



The Cost of Convenience



by Diana Sagers,
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Making wise food choices is particularly important for families on limited incomes. Today's supermarket has thousands of foods to choose from. Penny-wise shoppers consider many factors when selecting groceries.

While the deciding factor could and perhaps should be nutrition, more often it is price and convenience. Higher prices do not mean extra nutrition. Today's cook often juggles home, family and work responsibilities. After working all day, the cook may be tired, and pressed for time. Convenience is important.

Generally scratch cooking is less expensive, tastes better and is more nutritious than fast foods or convenience foods. However, it usually takes longer to prepare. The trade-off for convenience is usually money. Frequent meals of fast foods and restaurant fare can raise havoc with a food budget. A less expensive alternative to fast foods would be convenience foods available at grocery stores. How much more does convenience cost than food prepared from scratch?

Convenience vs. Scratch

Generally convenience foods are more expensive than scratch foods, but not always. How does a savvy shopper determine how their money is best used?

There are two useful guides to compare the values of food products. Unit pricing, is useful to compare similar products. Price per serving is useful in comparing different foods that serve the same function in a meal.

Unit Pricing

Knowing price per ounce of a product is useful when a decision has been made to purchase a specific product. Finding the best bargain among the various sizes and brands of pork and beans requires the shopper to determine the cost of a unit common to each.

For example if Brand A sells a 15-ounce can of pork and beans for one price and a 20-ounce can of pork and beans for a higher price, how do you determine which can provides more beans for the money spent? Divide the package price by the weight or volume of the contents, or number of items in the package.

Fortunately, most grocery stores now include unit pricing on the prices listed on the shelves. In large print, the tags list the overall price of the container of a product. In smaller print, usually at the left or above the overall price, they list a unit price. "Unit pricing" is often stated in price per ounce listed as cents. For example: a 15.5 ounce can of pork and beans may be priced at .45¢. The unit pricing would be listed at 2.9¢. (Notice that the 45 cent price will be listed as a decimal of a dollar, but the unit pricing is listed as cents including tenths of a cent.) The larger, 20 ounce can might sell for .56¢. The unit pricing would list the contents as 2.8¢ per ounce. Provided the homemaker could use the larger can of beans, it would be the better bargain.





Price per Serving

In some instances, shoppers must choose between two products that are not the same. For example, fresh potatoes, which still include the skins and moisture, provide fewer servings per ounce than potato flakes.

In such a situation, price per serving is a more accurate measure than price per ounce. For example, 20 pounds of potatoes makes about 50 servings. If twenty pounds cost \$2.98, each serving costs 6¢. The package of potato flakes might make 34 servings for \$3.89. A serving would cost 11.4¢. (The fresh potatoes cost just over half the price of the potato flakes.) So even adding in the expense of cooking, they will cost less per serving.

Sometimes choices might be between very different products in the same category. For example how does a serving of hamburger compare with a serving of hot dogs? If you make four hamburgers out of a pound of beef, and it costs \$1.04 per pound, the burger would cost 26 cents per serving. A hot dog at \$1.60 for a package of 8 would cost 20 cents each.

One might also compare the costs of homemade vs. ready-made products. For example, a homemaker's recipe for pizza may weigh more than a similar deli-pizza because she added extra ingredients but may actually cost less per serving.

To determine price per serving, the consumer should divide the total price of the product by the number of servings in the package. Fortunately, recent USDA specifications require that most foods must list on the label the serving size and number of servings in their packages. USDA regulations have established serving sizes on similar products so they are measured consistently through the industry.

Time and Skill Requirements

Scratch cooking usually takes longer than cooking with convenience foods since multiple ingredients must be measured, mixed and fully cooked. Often a recipe is required, located and consulted as the food is prepared.

However, this rule-of-thumb can be misleading. Cooking time is not necessarily shorter for convenience foods. For example, it takes just as long to cook macaroni as part of a mix as it does to cook plain macaroni. While the macaroni cooks for a scratch dish, other parts of the dish can be prepared.

The cook's skill level makes a big difference in the time required to prepare a dish. If someone cooks a certain dish often enough to have the recipe memorized and knows shortcuts, they can save much time.

Homemade mixes are a way of saving time on cooking by measuring bulk amounts of ingredients into a container and storing the mixture until it is needed.

Necessary Equipment

Some cooks are limited by lack of cooking equipment. A microwave or pressure cooker can save quantities of time, but are not necessarily available to everyone.

Some recipes require more dishes and very specific equipment to make. Generally equipment substitutions exist. For example a loaf or tube pan can substitute for a bundt pan. Two knives will replace a pastry blender. A hand grater works just as well as an electric grater, although the process takes longer. A wire whip or fork will blend ingredients in place of a mixer.

Some equipment enhances the cooking process, but is



not totally necessary for an acceptable product. For example, a copper bowl is excellent for whipping light, fluffy egg whites, but they can be whipped acceptably in any clean bowl.

The Advantages of Convenience foods vs. Home Cooked Foods.

Scratch Cooking

1. Generally scratch ingredients are less expensive than mixes.
2. More creativity and freedom in the ingredients included in the dish.
3. The cook can improve quality and flavor by ingredient choices.
4. The cook has the option to reduce or eliminate fat and salt in recipes.
5. The cook knows all the ingredients used to make the food.



Convenience Foods

1. Less time is usually required for food preparation.
2. Convenience foods can usually be made using fewer dishes and utensils.
3. Convenience foods have consistent flavor -- no changes from time to time.
4. Little skill is required. Part of the convenience of such foods is ease of preparation.
5. To vary tastes, extra ingredients may be added (such as toppings for pizza).

Cooks can make wise choices in providing meals for a family. By considering nutritional value, cost, time requirements, a homemaker can provide healthy, tasty and inexpensive meals for a family.

Food Pricing Charts



The following charts list some commonly used foods and their relative prices. Although prices change, these samples should show the price relationships between various products.

Four grocery stores including two major chains and two privately owned grocery stores were surveyed. In doing the grocery survey, sale prices were not used since they might artificially affect the averages. Store brands were priced when possible so that products would be similar in quality and price. After completing the surveys, the figures were averaged from all the stores to get sample prices.

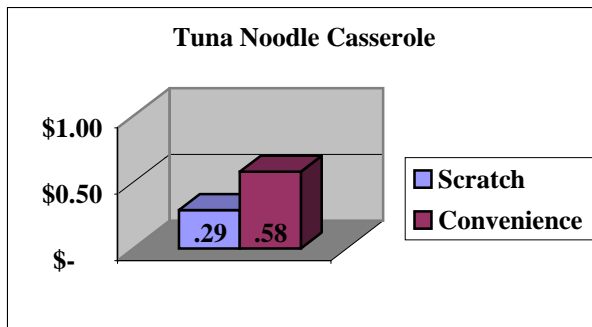
The charts also include recipes from various foods using Food and Nutrition Program (FNP) recipes to compare them with ready made or partially prepared dishes.

The included graph illustrates and compares the findings.

CONVENIENCE COMPARISONS

DINNER FOODS

cost per serving



Tuna Noodle Casserole

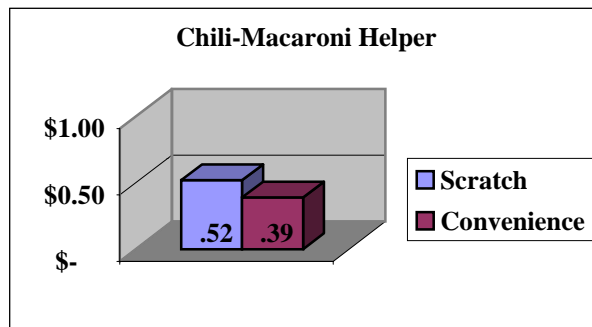
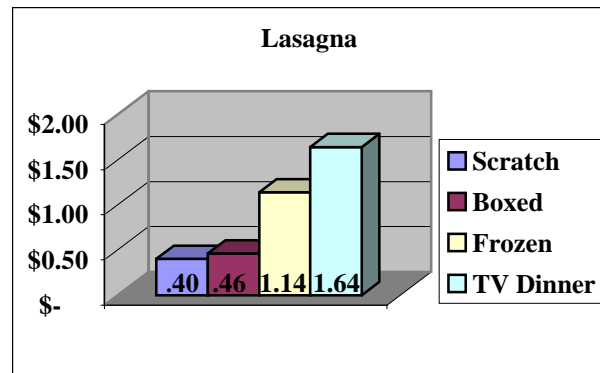
- 3 cups noodles
- 1 can tuna fish
- 1/4 cup crackers
- 1 can cream of mushroom soup

TOTAL COST: \$1.72 (6 servings)

Lasagna

- 1/2 lb. ground beef
- 1 tsp. garlic powder (optional)
- 1 cup tomato sauce
- 2 1/2 cups canned tomatoes
- 1/4 tsp. pepper
- 1/2 lb. lasagna noodles
- 1/4 lb. mozzarella cheese
- 12 oz cottage cheese
- 1/2 cups parmesan cheese

TOTAL COST: \$6.36 (16 servings)



Chili-Macaroni Helper

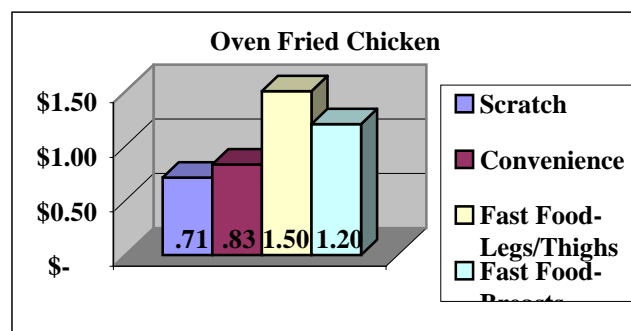
- 1 lb. hamburger
- 3 tsp. dehydrated onion flakes
- 1/4 tsp. garlic powder
- 1 tsp. chili powder
- 2 cans tomato sauce (8 oz)
- 2 cups macaroni, uncooked

TOTAL COST: \$3.15 (6 servings)

Oven Fried Chicken

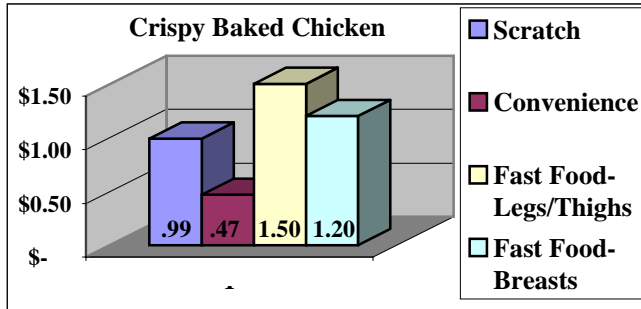
- 2 tsp. margarine
- 2/3 cup Master Mix
- 1 1/2 tsp. paprika
- 1 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1/4 tsp. pepper
- 1 broiler-fryer chicken

TOTAL COST: \$4.29 (6 servings)



DINNER FOODS

cost per serving



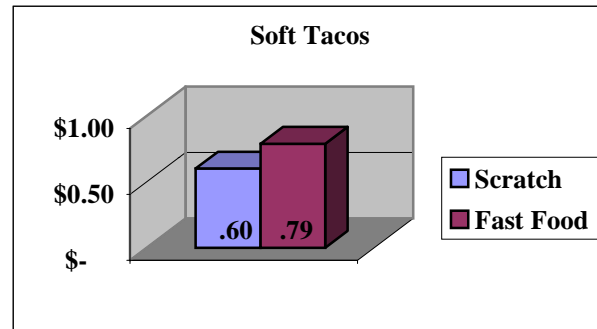
Crispy Baked Chicken

1 cup Cornflakes
1 frying chicken
1 cup skim milk
1 tsp. oil

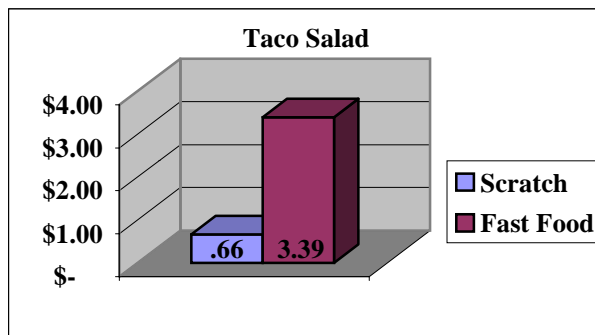
TOTAL COST: \$3.95 (4 servings)

Soft Tacos

1/2 lb. ground beef
1/2 cup onion
1 can refried beans (8 oz)
1 can tomato paste (6 oz)
1/2 tsp. chili powder
12 flour tortillas (6 inch)
1 cup cheese (optional) shredded
2 cups lettuce (optional) shredded
1 cup tomatoes (optional) chopped
1/2 cup green pepper (optional) chopped



TOTAL COST: \$6.02 (10 servings)



Taco Salad

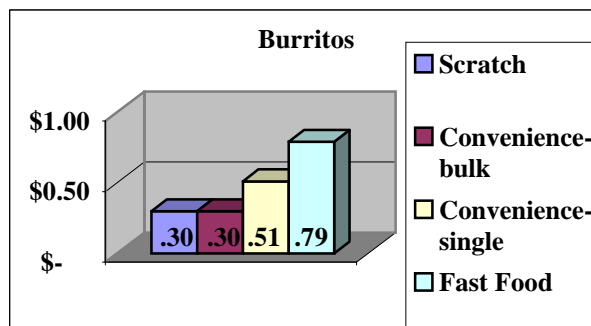
1 can kidney beans
1/2 cup onion
1 Tbsp. chili powder
6 chips
1 cup lettuce
2 tomatoes
1/2 cups cheddar cheese

TOTAL COST: \$3.93 (6 servings)

Burritos

1 lb. ground beef
1 green pepper (chopped)
1/4 cup onion (chopped)
1/2 cup tomato sauce
1/2 tsp. oregano
12 tortillas

TOTAL COST: \$3.56 (12 servings)

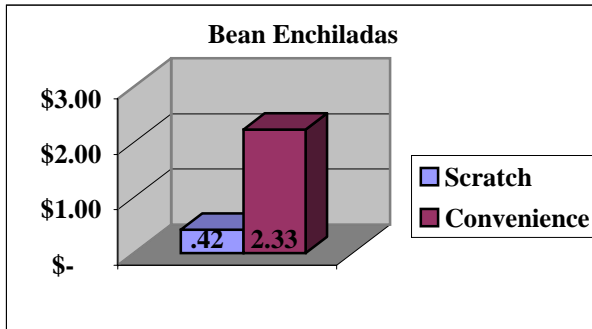


DINNER FOODS

cost per serving

Bean Enchiladas

- 1 cup onion
- 2 cups canned tomatoes (16 oz)
- 1 can tomato sauce (8 oz)
- 1/4 tsp. pepper
- 1 Tbsp. honey
- 1 lb. pinto beans, cooked, mashed
- 1/2 cup onion, chopped
- 1 can olives
- 1 tsp. chili powder
- 1/2 cup shredded cheese

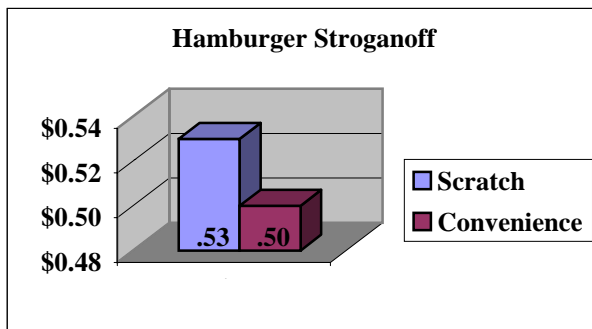
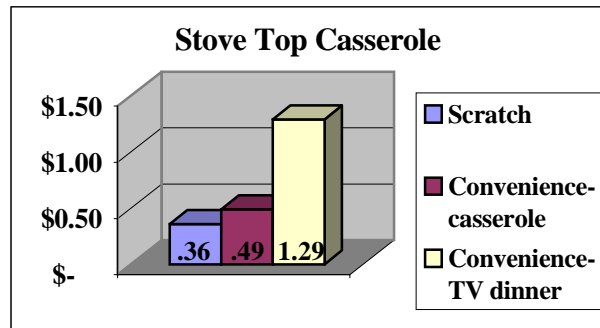


TOTAL COST: \$3.34 (8 servings)

Stove Top Casserole

- 1/2 onion, chopped finely
- 1/2 lb. ground beef
- 4 cups noodles, cooked
- 5 carrots, thinly sliced
- 1/2 tsp. pepper
- 1/2 cup white sauce
- 1 cube beef bouillon

TOTAL COST: \$2.91 (8 servings)



Hamburger Stroganoff

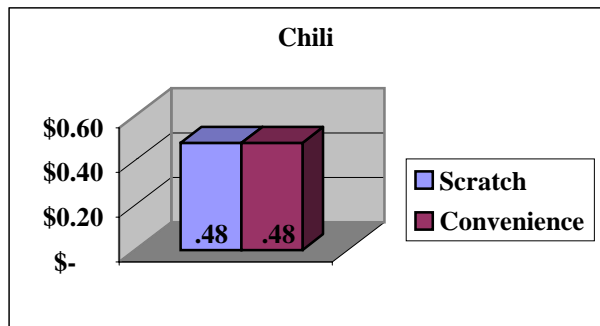
- 2 Tbsp. onion
- 1/2 lb. ground beef
- 1/4 cup flour
- 3/4 cup buttermilk
- 2 1/4 cup egg noodles, cooked
- 1/2 tsp. pepper

TOTAL COST: \$2.12 (4 servings)

Chili

- 1/2 cup onion chopped
- 1/2 lb. ground beef
- 2 tsp. chili powder
- 2 cups stewed tomatoes (16 oz)
- 1 cup tomato sauce (8 oz)
- 2 cups kidney beans (15 oz)

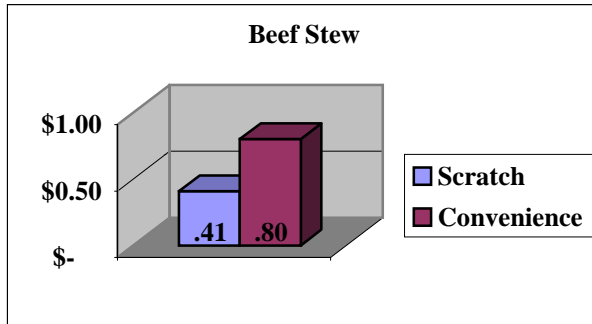
TOTAL COST: \$2.89 (6 servings)



DINNER FOODS

cost per serving

Beef Stew



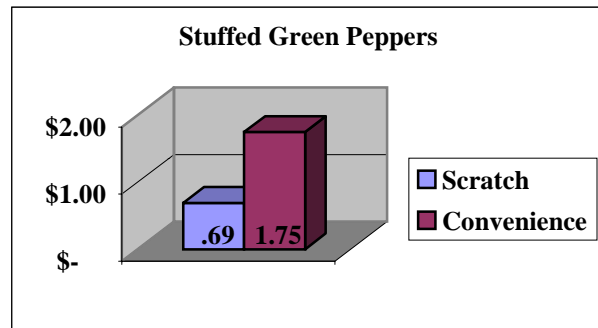
2 lb. beef stew meat
 1/4 cup flour
 1/4 tsp. pepper
 1 spray vegetable oil spray
 2 onions, medium
 1 stalk celery
 4 potatoes
 4 carrots, cut
 2 Tbsp. Flour

TOTAL COST: \$4.92 (12 servings)

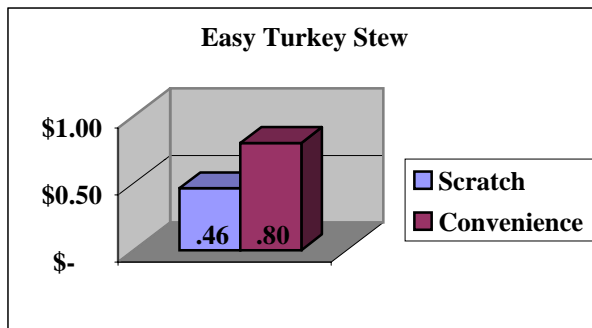
Stuffed Green Peppers

4 large green peppers
 1 lb. ground turkey
 1 cup rice
 1/2 cup onion
 1 1/2 cup tomato sauce
 1/2 tsp. salt (optional)

TOTAL COST: \$6.36 (16 servings)



Easy Turkey Stew



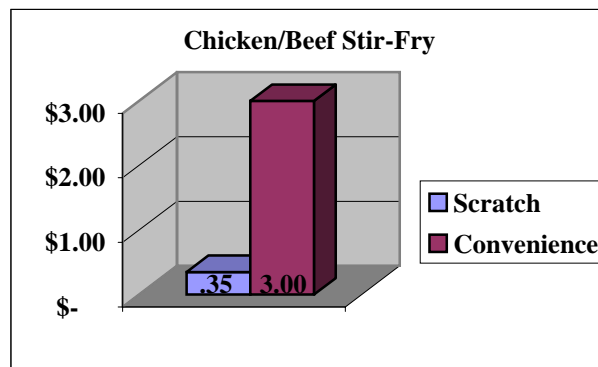
2 tsp. vegetable oil
 1/2 cup onion, chopped
 1/8 tsp. garlic powder
 1 cup turkey, cooked, chopped
 4 carrots
 1 stalk celery
 2 potatoes, diced
 1 can tomatoes (16 oz)

TOTAL COST: \$2.28 (5 servings)

Chicken/Beef Stir Fry

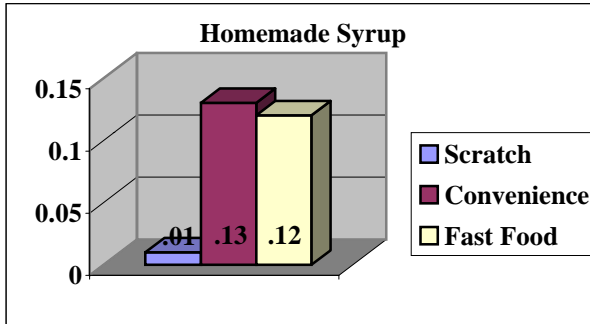
3 cups rice, cooked
 4 oz beef strips and/or
 4 oz chicken strips
 1/2 cup onion, chopped
 1/2 cup celery diced
 1 green pepper
 1 tsp. margarine
 1 cup any fresh vegetable
 2 Tbsp. soy sauce

TOTAL COST: \$2.13 (6 servings)



BREAKFAST FOODS

cost per serving



Homemade Syrup

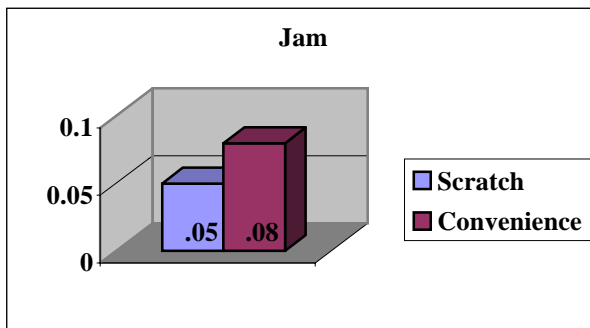
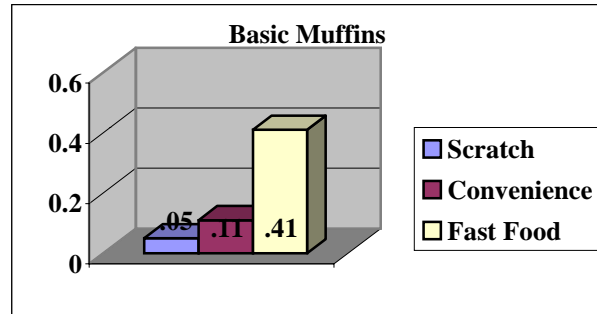
2 cups white sugar
1/2 tsp. maple flavoring

TOTAL COST: \$0.29 (25 servings)

Basic Muffins

2 cups flour
1/4 cups sugar
3 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. salt
1 egg
1 cup skim milk
3 Tbsp. vegetable oil

TOTAL COST: \$0.58 (12 servings)



Jam

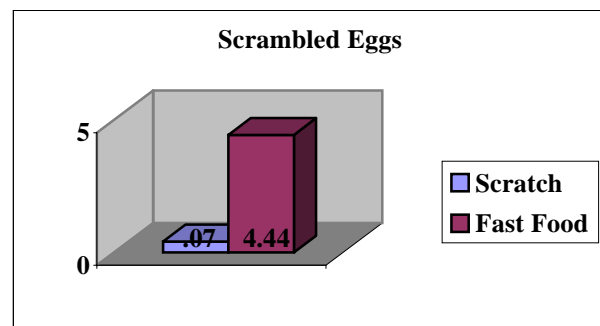
5 3/4 cups frozen strawberries
8 1/2 cups sugar
1 pkg. pectin
1/4 cup lemon juice

TOTAL COST: \$9.53 (176 servings)

Scrambled Eggs

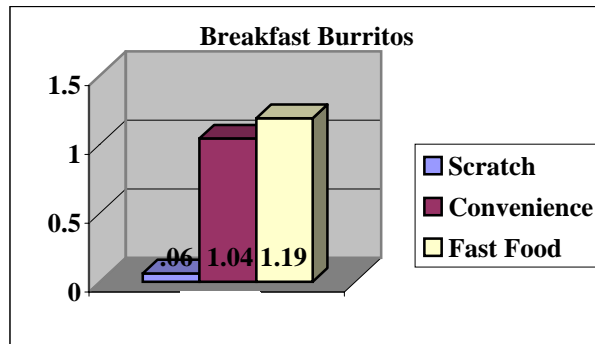
1 egg
1/8 tsp. salt and pepper
2 tsp. milk

TOTAL COST: \$0.41 (6 servings)



BREAKFAST FOODS

cost per serving



Breakfast Burritos

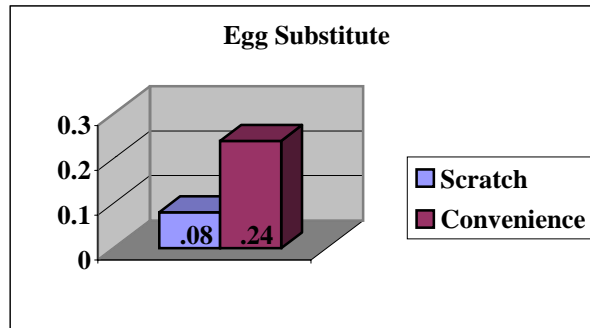
- 1 egg
- 2 tsp. milk
- 1 flour tortilla
- 1/2 slice ham

TOTAL COST: \$0.35 (6 servings)

Egg Substitute

- 6 egg whites
- 1/3 cup non-fat dry milk powder
- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil

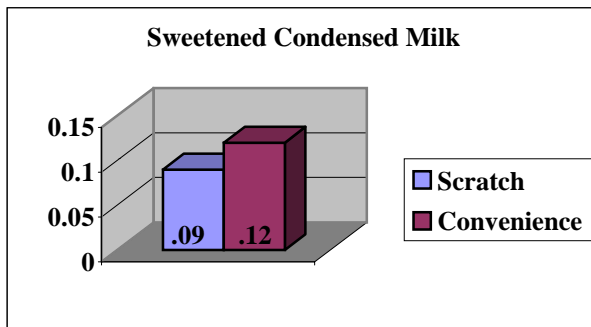
TOTAL COST: \$0.51 (6 servings)



Egg Substitute

- Scratch
- Convenience

Sweetened Condensed Milk



Sweetened Condensed Milk

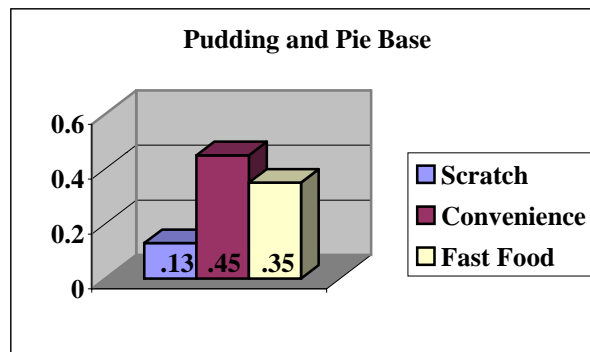
- 1 cup sugar
- 4 Tbsp. margarine
- 1/1/3 cup instant powdered milk

TOTAL COST: \$0.86 (10 servings)

Pudding and Pie Base

- 3/4 cup sugar
- 2 Tbsp. cornstarch
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 2/3 cup instant dry milk
- 1 egg
- 2 Tbsp. margarine
- 1 tsp. vanilla

TOTAL COST: \$0.51 (4 servings)

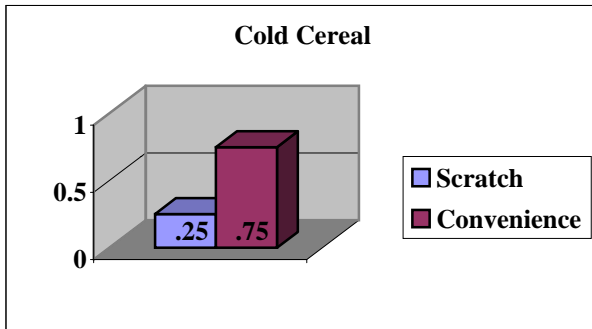


Pudding and Pie Base

- Scratch
- Convenience
- Fast Food

BREAKFAST FOODS

cost per serving



Cold Cereal

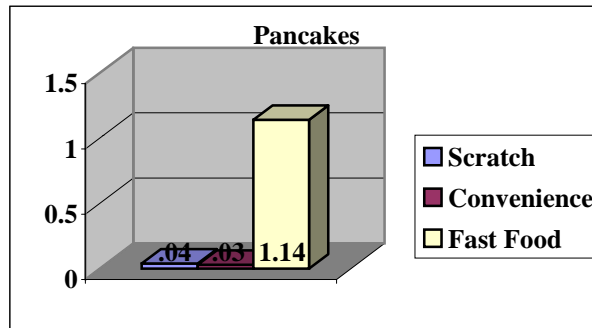
1 cup Cheerios
1/2 cup milk

TOTAL COST: \$0.25 (1 serving)

Pancakes

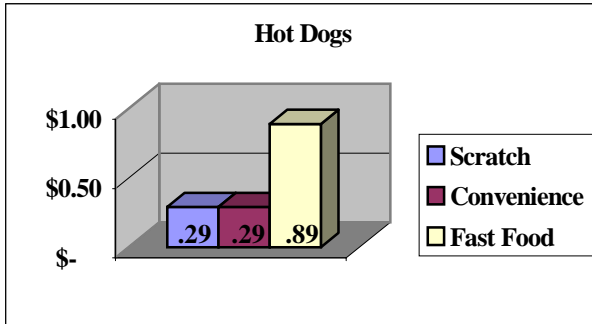
1 1/4 cup flour
1 Tbsp. baking powder
1 Tbsp. sugar
1 cup skim milk
1 Tbsp. vegetable oil
1 spray vegetable spray/oil

TOTAL COST: \$0.26 (6 servings)



LUNCH FOODS

cost per serving



Hot Dogs Recipe

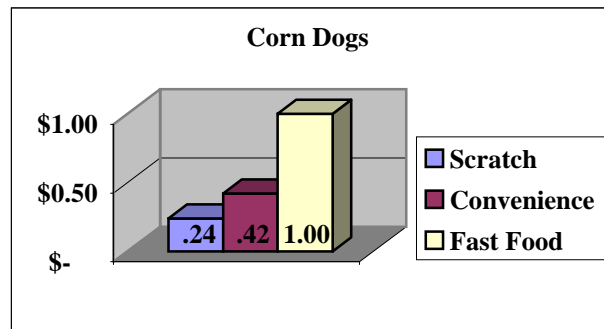
Package of 8 hot dogs
 Package of 8 buns
 4 tsp. ketchup
 4 tsp. mustard

TOTAL COST: \$2.30 (8 servings)

Corn Dogs Recipe

Package of 8 hot dogs
 2/3 cup flour
 1/2 Tbsp. baking powder
 1/2 cup cornmeal
 1 egg
 2 Tbsp. shortening, melted
 1/2 cup milk

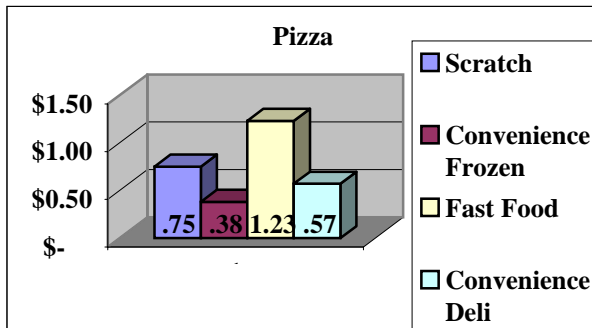
TOTAL COST: \$1.93 (8 servings)



Pizza

1/2 lb. ground beef
 1 tsp. oregano
 2 cups Master Mix
 1/2 c skim milk
 1 can pizza sauce (10 oz)
 1 cup corn
 1 can mushrooms
 1/2 cup Mozzarella Cheese shredded

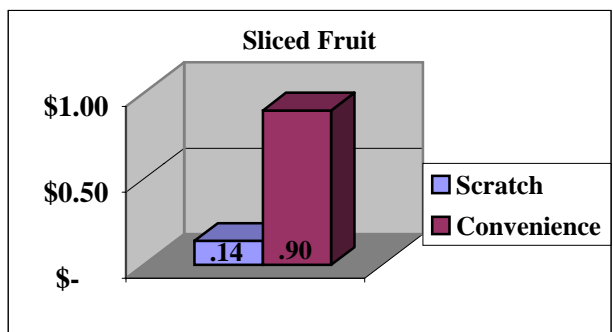
TOTAL COST: \$4.50 (6 servings)



Sliced Fruit

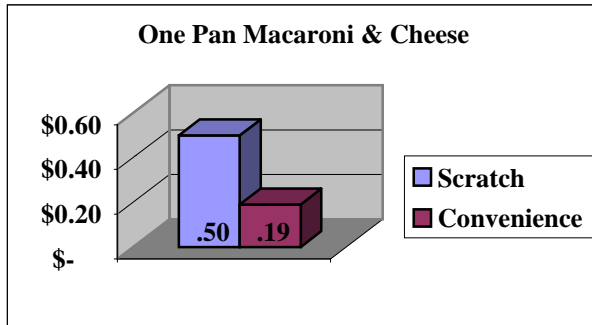
1 fresh Apple
 1 fresh Orange

TOTAL COST: \$0.57 (4 servings)



LUNCH FOODS

cost per serving



One Pan Macaroni & Cheese

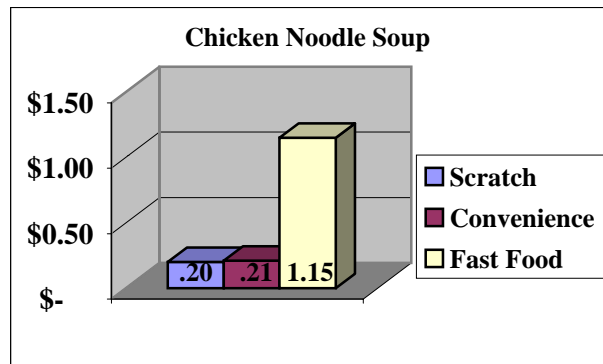
- 1 cup non-fat dry milk powder
- 8 oz cheese
- 3 cups macaroni, cooked

TOTAL COST: \$3.01 (6 servings)

Chicken Noodle Soup Recipe

- 4 cubes bouillon
- 2 cups chicken chunks
- 1/2 cup noodles
- 1/2 tsp. basil
- 1/2 tsp. oregano
- 1/4 tsp. pepper

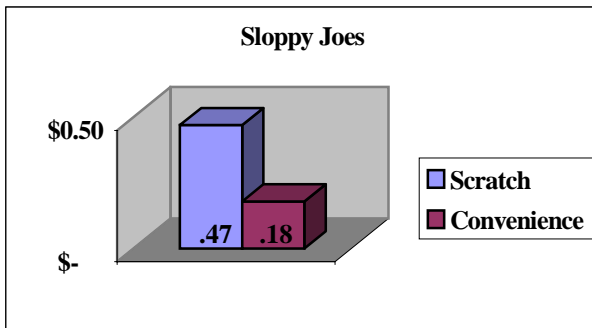
TOTAL COST: \$3.18 (16 servings)



Sloppy Joe Recipe

- 1 lb. ground beef
- 1/2 cup onion chopped
- 1 can tomatoes (7.5 oz)
- 2 Tbsp. quick oats
- 1 tsp. chili powder
- 1 tsp. Worchester sauce
- 6 hamburger buns

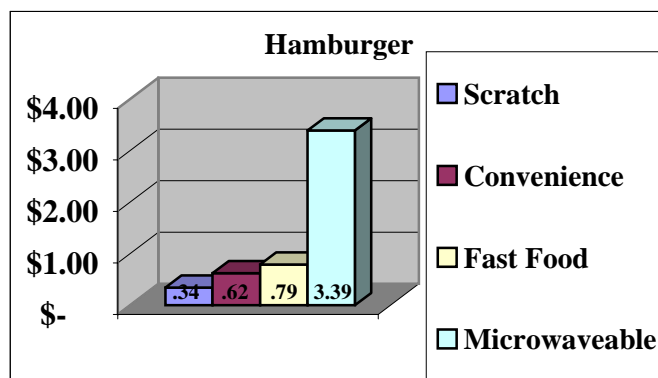
TOTAL COST: \$2.82 (6 servings)



Hamburger Recipe

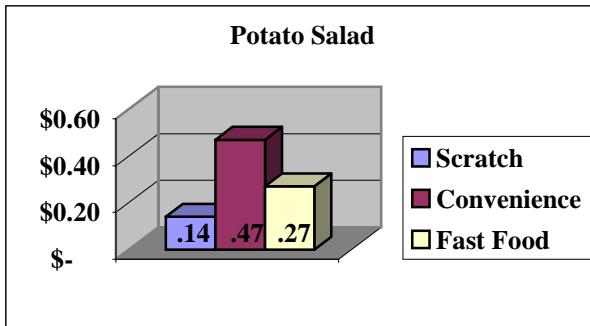
- 1 lb. ground beef
- 1/2 head lettuce
- 1 large tomato
- 4 Tbsp. ketchup
- 4 tsp. mustard
- 8 hamburger buns

TOTAL COST: \$2.74 (8 servings)



LUNCH FOODS

cost per serving



Potato Salad Recipe

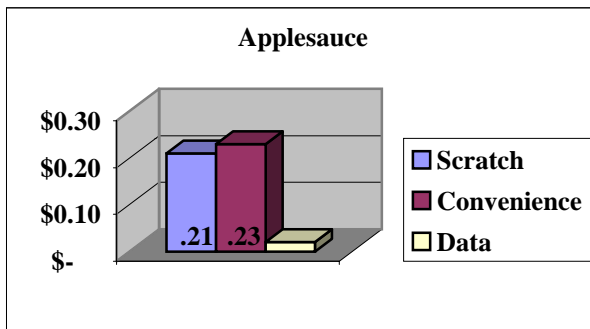
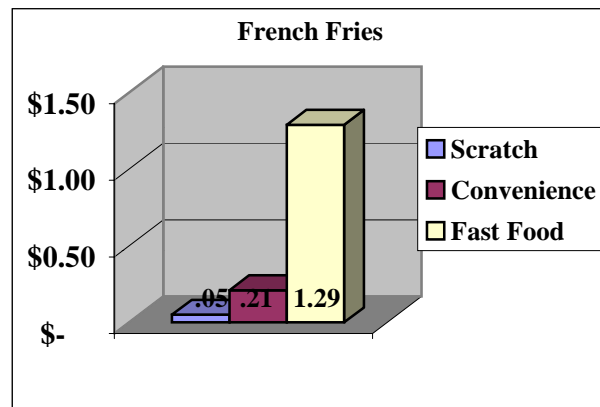
- 6 medium potatoes
- 6 hard cooked eggs
- 1/2 cup pickles
- 1 1/4 cup mayonnaise
- 4 tsp. mustard

TOTAL COST: \$1.68 (12 Servings)

French Fries Recipe

- 4 potatoes
- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil

TOTAL COST: \$0.30 (6 Servings)



Applesauce Recipe

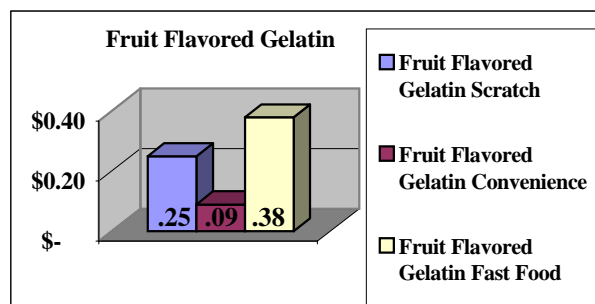
- 7 apples
- 1/4 cup sugar

TOTAL COST: \$2.12 (10 servings)

Fruit Flavored Gelatin

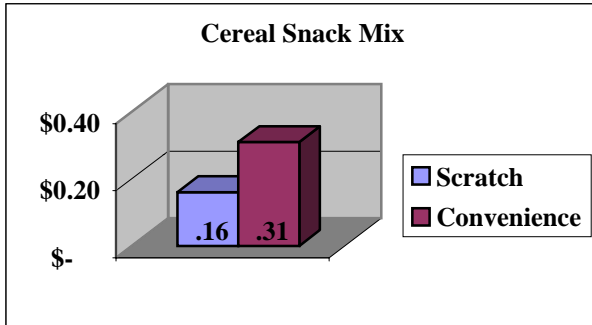
- 1 cup 100% fruit juice
- 1 pkg. gelatin (flavored or not)
- 1 cup juice

TOTAL COST: \$0.98 (4 servings)



LUNCH FOODS

cost per serving



Cereal Snack Mix

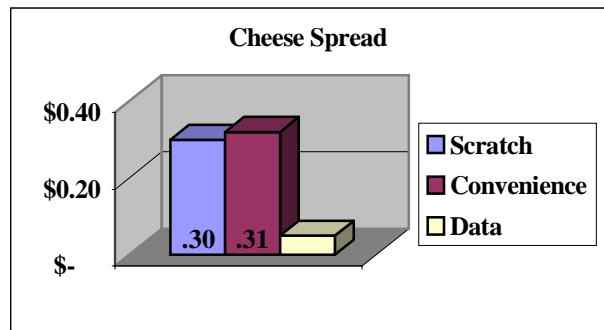
1/4 cup margarine
3 cups assorted Chex cereals

TOTAL COST: \$0.98

Cheese Spread

1 lb. American processed cheese
1 can evaporated skim milk (12 oz)
1 1/2 tsp. dry mustard
1 egg

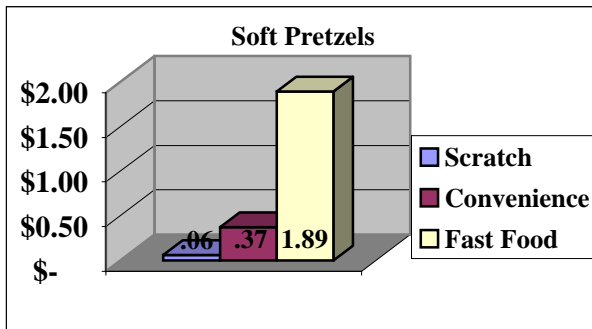
TOTAL COST: \$4.22 (14 servings)



Cheese Spread

1 pkg. yeast
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. sugar
4 cups flour
1 spray vegetable oil spray
1 egg

TOTAL COST: \$0.71 (12 servings)



Soft Pretzels

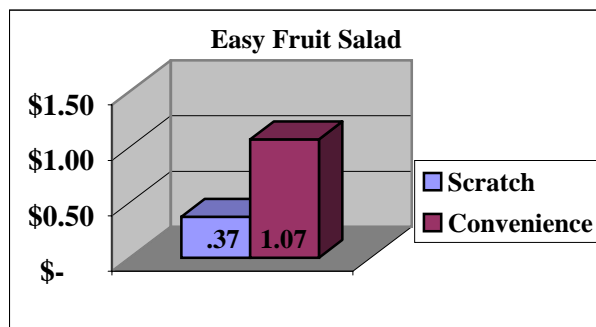
1 pkg. yeast
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. sugar
4 cups flour
1 spray vegetable oil spray
1 egg

TOTAL COST: \$0.71 (12 servings)

Easy Fruit Salad

6 apples
2 bananas
2 cups pineapple, canned
1 cup grapes

TOTAL COST: \$3.67 (10 Servings)



Easy Fruit Salad

1 pkg. yeast
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. sugar
4 cups flour
1 spray vegetable oil spray
1 egg

TOTAL COST: \$0.71 (12 servings)