP Challenge](#) and my eyes were set on NSA Supermarket in Dorchester, Mass., a grocery store known to have significantly lower prices than other local outlets.

Truth be told, I was nervous. I don't generally shop for groceries, so that in and of itself was out of my normal routine. But what began as mild sense of uneasiness ahead of the shopping trip, graduated to outright worry once I began shopping. After just a few minutes walking the aisles of the store, the concern set in that I may not be able to sustain myself for the next seven days. Thirty one dollars and fifty cents, the weekly budget, didn't feel so insignificant until I actually started filling – and editing – what was ultimately a barren shopping cart.

I had already understood that coffee, pistachios and granola, staples in my normal diet, would easily blow the weekly budget. What I found distressing was that items like fruit and even yogurt are luxuries I'll forego this week. When I could afford something like cereal, it was of the "off-brand" variety, and won't require a spoon, as I ended up leaving the milk at the register.

We're all familiar with the conventional wisdom that links fiscal constraints to unhealthy food choices. My goal with this challenge wasn't to relive Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* documentary with a week of "dollar menu" choices. My aim, before I actually went to the supermarket, was to amass a list of items that would allow me to eat as nutritiously as possible, albeit under the constraints of a budget that matches the assistance provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Of course, we all know what Robert Burns so poetically said about best laid plans.

The fact is, I was forced to choose foods that were filling – items that my Italian mother-in-law would have said will "stick to my ribs." But it isn't lost on me that I wasn't able to afford the fruits, vegetables and meats that most would say belong in a balanced diet.

This budget really forced me to prioritize. And it forced me to think ahead about eating in ways that I normally wouldn't have. Being Jewish, I celebrate Yom Kippur tomorrow with a fast. How would that work with my Challenge? I wanted to make sure I got a full seven days in on this Challenge, so I decided to begin a day early.

I ultimately tried to go heavy on the grains, under the belief that I can eat cereal in the morning, lentils and chickpeas for lunch, and then cap each day with a pasta dinner. The only "flavor" I'll be getting this week will come from the lemon, onions, garlic, peppers, and olive oil that I'll use to season my meals. And I'll snack on carrots in between. It's just a hunch, but there's a good chance I'll spend my remaining few dollars on a sugar fix at some point during the week. Here's my final list, along with the itemized costs:

Item	Price
Best Yet Toasted Oats	\$2.59
Prince Vermicelli	\$0.88
Prince Rotini	\$0.88
Prince Fettuccini	\$0.88
Rienzi Italian Plum Tomatoes	\$2.19
BY Sharp Cheddar	\$3.50
Spanish Olive Oil	\$2.79
<u>Gonsalves</u> Lentils	\$1.79
<u>Gonsalves</u> Dry Chickpeas	\$1.99
<u>Gonsalves</u> Dry Chickpeas	\$1.99
Garlic	\$0.60
Carrots	\$1.81
Jalapeno Peppers	\$1.87
Onions (White)	\$1.69
Lemon	\$0.50
TOTAL:	\$25.95

This isn't going to be easy. In fact, it's going to be incredibly hard. I haven't even felt the first pangs of hunger, and I'm already gaining a whole new perspective into challenges that so many people in this country face in dealing with food insecurity – from the embarrassment of having to leave items at the register to the diligence and ongoing calculation required to constantly prioritize and rank every purchase and potential purchase, big and small.

As I said in my [initial post](#), you won't hear me claim that my experiences from the upcoming week represent an authentic representation of food insecurity in America. My goal is merely to help bring awareness to the issue and spark deeper conversations about food insecurity and possible solutions – discussions that organizations like Feeding America are driving every day. Please take the time to view [this video](#) in which Feeding America CEO Bob Aiken talks about his goals for the SNAP Challenge. It is nice to have a partner like Bob in this effort.

I'll be updating the blog throughout the week, but please share your stories, thoughts, experiences, etc. in the comment section. Until tomorrow...