

# Supermarket SMARTS

Tips and tools to make grocery shopping faster, easier, and cheaper

Call it Coupon Queen Syndrome. You meticulously clip and print out coupons and you never, ever forget your loyalty card when you go to the store. But you're constantly dogged by a nagging feeling that you could be saving even more. Well, this story is for you, Coupon Queens. Even if you're not a fanatic, we promise you'll find some interesting and easy new ways to cut your grocery bill.

To uncover hidden ways to save, we dug up the latest phone apps and website tools that not only help you find more coupons and special deals but also save you time and help you find the best stuff at the store. (If you don't already own a smart phone, you'll want to buy one after you read this story!) We also interviewed expert shoppers about their tricks

for saving in every aisle of the supermarket.

Last, we deployed our secret weapon—our army of mystery shoppers—to check prices on more than a dozen popular everyday items, including Wheat Thins, Eight O'Clock coffee, Bounty paper towels, Tide detergent, and Hefty garbage bags. (All the items in this story are top-rated products from tests we've done in the past year. So if you missed any issues, you can check out some of our latest faves.) Our shoppers went to Targets, Walmarts, and supermarkets across the country to find out where you can get the best deals. We also checked prices at Amazon.com and other sites that sell groceries to see whether you can buy them for less online. (See page 34 for the results.) So read up before you head to the store!

ILLUSTRATIONS: DAVE WHEELER



# New ways to save

3 CUTTING-EDGE STRATEGIES THAT SLASH YOUR BILL

New phone apps and websites are making it easier than ever to do your grocery shopping. You can use them to scan special deals and clip and carry coupons. They can also cut the time you spend wandering supermarket aisles and help you snap up the best produce. They can even save you a trip to the supermarket. Ready to save money and make shopping easier and maybe even more fun? Here are the sites and apps to use before you head out and while you're at the store—or while you shop from the comfort of your couch.



## STRATEGY

### Click around before leaving home

Keeping up with the latest grocery-shopping tools can feel like a full-time job. But we have you covered with these websites and apps. Some are new; others are great tools that have been around for a little while that you shouldn't miss.

#### MyGroceryDeals.com

Find and compare current circular specials, then create printable grocery lists with one click and print coupons for additional savings.

#### Coupons.com

This longtime site for printable coupons has some great new partnerships. Just look for links to coupons and deals at Target.com and the sites of major supermarkets, including ShopRite and A&P ([www.apfreshonline.com](http://www.apfreshonline.com), [www.foodbasicsusa.com](http://www.foodbasicsusa.com), [www.pathmark.com](http://www.pathmark.com), [www.superfreshfood.com](http://www.superfreshfood.com), [www.thefoodemporium.com](http://www.thefoodemporium.com), and [www.waldbaums.com](http://www.waldbaums.com)).

#### Mambo Sprouts

Check here for healthful recipes and coupons for organic and natural products ([www.mambosprouts.com](http://www.mambosprouts.com)).

#### Locavore

This app tells you what produce is in season locally, points you to area farmers markets, and includes recipes to cook your bounty. Don't have an iPhone? Check out Locavore's Facebook app at [apps.facebook.com/enjoy\\_locavore](https://apps.facebook.com/enjoy_locavore). **Price** iPhone, \$2.99

#### Sam's Club/Click 'n' Pull

Members of the warehouse club can place orders online, then head to the store the next day to pay and pick up.

#### Whole Foods Market Recipes

Available for the iPhone, this app searches for healthful recipes by ingredients and dietary restrictions. Type in what you have on hand and discover what you can make without a grocery run, or add what you need to a shopping list and take it to the store.

**Price** iPhone, free

#### Twitter

Follow your favorite grocery stores on Twitter for special deals. BI-LO, Food Lion, Giant Food, Trader Joe's, and PriceChopper are all tweeting; enter your local supermarkets' names at [www.search.twitter.com](http://www.search.twitter.com) to find their pages.

#### Grocery iQ

Powered by Coupons.com, this app creates grocery lists that instantly integrate the week's deals and finds related coupons, too. Bookmark frequently purchased items to automatically add them to future lists.

**Price** iPhone and Android, free

#### Shopper

This app lets you scan bar codes to create grocery lists, find sales, and even see product recalls. Now available for BlackBerry and iPhone.

**Price** BlackBerry, free; iPhone, 99 cents

## STRATEGY

### Use your phone

These mobile tools make saving at the store easy. The CardStar mobile app, which stores your loyalty cards electronically, is also a good time-saving tool.

#### CompareMe

This app is a great tool for figuring out which product and which size package offers the biggest bang for your buck. So you don't have to scan unit prices and do math on the fly. You can also calculate discounts. **Price** iPhone, \$1.99

#### Unit Price Compare

Similar to CompareMe, but for Android

phones, this app helps you compare prices.

**Price** Android phones, free

#### Zavers

Get mobile coupons even if you don't have a smart phone. Sign up and receive text messages with coupon info for use at A&P network stores. To redeem a coupon, just respond to the text, and the coupon will be added to your loyalty-program card.

#### Target Mobile Text Alerts

Your smart phone is now a digital coupon book: Just opt into the free program at [www.target.com/mobile](http://www.target.com/mobile) (or go to [m.target.com](http://m.target.com) or text "COUPONS" to 827438)



and you'll get a monthly message with exclusive deals. The cashier scans the bar code right on the phone.

#### Cellfire

Nothing to clip! Just search for coupons on your phone and add them directly to your loyalty-program cards.

#### Verizon Spend Smart

Verizon phone (and TV) customers can register at [www.vzspendsmart.com](http://www.vzspendsmart.com) with their loyalty-card info. You can choose coupons on your phone and transfer the savings to your loyalty card.

#### Google Shopper

Want to know whether the price on that cereal is the best around? Scan the bar code, train the camera on the label, or say the product name, and this new app for Android phones will tell you how much it costs at various online stores. Its voice recognition is very good, and it's better at scanning food items than many other bar-code scanners (also works on nonfood items). Bummer: It often gave bulk prices rather than prices for regular-size products.

**Price** Android phones, free

## STRATEGY

### Shop from your couch

Whether you're tired of trolling supermarket aisles or just need a hand during crazy weeks, there are lots of ways to get groceries delivered to your door. Even Sears is testing a new program. But most services don't sell perishables in all areas, and they all can cost a lot extra.

Some cool trends in online grocery delivery: Many national sites, including Netgrocer.com and Amazon.com, have added organic sections. And at ShopOrganic you can choose vegan, raw, gluten-free, or kosher, among

other categories.

You can also skip the fees—and car loading—that go with warehouse stores and have bulk grocery items delivered by BuytheCase.net, which has a large organic section. Also check out My Brands, which is a great source for hard-to-find, regional, and seasonal products.

Online grocery delivery is also a great way to find food from other countries. For example, eFoodDepot.com has everything you can imagine, all in one place. Go to [www.smartlifelog.com](http://www.smartlifelog.com)



[com/100-places-to-buy-your-groceries-online](http://www.com/100-places-to-buy-your-groceries-online) for a list of great sites; we found Asian (Asian Food Grocer), Russian (RussianTable.com), and much more.

# Price scan: Everyday items

## OUR SECRET SHOPPERS REVEAL WHICH STORES HAVE THE BEST DEALS

We put together a shopping list of 18 top-rated products our labs have tested recently and had our shoppers check prices at local Targets, Walmarts, and supermarkets across the country. We also priced the products at three websites: Alice (launched last year as a place to save on paper products), Amazon.com, and Netgrocer.com (a national online supermarket). The results:

Shopping online is not the cheapest way to go. You can pay a premium of as much as 42 percent for the convenience. So which stores had the best prices? Walmart and Target were neck and neck for first place. See the results of our price scan in the scoreboard below, plus what you can save off supermarket prices at the price leader on 12 top products.

### PRICE SCOREBOARD

The number of items in our test that each store sold for the lowest price.

STORE	SCORE
Walmart	10*
Target	8*
Alice	2
Amazon.com	1
Netgrocer.com	0
Supermarkets	0

### What we learned

- Target and Walmart had the lowest prices almost every time. We saved an average of 21 percent at these stores vs. local supermarkets.
- Supermarkets were never the cheapest but never the most expensive.
- Grocery shopping online is convenient, but you'll pay more—especially at Amazon.com. So we recommend that site only for specialty and hard-to-find items. Netgrocer.com was never the cheapest, plus it charges for shipping.
- Alice is worth checking out for bulk purchases of nonfood products. Shipping is free if you buy six items.

(\*Walmart and Target were tied on three items, which were counted twice. And not all stores had all the products in all sizes.)

**Row 1:**

- 6 muffins: **SAVE 41% at Walmart**
- 16 ounces: **SAVE 28% at Walmart**
- 20 ounces: **SAVE 27% at Walmart**
- 8.1 ounces: **SAVE 18% at Walmart**

**Row 2:**

- 150 ounces: **SAVE 11% at Walmart**
- 12 ounces: **SAVE 24% at Target**
- 24 ounces: **SAVE 19% at Target**
- 21 ounces: **SAVE 26% at Target & Walmart**

**Row 3:**

- 12 ounces: **SAVE 20% at Target & Walmart**
- 64 sheets: **SAVE 21% at Alice**
- 40 bags: **SAVE 11% at Alice**
- per 10 bags: **SAVE 2% at Amazon.com**

**Callouts:**

- "This cost a whopping \$9.99 at Amazon vs. \$2 at Walmart!" (Muffins)
- "One loaf costs \$5 at Amazon.com vs. \$2.19 at Walmart!" (Wonder Bread)
- "At Netgrocer.com, the price is 42% higher!" (Tide)
- "It's almost twice the price at Netgrocer.com!" (Bounty)
- "This is the only item that was cheapest at Amazon.com" (Hefty)



## Save at the store

### AISLE-BY-AISLE TIPS TO USE NEXT TIME YOU SHOP

Sure it saves to shop with a list and pass up extras like cola and cookies. But keep an open mind as you stroll the aisles and shop for sales. Maybe you planned to make burgers, but the chicken fillets are much cheaper. The supermarket is packed with deals that aren't always hyped in the circulars. We talked to experts in the science of frugal food shopping to suss out strategies for whittling down your bill—yes, even in the goodies section!

### STOREWIDE SAVVY

Staples hit their lowest prices once every 12 weeks, says Jill Cataldo, founder of the website Super-Couponing. Browse often and you'll know when to snap up, say, cereal for \$1 instead of \$3.99 a box. Load up with enough to last three months, until the price plummets again. It takes about one 12-week cycle to master the game.

Give more store brands a try. Store-label items are often as good as brand-name products, according to our tests, and they cost about 27 percent less, on average. "They've shed their inferior, generic image," says Stephanie Nelson, founder of CouponMom.com. Kirkland Signature Organic Salsa (Costco) and Great Value Au Gratin Potatoes (Walmart) even beat big-name versions in our past taste tests. Another benefit: "Ninety-nine percent of the time store brands come with a money-back guarantee," says Phil Lempert, an industry analyst and founder of SupermarketGuru.com. So you can take back those crackers if you're not happy.

Don't forget your store rewards card. You can save 15 to 20 percent, and many of them are now tied to food-recall information. So if you've purchased a product that is recalled, the store can contact you.

- ### Produce
- Shop in season.** The best way to keep your fruit-and-veggie budget in check is to shop in season, when produce costs a third to half as much as it does when it's flown in from far away, says Michelle Jones, founder of BetterBudgeting.com. In-season fruits and veggies go for 99 cents to \$1.99 per pound, depending on the product.
  - Look for reduced-price items.** Go for overripe produce, often sold at a 50 percent discount, if you're making smoothies, salsas, or sauces. Jones says she once snagged perfectly edible but misshapen red peppers for half the usual price.
  - Watch the water weight.** Shake off the water from leafy items before bagging them, says Teri Gault, founder of TheGroceryGame.com, who got rid of a quarter-pound of water weight from a bunch of collard greens that way. Extra water not only adds to the price but also contributes to spoilage.
  - Don't waste money on overpriced convenience items.** Follow Nelson's 5-minute rule: If she can peel it or shred it in less than 5 minutes, it's not worth paying a premium for precut. (See page 37 for examples of how much convenience foods can cost.)
  - Buy in bags.** Buying bags of apples, potatoes, or onions rather than loose items will save you 25 to 50 percent.
  - Be choosy about organics.** To reduce your exposure to pesticide residue, it's best to buy organic produce. But if you're trying to save money, one strategy is to limit your organic purchases to the fruits and veggies that have the highest pesticide levels when conventionally grown (see page 12). Also, shop at farmers markets.



### Meat, poultry, and seafood

- Look for markdowns.** Meat can be marked down 50 to 75 percent as it gets closer to its use-by date. Ask the butcher when that usually occurs. At the Dominick's near Cataldo, it's every Monday. At the Kroger near Jones, prices on meat that's a day from expiring are slashed in the morning. And if Gault sees meat stamped with the next day's date, she'll ask if it can be marked down a day early. The answer is often yes. Just be sure to freeze the meat or cook it the day you buy it. And use a meat thermometer and heat it to the proper temperature. (Poultry should be cooked to 165° F; fresh beef, to 145° F; and ground meats, to 160° F.) If you're cooking for small children, elderly people, or anyone with a compromised immune system, don't take a chance with meat too close to the use-by date.
- Watch for added water.** When it comes to poultry and ham, read the labels, Lempert says. Check to see what was added. The label might say, for example, "10 percent saline solution added for flavor." Two products might seem to be the same, but you could be paying more for the water weight in one of them.
- Buy frozen fish.** Just about all seafood has been previously frozen, so stay away from the "fresh" counter and head to the frozen-seafood case, Lempert says. You can save 40 to 50 percent.



### Dairy

- Buy cheese from the dairy case.** Cheese prices can vary wildly throughout the store. A block of feta in the fancy-foods section can cost 45 percent more than a mainstream brand in the dairy case, Nelson says. Crumbled goat cheese can cost 30 percent more and Vermont cheddar, 50 percent more. Also, remember that there's a standard of identification for cheddar, Swiss, and Monterey Jack cheeses. "By law, they're processed the same way," Lempert says. "It may not be in as pretty a package or the same brand, but 60-day-old Swiss from Wisconsin is 60-day-old Swiss from Wisconsin."
- Stick to store brands.** You'll shave 20 to 40 percent off the cost of cheese, cream, buttermilk, and yogurt, Jones says. Store-brand milk, eggs, and cottage cheese tend to cost 25 to 50 percent less.
- Stock up on shredded cheese.** When it's on sale, fill your shopping cart. You can freeze it.
- Buy yogurt in bulk.** Buying large tubs saves 20 to 50 percent over purchasing single-serve cartons.
- Save on premium-priced milk.** If you want milk that's free of artificial growth hormones but can't afford to pay a premium for a carton of certified organic, look for "growth hormone-free," "rbGH-free," "rbST-free," or "no artificial growth hormones" on the label.



### Dry goods

- Take advantage of back-to-school markdowns.** The fall is a good time to look for half-off granola bars, pudding cups, fruit snacks, and other brown-bag stuffers. Stock up on soup and canned pasta sauce during September and October; flour, sugar, cake mixes, and other baking supplies when they're on sale, usually from October through the end of the year.
- Wait for post-holiday sales.** After Dec. 25 there are all kinds of crazy bargains, Cataldo says. "If you don't mind a Christmas tree plastered to your jug of cranberry juice, you can nab it for 75 to 90 percent off in January." Some items, such as vanilla and vinegar, never expire because they're fermented, which means that after Christmas \$7.99 bottles of vanilla will be going for 99 cents. Cans are often dated almost two years out, depending on the item, so it's easy to stock up during a sale. Cataldo is a fan of the website StillTasty, which tells you when you really have to toss a product.
- Track down the lowest price.** Nut prices can vary, depending on where they're shelved—in the baking aisle, the produce department, or the snack aisle. Salsa parked by the chips is probably not the lowest-price salsa in the store, and there might be cheaper, store-brand organics stocked alongside conventional foods.



### Baked goods

- Don't dismiss the day-old-bread rack.** Most loaves go for half off, Cataldo says. If you're squeamish about winding up with a stale sandwich, use the slices in recipes where freshness isn't a factor, like French toast or bread pudding.
- Try store-brand breads.** You'll save 50 percent, Nelson says. If you shop at a stand-alone bakery outlet, however, you can get brand-name goods, such as Thomas' English Muffins, for as much as 70 percent off.
- Pounce on nearly outdated pies.** If the sell-by date on pies, cakes, cookies, or muffins is that day or the next, Gault will ask for a discount, and she often gets it. Fruit pies, incidentally, freeze well for about three months.



### Deli meats and cheeses

- Shop the specials.** This is a prime place to shop by what's on sale. "If it's ham, then have ham sandwiches this week," says Cataldo, whose price benchmark for lunch meat is around \$1.99 per pound. You can freeze it, too.
- Check the prices on hand-sliced cheese.** It might be cheaper than the packaged kind. Nelson once saw presliced American cheese for \$10 a pound; the same cheese cost \$4.99 a pound hand-sliced.
- Skip deli-counter lunch meat.** It can cost 20 percent more than the packaged kind, Lempert says. Save more and buy a whole cooked ham or turkey breast for 10 to 20 percent of the price. Then ask the butcher whether he will slice it free.



### Frozen food

- Stock up on dinners.** "Stashing away on-sale lasagna and pizzas is a good investment because it keeps you from eating out when you're busy," says Gault, who recently snagged an 80-ounce, store-brand frozen lasagna for \$6.99.
- Wait for 2-for-1 sales.** Find the buy-one-get-one-free deals. "They have these on almost every category of frozen food at some point, from ice cream to vegetables," Cataldo says.
- Don't pass up frozen produce.** It can be 30 to 40 percent cheaper than fresh when it's out of season. And there might be less waste. With broccoli florets, for example, you're not paying for "that gigantic stump in the fresh section that you just toss," Gault says.



### Gourmet foods

- Watch for clearance items.** With the economic downturn, Cataldo has noticed that a lot of supermarkets are discontinuing some of their pricey packaged goods and putting what's left, such as artisanal breads, fancy nuts, flavored olive oils, and imported vinegars, on clearance. "As they're paring things down, those are opportunities to snap up gourmet ingredients at discount prices," she says.
- Look for specials.** Ask about the occasional, sometimes unadvertised steal. Broccoli salad could be on sale, or the store might have roasted too many chickens that are not selling. So don't bypass gourmet or convenience foods without checking for special deals.

**MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE BUTCHER** Instead of buying individual chops at the supermarket, ask the butcher to cut up a whole, on-sale rack of lamb or a pork tenderloin. The service is free, and at most stores you can easily save about 60 percent on the price of the meat.

## The cost of convenience

Slice it yourself and save!

Those sliced, cubed, and pre-prepped versions of everything from bagels to burgers that you find in the supermarket are handy, but are they worth the extra cost? We went shopping at local markets in the New York area and found that we would have spent an extra \$14, or 51 percent, on the convenience items here.

Bagels		Extra cost
whole, loose	sliced, packaged	9%
59¢ each	65¢ each	

Broccoli		Extra cost
whole	florets	63%
\$1.49/lb.	\$3.99/lb.	

Carrots		Extra cost
whole	baby	63%
\$1.49/lb.	\$3.99/lb.	

Chicken		Extra cost
whole	cut up	25%
\$1.49/lb.	\$1.99/lb.	

Feta cheese		Extra cost
whole	crumbled	63%
\$3.23/8 oz.	\$8.65/8 oz.	

Granny Smith apples		Extra cost
whole	sliced	50%
\$1.99/lb.	\$3.97/lb.	

Lean ground chuck		Extra cost
ground	patties	33%
\$3.99/lb.	\$5.99/lb.	