

FEATURES

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How to eat well on a downsized budget

Now may be a good time to bring back the basics — the nutritious and affordable foods that have been all but forgotten by many affluent families since the Great Depression.

I'm not going to suggest a nightly diet of stone soup or the cheap fat- and sugar-rich menus of the urban poor. But many people who once gave little thought to dining on steak, lobster, asparagus, baby spinach or creme brulee are now having to spend less on just about everything, including food.

Those who have lost jobs may be able to turn some of their unwanted spare time toward the grocery and kitchen. Others, like families with two working parents or working single parents, have to carve out time to provide economical, nourishing meals.

Not only is it possible, but it can improve health and reduce girth, regardless of socioeconomic status.

A LITTLE EFFORT GOES A LONG WAY

"We need to look at real foods for real people, the foods that got us through the last depression," said Adam Drewnowski, an epidemiologist at the University of Washington's Center for Public Health Nutrition. "We must avoid the temptation to turn to cheap, empty calories — the refined grains, added sugars and added fats that give you the most calories you can get for your food dollar."

Instead, Drewnowski said, "there are many foods that are affordable and nutrient-rich and not loaded with empty calories."

And eating for good health does not have to mean eating less. "If you have equal portions of foods that are nutrient-dense, you will end up eating fewer calories," he said.

For families accustomed to eating out and ordering in, shopping for and preparing meals can take more time. According to the Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture, low-income women who work full time spend just over 40 minutes a day on meal preparation. With a little planning, another 20 or 30 minutes can provide healthy, economical fare.

Households not accustomed to home cooking may have to make small investments in kitchen equipment and ingredients that can speed food preparation and will remain useful long after the economy improves. Even families on public assistance can afford the foods discussed below to make recipes like those posted with this column at nytimes.com/health. And no one need go hungry.

VALUE-ADDED FOODS

To assess which foods provide the best value of balanced nutrients for less money, Drewnowski said, "we need to calculate nutrients per calorie and nutrients per dollar and make those foods part of the mainstream diet."

Researchers at the State University of New York at Buffalo who studied families in a program for overweight children found that basing the family diet on low-calorie, high-nutrient foods not only improved the health of the entire family but also reduced the amount spent on food.

One myth to dispel is that fruits and vegetables must be fresh to be nutritious. Not only do canned and frozen versions usually cost less and require less preparation, but nutrient value is as good or better and less food is wasted. Fresh produce is often harvested before it is fully ripe and so comes to the consumer with fewer than optimal nutrients. But fruits and vegetables that are canned or frozen are picked at the peak of ripeness. There is more vitamin C in a glass of orange juice made from frozen concentrate than in freshly squeezed juice.

So let's welcome back to the table meals made from potatoes, eggs, beans, low-fat or nonfat yogurt and milk (including reconstituted powdered milk), carrots, kale or collards,

Basing a family's diet on low-calorie, high-nutrient foods can not only improve the health of the entire household — it can also reduce the amount of money spent on groceries

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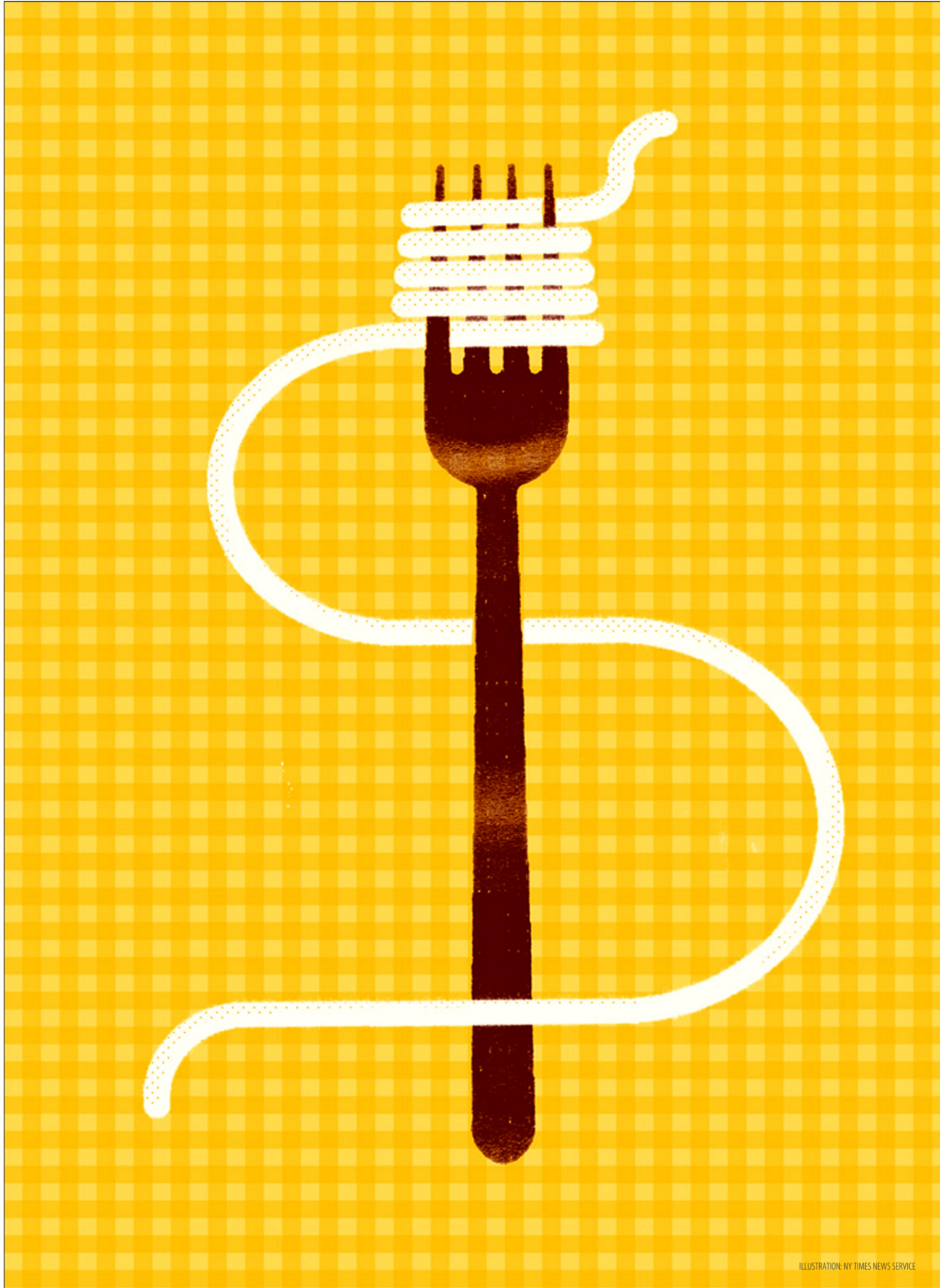


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onions, bananas, apples, peanut butter, almonds, lean ground beef, chicken and turkey, along with canned or frozen corn, peas, tomatoes, broccoli and fish. For nutrient-dense beverages, Drewnowski suggests 100 percent fruit juice blends and fruit-and-vegetable juice blends.

To his suggestions I would add pasta and rice (the whole-wheat kinds cost just a fraction more), which can be a base for many quick, nutritious meals. Combining leftover vegetables and meat or poultry with a pot of pasta or rice takes just minutes, and has the added benefit of reducing potential waste.

For dessert, try frozen yogurt or low-fat ice cream topped with seasonal fruit for the best nutrient-to-calorie ratio and value.

POTATOES: ONE OF THE GOOD GUYS

Some perfectly good foods have been unfairly smeared by a broad brush. Potatoes are an example, deplored by nutrition advocates for how they are most often consumed — fried and heavily salted — and by the low-carb set for their high glycemic index.

In fact, potatoes are highly versatile, they are easily prepared in many delicious ways with little or no added fat, and they are nearly always consumed with other foods, which greatly reduces their effect on blood sugar. And they are nutritious. A 140g potato provides just 100 calories, for which you get 35 percent of a day's recommended vitamin C, 20 percent of the vitamin B6, 15 percent of the iodine, 10 percent each of niacin, iron and copper, and 6 percent of the protein.

Try potatoes baked, boiled or steamed and topped with low-fat yogurt or sour cream seasoned with your favorite herbs or spices.

Beans, whether prepared from scratch (soaked overnight and then cooked) or taken from a can, are a low-cost nutritional powerhouse. They are low in fat, rich sources of B vitamins and iron, and richer in protein than any other plant food. When combined in a meal with a grain like rice (preferably brown), bulgur or whole-wheat bread, the protein quality is as good as that of meat.

Cabbage, too, gives you more than your money's worth of nutrients, including vitamin C and potassium, at only 17 calories a cup eaten shredded and raw, 29 calories a cup when cooked. Collards are high in vitamins A and C, potassium, calcium (cup for cup, on a par with milk), iron, niacin and protein, and yet low in sodium and calories. Kale has only 43 calories a cup when cooked.

In the fruit category, it's hard to beat apples for year-round, economical, nutritious and versatile fare that can be a part of any meal or served as a snack or dessert (as in baked apples). Bananas are also handy; even when overripe, they can be mashed and used to make banana bread or a smoothie.

Here are some other tips for busy cooks concerned about nutrition and cost:

- Buy family-size packages of meat or poultry; divide them up and freeze meal-size portions, labeled and dated.
- Choose the less expensive store brands of canned and frozen produce.
- Use powdered reconstituted milk for cooking.
- Cook in batches, enough for two or more meals, and freeze single portions for lunch.
- Use meat, poultry and fish as a condiment, in small amounts added to main-dish salads, soups and sauces.
- Try main-dish soups and salad for filling yet low-calorie meals. Soups can also be made in large amounts and frozen.
- Consider buying a slow cooker for efficient, one-dish meals.

[THE WEEKENDER]

A fallen angel and reflections of Leonard Cohen

The Taiwan International Festival continued its run of impressive productions with Philip Glass' 'Book of Longing' and Compania Nacional de Danza's 'Alas'

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
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STAFF REPORTERS

One of the most highly anticipated events of the Taiwan International Festival (台灣國際藝術節), *Book of Longing*, a song cycle by Philip Glass based on the 2006 book of the same name by artist Leonard Cohen, opened to a full house at the National Concert Hall in Taipei on Saturday.

The audience ranged widely over age and style of dress, suggesting that this collaboration between two highly unconventional artists had managed to appeal widely across the social spectrum. Although Leonard Cohen was not himself among the performers, his voice and his words were a powerful aspect of the diverse and not-easily categorizable musical program.

The performance is subtitled "A New Work by Philip Glass Based on the Poetry and Images of Leonard Cohen," and it would have been nice if the images could have played a larger part, or simply been larger. As it was, Cohen's wonderful images seemed merely to accessorize the musical presentation, in a slideshow rather unimaginatively

enlivened with various computer effects.

This is the only complaint that can be made of a production that was in every other respect outstanding. Apart from the music itself, there was an elegance and urbanity of the musicians and singers that would have done Cohen the ladies' man proud. The performers were certainly as important as the music, with individual musicians coming forward for solos at different points in the program, drawing the audience in not just with the sound, but with their physical presence as well. A solo by cellist Wendy Sutter was particularly captivating.

The four singers, Dominique Plaisant, soprano, Tara Hugo, mezzo, Will Erat, tenor and Damiel Keeling, bass, wandered on and off stage in an apparently haphazard manner, and through simple movements and interaction provided a minimalist dramatic backdrop for the concert.

Philip Glass' *Book of Longing* provides an aural complexity that works effectively against the ambiguities and swoops from transcendent speculation about life and love to the banalities and discomfort of the same in Cohen's poetry. The production might have been



Members of Spain's Compania Nacional de Danza rehearse last Thursday for their performance of *Alas* at the National Theater in Taipei.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NITC

made a tad more accessible, both for Taiwanese and foreign audiences, by the presence of subtitles, even if these were just the English text. Cohen's poetry is at turns dense and rambling, and a readable text, above or at either side of the stage, would have been an aid

to comprehension for those unable to pick up all the words amid the musical setting. But the audience on Saturday certainly seemed to feel it had got its money's worth simply from the presence of the great musical maestro in Taipei. Compania Nacional de Danza's

production of *Alas* opens with a black-clad angel slowly climbing down a cubist tower to join the humans on earth, and ends with the humans climbing the tower to heaven while Damiel, the fallen angel, writhes in a pool of water on the floor.

In between there were some heavenly passages and duets, lyrical and light, a lot of running, and one hellish sequence with men in black leather kilts, women in black leggings and bandeau tops, lots of boots, and a harsh electronic score. However, the 70-minute ballet seemed to pass in no time at all and at the end, I remembered the good parts, not the bad.

Since my Spanish never got much beyond the "¿Dónde está la biblioteca?" stage and my Chinese reading is not up to Peter Handke's metaphysical musings in his screenplay for Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, I felt free to concentrate on the dancers and the staging and ignore both the whisperings of artistic director and choreographer Nacho Duato as Damiel and the Chinese translations on either side of the stage.

For the most part *Alas* worked. The staging was minimal and the lighting frequently organic, with dim glows

coming from stage right so that the shadows of the dancers were projected onto the large screen at stage left. The water ballet at the end was beautiful, especially the unintended reflection of the water onto the ceiling of the National Theater, which made looking up give you the feeling that heaven and earth had been reversed.

While Damiel was sans wings, costume designer Angelina Atlagic thoughtfully left large slits in the back of his coat (and his T-shirt) where wings could have been attached. But while Duato amply conveyed the physical struggles of a heavenly creature torn by his desire for mortality, the reasons for this desire were less clear. In the film, Damiel wanted to join the woman he loved. In *Alas*, the woman appeared to be an afterthought.

I had expected some grand pas de deux. What you got was Damiel as a watcher, not a doer.

The 52-year old Duato, however, has retained the suppleness he was famed for in his younger days, and while I'm sure he could tell the difference, there were probably few in the audience on Saturday who would have been able to discern his age from the way he danced.