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FOOD

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KITCHEN CURIOUS
BLACKBERRIES
STAR IN DECADENT
DESSERT F3

ONLY IN THE AJC DINING ON A BUDGET

Great meals, low cost

Used well, inexpensive ingredients combine for instant classics.

By Daniel Neman
 St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Once again, I mysteriously failed to win the lottery.

That means one thing: back to having a food budget. But I want the food I cook to taste good, no matter how little it costs.

So this week, I set out to make a handful of great-tasting dishes that were not a strain on my wallet.

The idea was to use inexpensive ingredients, but in an artful way. I cut out pricey frills and kept to classic combinations of flavor. I made sure that I got my protein. And I cooked dishes that made me smile. They may not be fancy, but they're awfully good. Also, they're kind of fancy. One is a traditional Italian dish, one is based on a dish I saw at a wonderful restaurant, one is hearty German fare and the dessert is a traditional, all-American favorite.

Not only are they inexpensive, but they are all easy to make. In fact, the hardest part for me was figuring out how much each one cost me per serving.

I'll admit to cheating a little in this respect. I did most of my shopping at a store in my neighborhood that is noted for perfectly decent-quality food sold at particularly low prices. If you go to one of the better-known grocers, your mileage may vary. But not by much.

I bought the size of each item that I typically buy, keeping in mind that my pantry is small. For instance, I used a 4-pound bag of sugar instead of a less-expensive (per ounce) 10-pound bag, however I used a 5-pound bag of flour instead of a 2-pound bag. I prorated only the amount of each item that I used.

The results are in, and I spent no more than \$2.09 per serving on any of the dishes.

The cheapest of all was the Italian dish, spaghetti al tonno, which I served for a paltry 73 cents per serving. I wouldn't call it elegant, necessarily, but it was delicious.

The "tonno" in spaghetti al tonno means "tuna," and this particular tuna comes out of a can. That's how they serve it in Italy, too. There is nothing wrong with frugality when it tastes this good. For the sauce, you just sauté



Polenta with Kale and Garbanzo Beans (fried wedges of polenta topped with a garlic-scented mixture of wilted kale, garbanzo beans, diced tomatoes and onion) cost 98 cents per serving. COLTIER PETERSON/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/INS

garlic in olive oil and add canned tuna. The sauce comes together in less time than it takes to boil the pasta. It will be a little dry, so simply add a bit more olive oil and a dash of butter to the mixture.

No one needs to know how inexpensive it is.

I went vegetarian for my next entrée. This is the one that was inspired by a description of soup

I did't even try, the kale and garbanzo soup at Union Loafers. When I'm counting my pennies, I look to polenta. I look to polenta when I'm not counting my pennies, too, because it is so deeply satisfying that it gratifies the soul.

I particularly love polenta cut into wedges and fried. It takes more work and fills you with

more calories, but that is nothing when the result is so sublime. I fried some wedges of polenta and topped them with a garlic-scented mixture of wilted kale,

Budget continued on F2

ALSO INSIDE
 » More ways to dine on a short dime, **F2**

AJC 5:30 CHALLENGE
SKILLET LASAGNA



Easy Skillet Lasagna starts on the stove top and is finished in the oven. CONTRIBUTED BY HENRI HOLLIS

Trade the casserole dish for a skillet

Make weeknight homemade lasagna in just 30 minutes.

By Kate Williams
 For the AJC

Unless you're pulling out a block of frozen Stouffer's and zapping it in a microwave, lasagna isn't usually top of mind for a quick weeknight recipe. Even when using oven-ready noodles and pre-made marinara sauce, a fully oven-baked pasta casserole — as that is, essentially, what American-style lasagna is — will clock in at around an hour on the best days.

But there is a workaround. Move the lasagna from the oven to the stovetop and do away with careful layering and you're well on your way to a quicker, still comforting, lasagna.

Skillet pastas cooked entirely in one pan — no boiling salted water needed — saw their 15 minutes of fame in 2013, when Martha Stewart published a one-pan spaghetti and fresh tomato sauce recipe, spanning a legion of copycat recipes and, eventually, improvements to the technique. Skillet lasagna is a similar affair.

In your largest, broiler-safe skillet, water down a jar of marinara sauce so there's enough liquid in the mix to hydrate the pasta, then add oven-ready lasagna sheets, broken into pieces so they'll fit, then cover and simmer until the noodles are tender. After

Skillet continued on F2

FROM THE MENU OF BELLINA ALIMENTARI

Espresso pasta contributes a mild coffee flavor

Bellina Alimentari
 Ponce City Market, 675 Ponce de Leon Ave., Atlanta, 404-330-9933.
 bellina-alimentari.com/v

By C. W. Cameron
 For the AJC

I can't stop thinking about the espresso pasta I enjoyed at Bellina Alimentari. It takes a minute to realize there's espresso in the pasta because the coffee flavor is not overwhelming at all, but we loved how it underscored the richness of the mushrooms in the sauce. I'd love to try making this at home. — Sandra Katz, *Decorist*

Executive chef Brandon Hughes created this pasta as a tie-in to the "Passione Italiana: The Art of Espresso" exhibit now on display at the Museum of Design Atlanta. The exhibit runs through June 9. He paired the pasta with a creamy mushroom and kale sauce.

"The earthiness of the sauce really complements the pasta's subtle coffee flavor. Since the exhibit highlights the art of Italian coffee, we thought this dish was a great representation of how to use espresso in a creative and unique way." In his instructions for the

pasta, Hughes notes that long kneading is important as you are mixing the dough.

"It develops the gluten in the flour and prevents the dough from tearing apart later on. Dust your work surface with flour as you're kneading to keep the dough from becoming sticky."

Semolina flour is widely available these days in grocery and natural food stores that carry alternative flours.

Double zero (00) flour is harder to come by and you may need to order it online. (If all else fails, try making the pasta with cake flour. It works, although the texture will be a bit different.)

If you're interested in making pasta at home but want some hands-on instruction, try one of Bellina's Pasta 101 classes offered each month.

Is there a recipe from a metro Atlanta restaurant you'd like to make at home? Tell us and we'll try to get it. We'll also test it and adapt it for the home kitchen. Because of volume, we can't answer all inquiries. Send your request, your address and phone number to fromthemenue@gmail.com and out "From the menu of" and the name of restaurant in the subject line.

BELLINA ALIMENTARI'S ESPRESSO PASTA
 ¾ cup unbleached, unenriched semolina flour
 ¾ cup unbleached, unenriched double zero (00) flour
 1 tablespoon ground espresso
 2 teaspoons cocoa
 2 eggs
 Salt

On a large work surface, make a pile of the semolina flour, 00 flour, espresso and cocoa. Stir together and form a well in the middle. Break eggs into the well.

Using a fork, whisk the eggs gently, gradually incorporating flour from the sides of the well. When mixture becomes too thick to mix with a fork, begin kneading with your hands.

If needed, add small amounts of water (no more than a tablespoon) until all the flour can be incorporated. The dough will be very sticky at the beginning.

After about 4 minutes of kneading, it will become more elastic and smooth. Knead for 3 more minutes to reach maximum elasticity and firmness. Roll the dough into a ball, wrap tightly with plastic wrap and allow to rest 20 to 30



CONTRIBUTED BY CORA PURSLEY

minutes. Dust work surface with flour. Divide dough into four pieces and begin to roll out. With each roll, give the dough a quarter turn and keep working until the dough is about the thickness of a playing card. Cut the pasta into strips as desired and lightly dust with flour to keep strips from sticking to each other.

Bring a large saucepan of salted water to a boil. Add pasta and cook 2 to 3 minutes. Pasta is ready when it floats to the top of the water. Drain and toss directly into a skillet with your preferred sauce. Makes 6 cups. Per ½ cup (72 calories). Percent of calories from fat: 12, 9 grams protein, 13 grams carbohydrates, 1 gram fiber, 1 gram fat (trace saturated fat), 35 milligrams cholesterol, 10 milligrams sodium.