

My One-Month “Grocery Cleanse”

By Andrea Edmundson

Email: DowntownAndrea@gmail.com

Phone: 1.520.245.5116

SITUATION

The best thing I’ve done for myself lately was to embark on a one-month, self-imposed grocery cleanse.

I was sitting on the patio sipping coffee like I do most mornings (we live in AZ). It was Wednesday and I had just sorted through the grocery sale papers. Plus, it was “Senior Citizens Discount Day” at the grocery stores, so I was planning my list. I then thumbed through my stack of food magazines, curating more ideas for the week of meals ahead. I’m semi-retired so I actually have time to cook. Plus, I love experimenting, creative cooking, and sampling cuisines of the world. I’m a former Peace Corp Volunteer and world traveler, so my taste buds crave variety and spice. Lucky me, my husband loves to eat – everything – as well.

So, I went into the kitchen and looked in my fridge and freezer. Hmm. Not much room. This was my first clue to having an issue. The cheese & meat drawer was still full after my bonanza vacation in Wisconsin last month – just 7 varieties of cheese but hey, I only get to WI every few years.

The bottom drawers were still full of veggies left from last week’s CSA share (community supported agriculture) and from my POWWOW share. I’m not sure if POWWOW (Produce on Wheels Without Waste) is local but basically, you get 70 pounds of seasonal produce for \$12. Yup, how can you go wrong? Here’s an example. My friend Nan and I will often share the produce. Two weeks ago, her text said: “Your half: 2 honeydew, 3 spaghetti squash, 18 tomatoes, 9 mangos, 1 butternut squash.” Now, that’s *my* share (\$6), for just me and my husband Victor. A week later, her text read: “Your take: 4 bags cherry tomatoes, 7 regular tomatoes, 3 box white mushrooms, 2 summer squash, 4 butternut, 2 spaghetti, lots of limes, 2 mangos.” Get the picture? No shortage of veggies around our house. But hey, right? My half only cost Six dollars!

The regular fridge shelves contained a few left overs (whew, at least that’s not a problem when you have a husband who takes his lunch to work every day but I had a lot of ‘remnants’ from other recipes: Almost a gallon of whole milk that I used to make mint ice cream, homemade pasta sauce from, of course, last week’s abundance of tomatoes, six types of beers left by guests, etc. You get the picture.

I also had veggie by-products like broth and pickled green beans. And lastly, the fridge door was overflowing with condiments; not just mayo or 3 types of salad dressings and 3 mustards (does this sound like you?), but an international assembly of sriracha, hoisin, tamari, tapatio, and go-chu-jang. Hmm, now I understand my mother’s look of consternation...

The freezer was full of not only meat, but the veggies that I froze from the previous month of overabundance (Hatch chiles, green beans, garbanzos), as well as tortillas (corn and flour-I’m well prepared), snacks like the Costco size bag of edamame, phyllo dough, shredded cheese(s), a few leftovers (T-bone and baked potato from big restaurant meal) and more.

I started rethinking my sanity and my grocery list, so I took a deeper look...

The pantry! Really, it is not that big, but I had full shelves of

- Baking ingredients (not just flour but gluten free varieties, nuts (3 Costco bags of almonds, pecans, and walnuts), dried raisins AND craisins, Abuela's chocolate for Mexican mole, chia seeds, 3 syrups (molasses, Karo, and Yacon – yeah, look that one up!) garbanzo flour, ground flax, and others – I'm a huge fan on Nuts.com), ingredients like cinchona bark and lavender for homemade tonic water. Okay, even as I write, I start to question my sanity even more...
- Staples like brown rice, lentils, dried pinto beans (we are in Tucson, after all...Mexican food is a standard) and oh, spring roll wrappers, dried coconut powder (I never had coconut milk on hand when I want to make Thai food), 3 bags of dried garbanzo beans (because they were on sale, for Pete's sake, and I have an Instant Pot, so I can handle it.)
- Three revolving turntables of spices but all nicely labelled, from anise to zaatar.
- Staples like tomato sauce (which I'd 'won' in the grocery Monopoly Game – a lot), peanut butter *and* almond butter, maple syrup (what, more?), 2 types of honey, canned black cherries, tuna, canned wax beans, and again, more.
- Almost forgot the top shelf: Crackers, oatmeal, popcorn, gravy and sauce mixes (another 'winning' from the Monopoly game), breakfast cereal and granola (a Christmas gift).

What can I say? Right then, I declared a one-month grocery cleanse during which I would not buy ANY more food (except for my CSA veggie share). No condiments, no staples, no bread, no nothin' as my Wisconsin family would say. It's obvious that I've over-bought and under-used. Many items were just getting cycled to the back of the shelves, overshadowed by new ones. It was time to get serious – my own personal intervention – and to act. Action became my goal: Empty the pantry, the freezer, and the condiment door in the fridge by not shopping for groceries for one month.

The likelihood of us going hungry appeared slim. I had a good assortment of frozen meats: chicken, salmon, chuck roast, flank steak, lamb, chicken breast, pork chops, even Tofu. I had the pantry of ingredients, grains/beans, and baking supplies, from basic to bizarre (as my mother would say). I received a fresh bundle of produce weekly. So how did it go?

PROGRESS

By late week three (minus 3 days out of town for a holiday weekend) of my grocery cleanse, I am proud to say I had not made a single food purchase in that time. However, the time did not pass without some challenges.

First, I constantly tempted myself to buy more groceries by reading cooking magazines all the time. But, while it was a challenge to not buy new foods, it became a bigger challenge to make the meals I wanted ONLY from the ingredients I had on hand. That led to many creative modifications. For example, I didn't have any tomato paste for my osso bucco recipe. Instead, I used the previous day's roast beef gravy to thicken the sauce. And (this is really stretching), the next day, I defrosted my left-over T-bone steak and mixed it into the osso bucco, so we'd have another day's worth of stew. Yay, two products gone!

I converted a can of wax beans, a nostalgic purchase from childhood in the Midwest, to an afternoon snack. Here's the trick: Just chill them and put them in an attractive bowl in a strategic location like the kitchen island. People just eat them as they walk by. If you had said to someone, hey how about some

nice chilled wax beans for a snack, no one would say yummy. But put them there...and they will disappear.

That milk left over from ice cream? I learned to make ricotta and it was great!

That abundance of spaghetti squash (that my husband hates)? Cooked it, pureed it in the food processor, added spices and butter and baked it. I called it vegetarian polenta and it was wonderful!

I had a lot of plain Greek yogurt but no more honey or fruit: I discovered that maple syrup on yogurt is quite satisfying. My next project is to cook the jar of black cherries (that were originally destined to become homemade Maraschino cherries until I determined it was too pricey) into another yogurt topping. My husband is a captive audience for some of my experiments because he takes his lunch to work every day and he doesn't open until he gets there. He gamely eats everything although he did protest when he got a mishmash of leftovers – beef, pork, and chicken – one day.

My most eye-opening creation? I wanted to make pumpkin muffins from my current issue of Eating Well magazine, so I could use up last winter's oatmeal and pumpkin, but I had run out of eggs the week before. I googled 'egg replacement' and guess what? I could use my chia seeds mixed with water to replace one egg in the recipe and some oil for the other. That was already a cool discovery (and the muffins were moist and delish), but the chia website led me to more findings: You can make chocolate chia pudding! I now plan to grind up the Abuelita's chocolate for this desert instead of making (multi-stepped) homemade mole! Score again!

I had a few failures...well, not completely because we still ate the food, but it didn't turn out like I'd hoped. I tried to make pecan tarts with the phyllo dough. I mixed chopped pecans with Karo syrup and butter (yum, right?). I layered the phyllo with butter and wrapped the layers around the filling and baked it, but it was just too dry. We had to drink twice as much wine to wash them down! And, let's face it, phyllo is a pain to work with.

I had some major successes, as well, because I discovered great new recipes. I cooked tomato and summer squash pie with quinoa crust for a savory breakfast, oven-roasted cherry tomatoes as a simple and delicious side dish (and I used all four bags!) and a zucchini-based gazpacho for a light summer dinner – cooked it, pureed it, added spices and some finely chopped veggies. An unintentional success was that I created another dish that hides a veggie that Victor doesn't like - zucchini.

In addition to cooking creatively, this whole cleansing also generated a few new behaviors. For instance, I now set aside the food sale papers because I still have plenty to eat. For this month's senior citizens discount, I only bought non-grocery items like TP and laundry soap (although I was perturbed that my receipt showed one grocery item – I bought a gallon of vinegar, BUT I use it for cleaning not eating). And rats, that reminds me, I have a small cupboard of vinegars and oils...where does it end?

Also, when I went to the store, I talked myself past impulse purchases. For instance, I was craving a sandwich and I knew I didn't have bread at home... Wait, I have English muffins in the freezer! It was a perfectly acceptable substitute.

I still read my food magazines, but with an eye towards recipe adaptation instead of replication.

I'm also trying to be less organized. That's right, giving myself a break. In the past, I tried to have a fully-stocked kitchen. To that end, we have a dry erase board in the kitchen to keep a list of items to shop for.

However, I'm now consciously NOT buying anything we don't yet need or that we won't use soon. Thus, instead of my usual list of about two dozen items, there are only 4 items (so far) to buy at the end of the month-long cleanse...possibly even later! Plus, fewer shopping trips is more time for ME.

I recognized another behavior that had contributed to unnecessary stockpiling: I hate to waste food. For example, I own the cookbook, "Root to Stalk Cooking" because I know we throw away so much edible food. Believe me, we compost as well, but if I can use carrot greens to replace parsley in tabbouleh or to create a chimichurri, I do. Consequently, I stretch our veggie and fruit supply more than the average person. All of these are good habits, but need to be reconciled. Thus, once I start shopping again, I will need to reassess how *much* I really need to buy.

Another change I've made is to only pick-up my CSA share every other week, instead of weekly. I really want to exhaust my produce supply (and believe me, we do eat very 'veggie forward') before buying more. And that POWWOW thing? Even if it's a great deal, I don't always need to participate. Or, I need to split the 70 pounds with more friends. I used to tease my mom for buying things just because they were on sale or a great deal. Well, that's me too, I guess. Ouch, should I tell her?

So, what is next?

From what I see in my fridge and pantry today, I believe the cleanse may last more than one month. That's eye-opening for me. But, I'm also excited to have a fresh start and an emptier pantry. I'll be trying more new dishes and replacing some spices, too. I've enjoyed the challenges and the heightened creativity. I've changed some behaviors and learned new things. I've seen what my husband and I truly enjoy eating and what not to buy again (sorry, phyllo...you are being replaced with frozen pie crust or puff pastry). And I've consciously improved my willpower: Fewer shopping trips, items, and impulse buys.

Sometimes we waste food by getting ahead of ourselves... Too many new ideas, plenty of cupboard storage, great shelf life of today's foods, buying in bulk, buying things on sale or even at a dollar store (truly a great place for \$1 items like mushroom stems & pieces and thin pizza crust). Okay, I may still have the bargain hunter instinct, but I know that I am going to avoid this situation in the future! I recommend trying the one-month grocery cleanse. I'll let you know if it's a permanent cure.