

A Dash of Soy

and

A Splash of

Lemon

(Or, how to make a little bit of nothing taste quite good.)

Favourite frugal recipes from Penny Wise.

A Dash of Soy and a Splash of Lemon...

My friend reckons you can fix pretty much anything with soy sauce or lemon juice. At first I thought he was quite possibly mad. Many times I would watch aghast as he liberally squeezed fresh lemon into all kinds of dishes I would never have dreamed of shaking one anywhere near! But the thing was, every time he added lemon to something, it turned out good. Better than good; in fact quite often sensational. And as I've watched him cook more and more I've had to admit to myself that he's not mad after all; he just 'gets' food. As in, he understands its many different flavours and knows exactly what a dish needs to improve it. Eight times out of ten, it's soy sauce or lemon; the other two it might be sweet chilli sauce or curry paste – but he always gets it right and these days I also find myself shaking the soy sauce bottle over many a saucepan or bowl and running out to the garden to pick a lemon! I have been so grateful for this knowledge over the past 12 months when both money and food have been particularly tight. No matter how little food I have had or how plain, I have learned how to make it taste special, even fantastic, with these few things. Sometimes all you need is one simple tip passed on from one person to another, to make a huge difference.

And it is tips like this and many thousands more I have learned from Simple Savings which have helped me through the toughest year of my life both financially and personally. This wonderful site and community has been my lifeline for almost ten years now – but never more so than this last year. I honestly can't imagine what life would be like for the boys and I now without all the knowledge, skills, tips and recipes I have gained from the Vault and Forum over the years. The bank balance may not show it yet, but I feel our lives are extremely rich.

I wanted to be able to give something back as a thank you for all the support, advice and encouragement I have received from members during my first year as a solo mum. The following is a collection of recipes which have helped get me through meal times on many an occasion. Most of them I've had for years, some even since I was a small child but it's only really now they are coming into their own and I am thankful for every one of them. Some are completely made up and I'm not sure if I'm doing you a favour by inflicting them on you but if you are brave enough to give them a go, please do, I would love to hear what you think! I hope you enjoy these recipes as much as my boys and I do but most of all, I hope that perhaps one day they may just help someone else the way they've helped me.

With much love and gratitude to you all,

Penny x

Ali's Acceptable Quiche

Ali, or Alistair as he is more often known these days being a very mature 15 and all, absolutely HATES quiche. Which is a right pain at times; as any cook worth her salt knows, you can make some wonderful meals out of eggs and milk, with a few odds and ends of bacon or ham and vegies thrown in. Maybe I over-did the quiche thing too many times in \$21 Challenges, who knows, but I've tried re-naming them to 'pie', 'flan' and 'frittata' for years now and alas he is still not fooled. However, several months ago I found myself in the position of HAVING to make quiche as we really didn't have anything else. I made a basic Quiche Lorraine, except with milk rather than the traditional and more expensive cream and told Ali amidst much complaining when he asked what's for dinner, 'Mate, it's just bacon, eggs and cheese! You like all those!' And wonder of wonders, he did! So now, even though we still get complaints, we now have an acceptable quiche with no-vegies, no-cream and no other weird-quiche-like-things snuck in. It's cheap to make (even cheaper if you make your own pastry) and as Ali has found out at last, there's nothing not to like!

Ingredients:

Savoury shortcrust or flaky pastry (I cheat and use frozen sheets)
6 bacon rashers (or whatever you have, it only takes a little bacon to taste like bacon!), finely chopped
Splash of oil
3 eggs
1 onion, finely chopped
350ml milk
Large pinch salt
1 tbsp flour
1 cup grated cheese

Method:

Preheat your oven to 230°C. If using shortcrust pastry you will need to line your pie dish with the pastry and bake it blind until the pastry is golden and 'done'. If using flaky pastry ignore this part and just line your pie dish! Turn the oven temperature down to 160°C. Heat a splash of oil in a large frying pan and cook the chopped bacon until crispy. Remove from the pan and set aside, then throw the onion in the pan and cook in the bacon juices for five minutes. Beat the milk, eggs and salt together in a large bowl, then add the bacon and onion. In a separate bowl, mix the grated cheese and flour together, then add to the wet ingredients, mixing well to combine. Pour everything into your prepared pie dish and pop into the oven for 35-40 minutes, until your quiche is puffy and golden and set in the middle (if it still looks sloppy and you're not sure if it's 'done', stick a clean knife into the centre. If it comes back out clean, you're good to go!). Serve with salad and/or vegies.

'Boring' Meat Pie

Wot no vegetables?! Nope, not even an onion! Don't let the title put you off, however, this pie isn't boring at all! I've just always thought of it that way as it contains so little ingredients but out of all the meat pies I've ever made this one is always everyone's favourite! The nutmeg really makes a difference and don't leave out the soy sauce as it adds to the flavour and gives a lovely rich colour.

Ingredients:

750g minced beef (or lamb or leftover roast beef or whatever)

Splash of oil

2 beef stock cubes

1 ½ cups water

2 tbsp flour

¼ cup extra water, for thickening with flour

Large dash of soy sauce

Salt and pepper

Pinch of nutmeg

Cheese (optional – I just add some as the boys like it but you don't have to)

3 sheets puff or flaky pastry (or you can be super frugal and make your own but pastry making is one of my most detested jobs so I always try and keep some in the freezer)!

¼ cup milk for glazing

Method:

Heat the oil in a large saucepan and add the meat. Cook, stirring until browned all over. Drain off any excess fat and return the meat to the pan. Add the crumbled stock cubes, water, salt, pepper and nutmeg and stir until boiling. Reduce heat and simmer, covered for around 20 minutes. Mix your extra ¼ cup of water together with the flour and stir until smooth, then add it to the meat and keep stirring over a low heat until the mixture boils and thickens. The addition of the flour is going to make it look really quite blah, so now is the time to add a nice big dash of soy sauce to give it a colour boost! Mix well to combine and simmer another 5-10 minutes, then remove from the heat and leave to cool.

While the meat is cooling down a bit, preheat the oven to 180°C and grease your pie dish. Line the dish with whatever pastry you are using, then add the meat filling. At this stage I usually pop a few slices of cheese on top of the meat as the boys love it and it goes all lovely and melty during cooking but that's just me, you don't have to. Once you have added your cheese (or not), pop the top on and seal around the edges as usual before gently brushing with milk to give the pie a nice glaze. Place the pie in the oven and cook for 20-25 minutes until golden brown. We love this pie with a big pile of mashed spuds, green vegies and lots of gravy!

'Bung-it-in' Bolognese

Everyone has their own way of making Spag Bol. I used to be a real snob; making the purest, most authentic version I could from scratch, courtesy of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. I've made it for years and am rather proud of it if I say so myself. So I got a heck of a surprise recently when I sampled this far more unorthodox version! A friend had come to stay and I was rather embarrassed at how little food I had in the house as my weekly benefit hadn't come through yet. 'No worries, I'll cook dinner!' he said enthusiastically. A university student and self-taught cook, I had sampled many of his creations and they were always delicious so I was quite happy to let him loose in my kitchen to make Spag Bol, even if he did insist on using a jar. In went the onion, carrot and tomatoes - then to my amazement he threw in potatoes, silverbeet and goodness knows what else - whatever he could find in my fridge! What started off as a small pack of mince turned into a MASSIVE pot with tons of flavour, plenty of zing and heaps of healthy vegies. Unconventional? Yes - but it tasted amazing! Not only did the kids scoff two huge platefuls, they wasted no time in saying that his was much better than mine! Here's the basic recipe, as close as I can remember. Feel free to experiment with it as much as you like with whatever you have. I hope you enjoy it as much as we did!

Ingredients:

1 tbsp oil
500g mince (or thereabouts, whatever you have)
1 onion, chopped
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 carrot, grated (you can chop it if you like, but I liked the texture this gave the dish)
2-3 mushrooms, finely chopped
1-2 potatoes, peeled and sliced
1 courgette, finely chopped
2-3 leaves silverbeet or spinach, chopped
1-2 tins tomatoes (we ended up needing two as there was so much it got too thick!)
1 jar basic tomato pasta sauce, any kind will do
1 cup beef stock
Salt and pepper
Lemon juice (yes, really!)
Pinch of chilli flakes or chilli powder, to taste

Method:

Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat and add the mince, onion and garlic, stirring until the onion is softened and the meat is browned all over. Reduce the heat and add the rest of the vegetables, whatever you are using, stirring well with each addition. Add the pasta sauce and tomatoes, then leave to simmer gently for at least 30 minutes, preferably up to an hour. Season generously with salt and pepper and a good splash of lemon juice if desired (this really adds to the flavour, kind of works in the same way as salt but better for you!) and sprinkle in some chilli flakes to taste for some added zing. You don't have to do this if you prefer your Spag Bol flavour to be more traditional but I really liked it this way! Enjoy with a big bowl of cooked pasta. Tastes even better for lunch the next day too!

Chelsea Winter's Pork Belly with Crispy Crackling

NZ Masterchef winner Chelsea Winter and I have never met but she is definitely one of my best friends. After my marriage ended, my motivation to put a decent meal on the table suffered. This recipe was what brought it back. I had never watched Masterchef or read Chelsea's book 'At My Table' but I kept seeing people 'like' her on Facebook so checked it out. This recipe looked so mouth-watering that I couldn't get it out of my head – and I didn't even like pork! Ali on the other hand LOVES pork but there was no way we could afford his favourite roast at \$32 a kilo. However, one day I spotted a nice piece of pork belly for \$11 and decided to give my boy a treat. The result was AMAZING and now I absolutely adore roast pork done this way! I am now the proud owner of Chelsea's book and have made many wonderful dishes from it. Two things you need to know about this recipe – one, it takes a LONG time to cook but it is worth it and two – the meat is very rich cooked this way, which means a little goes a long way so plenty left over for sammies the next day, yum! Sincere thanks to Chelsea for giving me my mojo back in the kitchen and giving me permission to share this recipe. Be sure to 'like' Chelsea Winter's Facebook page as well as her website www.chelseawinter.co.nz for some wonderful free recipes. She really is a star!

Ingredients:

1-2kg pork belly
Olive oil
Salt

Method:

Preheat the oven to 130°C. Place the pork belly skin-side up on a clean chopping board and pat the skin very dry with paper towels. If the skin has not already been scored, carefully slice lines right across the belly using a sharp knife, about 1cm apart. You want to pierce through the tough skin and just go into the fat layer, not cut into the meat underneath. Scoring helps the crackling puff up later.

Place the pork belly skin side up in a roasting pan, preferably sitting on a wire rack if you have one. Drizzle a good amount of olive oil all over the whole pork belly (including the underside). Sprinkle the skin side generously with salt and massage it in. I give it a hit of cracked pepper here too. If there's any meat poking out from under the fat layer, try and tuck it under best you can so it's not exposed. Place the pork in the middle of the oven (skin side up) and cook it for four hours.

After four hours, increase the temperature to 150°C and cook for another 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, change the oven setting to 'grill' on medium-high. Move the pork belly to the top of the oven and grill the skin until it goes puffy and golden all over (it might only take a minute – watch it or it will burn!).

Transfer to a chopping board and cut into pieces to serve.

Easy Pizza

I learned how to make this yummy savoury scone type pizza before I knew how to make a 'normal' one! I like it because there's no yeast in it, so no waiting around for dough to rise and do its thing but I also really like it because it suits a variety of low-cost toppings really well – for example if I have nothing much but a tin of spaghetti in the pantry I just use that with grated cheese on the top and it tastes awesome! Like any pizza, however, you can put pretty much any toppings on, just use whatever you have and you can easily double the quantity of this recipe to make more. The cheesy-herby pastry makes a nice difference to regular pizza too!

Ingredients:

1 cup self raising flour

1 cup cheese, grated

1 tsp mixed herbs (or whatever you have – basil, oregano and marjoram all work well)

Approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ cup milk

Toppings of your choice, whatever you would normally use to make pizza or chuck on a tin of spaghetti for a kid-friendly version they love (so do adults!)

Method:

Put all your ingredients except the milk into a large bowl. Slowly add the milk and mix with your hands or a wooden spoon until you have a firm scone dough. Roll out on a floured surface to around 25cm, then pinch all around the edges to make a 'lip'. Preheat your oven to 220°C and carefully place your pizza base onto a greased baking sheet. Have fun putting all your toppings on, then pop into the oven for around 10 minutes until the base looks golden brown. Delicious!

French Shepherd's Pie

This recipe, shared on the Forum several years ago by Simple Savings member Poppet is my son Liam's absolute favourite dinner. I'm happy to make it for him as often as he likes because it contains just a few basic ingredients and is so unbelievably easy! It's the perfect example of how far you can make a little meat stretch and is also a wonderful way to use up any leftover sour cream or cream cheese in the fridge. It's a real favourite with other Simple Savings members too. Give it a go!

Ingredients:

400g-500g minced beef or lamb
6 large potatoes, cooked and mashed
Splash of oil
1 onion, chopped
2 cloves (or 2 tsp) garlic, crushed
250g sour cream (or cream cheese – or however much you have, less is fine)
Handful of grated cheese
Large pinch mixed herbs (preferable but not essential)

Method:

First, bring a large pot of potatoes to the boil and cook until tender. Drain and mash and set aside. Next, put your oven on to 180°C to warm up. Heat the oil over medium heat in a separate saucepan. Throw in your onions and garlic and sizzle gently for a few minutes until softened. Add your mince and brown all over, stirring frequently. Then add the mince and onion mixture to your cooked, mashed potatoes. Mix together well, then add your sour cream (or cream cheese) and mix well again – don't worry if it looks a bit runny! Pour everything into a large, rectangular dish and sprinkle the grated cheese over the top. Scatter your mixed herbs over the top to finish, if using. Pop in the oven for 20-30 minutes until golden on the top. Serve with vegetables or salad. So simple, yet so delicious!

Garden Café Vegetable Lasagne

This recipe originally comes from a lady called Anne Goodin who still lives in the tiny farming community where I used to live. A very active community member, Anne was forever being asked for plates, baking and catering for all kinds of local events. Several years ago our local Lions club put together a fund raising cookbook. When we approached Anne to see if she would like to donate a recipe, she immediately knew which one she would pass on – the same one she was ALWAYS getting asked for, her vegetable lasagne! There are two things I love about this recipe; the first is that it is really cheap for me to make as I have so many of the ingredients growing in my garden (I often use fresh tomatoes when I have a glut instead of a tin). The second is the flavour, it's incredible! Many a big, burly farming bloke has been fooled at pot luck dinners into thinking they're eating a regular meat lasagne as the dish is so flavoursome, they can't tell its vegetarian! Even my kids haven't realised it doesn't contain any meat and wolf it down. Adapt it to include or omit pretty much whatever you like; you can't really go wrong!

Ingredients:

- 3 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 large onion, roughly chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 2 cups grated carrot
- 2 courgettes, chopped
- 1 red or green pepper, chopped
- ½ cup sliced mushrooms
- 2 cups chopped silverbeet, frozen spinach or tinned spinach
- 400g tin tomato puree
- 400g tin peeled tomatoes in juice, chopped
- 1 tbsp brown sugar
- 1 tbsp dried basil
- 1 ½ tsp dried mixed herbs
- 3 tbsp chopped parsley
- 1 ½ cups water
- 400g lasagne pasta
- 3 cups white sauce (50g butter, 6 tbsp flour, 3 cups milk)
- 1 cup grated tasty cheese

Method:

Heat the oil in a large, heavy based saucepan and add onion, garlic and carrot. Cook, stirring, until vegetables are soft. Add courgettes, pepper, mushrooms and silverbeet as they are prepared, then tomatoes, seasonings and water. Simmer for at least an hour. Season to taste with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Grease a 30cm x 20cm baking dish, about 5cm deep. Spread a little sauce on base, cover with a pasta sheet trimmed to fit. Cover with 2-3 cups sauce, then pasta, sauce and so on, ending with pasta. Top with white sauce and grated cheese, being careful not to overfill dish. Cook 45-50 minutes at 160°C. Leave to settle 10-15 minutes before serving. Reheats well for lunches the next day too!

Gerry's Spinach Quiche

When I left home at 19 I barely knew how to cook anything other than scrambled eggs. Mind you, I didn't eat much more than that either, I was a dreadful fusspot! Noel and I lived with a farming bachelor who was 10 years older than us and I learned how to cook by raiding his recipe books and experimenting with dishes while they were out on the farm. Many of his recipes were handed down from his mother and this was one of them. I like this recipe because it only uses a few basic ingredients but has a wonderful flavour. I use silverbeet from the garden to make it, so it's really economical for me and makes a big quiche. Funnily enough, many people tell me they don't like quiche, but they always seem to like this one!

Ingredients:

3 eggs
2 cooked, diced potatoes
1 cup cooked spinach or silverbeet
1 cup milk
½ cup flour
½ tsp baking powder
1 cup grated cheese
1 onion
2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 tbsp butter

Method:

First, cook your potatoes and spinach. While they're cooking, beat the eggs with the milk. Sift in flour, salt and baking powder into a large bowl and add the eggs and milk. Stir, but do not over-mix. Add your cooked, drained potatoes and spinach along with the grated cheese. Preheat your oven to 200°C. While the oven is warming up, melt the butter in a small saucepan, then add the onion and garlic and sauté until tender (I tend to cheat and zap it in the microwave). Combine all the ingredients together and pour into a large, greased dish. Bake for 25-30 minutes until lightly browned and set in the centre. Leave to stand for 10 minutes before serving. Delicious hot or cold – in fact the longer you leave it, the better it seems to get!

Golden Rice Pie

Rice is so cheap and filling! I also have the perpetual habit of making way too much and always have heaps left over so this is a great recipe for putting it to good use. In fact it uses up many of the things I often have in my fridge, such as the last of the cream in the bottle that you bought to make something else but can never find a way to use it all up. An added bonus is that you can throw in whatever vegetables you have lurking around too, or even bacon - pretty much everything works well. This delicious pie with its rice 'crust' looks fantastic and tastes even better. You wouldn't believe how filling it is too. We all love it!

Ingredients:

1 ½ cups cooked rice
50g butter
4 eggs
1 cup grated cheese
½ chopped onion
2 sticks celery, chopped
1 tbsp oil
1 cup sliced zucchini
1 cup sliced mushroom
½ cup cream
Salt and pepper

Method:

Put your oven on to 190°C to warm up. If using leftover rice from the fridge, zap a little in the microwave until it's nice and warm – you want the butter to be able to melt in it. Put your rice in a large bowl and add your butter and TWO of the eggs – not all four! Mix well and press into a 23cm pie plate or flan dish. Sprinkle half of your grated cheese over the top. Next, heat the oil in a small pan and sauté the onion and celery for a few minutes to soften. Pop it on top of your rice base, then scatter the rest of the cheese over the top. Arrange your zucchini and mushrooms (plus any other vegies you want to use up) over the top of the cheese. In a separate bowl, beat your remaining two eggs together with the cream, add a sprinkle of salt and pepper and pour over the pie. Cook in the oven for 35 minutes or until the pie is 'set' and golden brown on top.

Honey Barbecued Chicken

I first made this recipe when I was still at primary school and decided out of the blue one day I wanted to make a posh dinner for my parents and their friends. Fortunately they were pleasantly surprised and both Mum and I have been making this recipe ever since. Who would have thought 30 years later this 'posh' recipe would become such a handy money saver? How times have changed – it is still a very nice meal to serve guests, however! Don't be fooled by the title either, it has absolutely nothing to do with a barbecue, although I guess you could! I serve this with rice and green vegetables, it's yum! This recipe serves four.

Ingredients:

50g butter
Enough chicken drumsticks or pieces for four people
1 large onion, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, crushed
2 tsp Worcestershire sauce
1 400g tin tomatoes
1 tbsp honey
Salt and pepper

Method:

Pre-heat your oven to 180°C, then pop in your chicken pieces and cook for 40 minutes, turning halfway through cooking. While the chicken is cooking, put the butter, onions, garlic, tomatoes, honey and plenty of salt and pepper in a large saucepan. Bring to the boil, reduce the heat and let bubble away for 30 minutes. Once the chicken is cooked, remove from the oven and add the pieces to your nice, glossy sauce. Serve over a bed of cooked rice, with vegetables of your choice.

Posh Potatoes

After years of farming and having to buy very little meat, I was shocked to find just how much of a dent meat makes in the average person's grocery budget. All the things I used to take for granted such as steak and roast beef are now pretty much things of the past! These days we eat whichever meat is the cheapest and sometimes that can get pretty mundane. However, thanks to a few 'old faithful' potato recipes gleaned from friends and family over the years, even the plainest meals don't have to be boring or tasteless. These simple dishes are good enough to grace any dinner table and are great for entertaining or 'take a plate' events too!

Potatoes Boulangeres

Ahh, the spangly '70's, my childhood era! Long before the likes of Jamie Oliver and Rachael Ray strutted their stuff on telly, UK families where I grew up were enthralled by the rather serious Delia Smith and her cookery courses. Our family was no exception. Mum had the books; in fact I think she even had the same dodgy haircut at one stage! Now an unbelievable 72 years old, Delia is still teaching the world to cook from scratch through her online cookery school (<http://www.deliaonline.com>). The woman is a legend and so is this recipe, which Mum learned from Delia and I learned from her as soon as I was old enough to learn to cook.

Ingredients:

2lb potatoes
1 large onion, finely chopped
125ml chicken stock
125ml milk
50g butter
Salt and pepper

Method:

Pre-heat your oven to 180°C. Grease a large, rectangular dish. Peel the potatoes and slice them thinly, then set aside while you chop the onion. Cover the bottom of the dish with a layer of potato. Sprinkle some of the onion on top and season with salt and pepper. Repeat these layers, seasoning each time until all the potato and onion is used up, ending with potato. Pour over the stock and milk, then 'dot' all over the top with butter. Cover with foil and cook for one hour, then remove foil and cook for a further 30 minutes until the potatoes are cooked through and the top is golden and crunchy.

Kimmie's Greek Potatoes

Any long-time Simple Saver will remember Kimmie! Always busy in the Forum and ready to help, Kimmie has been instrumental in the sharing of many, many recipes over the years. I have been making these potatoes ever since I spotted them hiding in Mimi's Crockpot Greek Lamb thread way back in 2008! If you've never made them you HAVE to try them. I always have lemons on the tree so this is super cheap for me to make. People ALWAYS go crazy over these potatoes – try them yourself and you'll see why!

Ingredients:

4 large baking potatoes (8 medium), peeled and quartered
½ cup olive oil
1 cup water
½ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (approximately 3 lemons)
1 tbsp dried oregano
1 tbsp salt
¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper

Method:

Heat oven to 200°C. Place potatoes in a metal roasting pan large enough to fit potatoes in a single layer. Add the water, olive oil, lemon juice, oregano, salt, and pepper and toss the potatoes in it until well coated. Bake, uncovered, until tender and brown on the edges; about 50 minutes. Turn the potatoes halfway through for even browning; add water if all the liquid has been absorbed before they have fully browned. Enjoy with chicken, fish, barbecued meats, cold roast meat – pretty much anything!

Kiri's Potato Slice

Be warned, this rich, golden potato slice may not do your waistline any favours. It's also very garlicky so will keep the vampires away! But it makes HEAPS and is too delicious not to try! Given to me several years ago by my friend Kiri, this recipe has been in her family for years. It's a definite favourite in our household too! Great for pot luck dinners and suchlike, I always make it when I have cream to use up. Serious comfort food!

Ingredients:

Potatoes (as many as you would use to fill a large rectangular dish), peeled and roughly chopped
50g butter
1-2 cloves garlic, crushed
Cream (however much you have really but anything near or around 300ml)
Grated cheese for topping
Mixed herbs

Method:

Preheat your oven to 180°C. Bring your potatoes to the boil in a large pan of water. As soon as they reach boiling point, remove from the heat and drain, do not cook. Put the garlic and the butter into your dish and pop into the heated oven for a few minutes until sizzling nicely. Transfer your parboiled potatoes into the buttery dish and arrange so they 'sit' nicely, then pour the cream over the top. Sprinkle generously with grated cheese and mixed herbs, then bake in the oven for one hour. Enjoy with just about any meat and vegetables or salad. These keep really well in the fridge so you can enjoy any leftovers the next day!

Tauli

Oh the things you can do with a tin of tomatoes! I probably use them in cooking way too much but at \$0.85c a tin you can use them to make many a cheap meal. I've had this recipe since I was nine years old! It's a great side dish to jazz up plain old sausages but is also hearty enough to enjoy as a main meal for vegetarians. This is the basic recipe but pretty much any root vegetable can be added, courgette works well. I like to give it a little extra zing by adding a good dash of Worcestershire sauce or a little cayenne pepper before serving.

Ingredients:

900g potatoes
2 medium onions
75g butter
400g tin of tomatoes
450g carrots, peeled and cut into large dice
Salt and pepper

Method:

Melt the butter in a large saucepan. Add the onions and sauté until golden; don't let them burn. Add the tomatoes and carrots and cook, covered for 30 minutes over low heat. Add the potatoes and plenty of salt and pepper. Keep the heat low and cook for another 30 minutes or until all the vegetables are tender, stirring frequently to prevent burning.

Penny's Nothing Soup

So called because it really is made from pretty much nothing but is still surprisingly delicious, considering it contains absolutely no vegetables, not even an onion! If I do have any leftover vegetables from the night before I chop them up and chuck them in, gravy and all but nine times out of ten all I have is this basic recipe. I make a big pot any time I have a leftover roast chicken carcass and it has got us through many a time when we have next to no food in the house and can't afford to go to the shops. You can adapt it however you like but this is the 'bare bones' – literally!

Ingredients:

One leftover cooked chicken carcass
2 tsp mixed herbs (or at least SOME kind of herb - very important!)
1 chicken stock cube
Water
Decent dash of soy sauce
Squirt of lemon juice
Salt and pepper
Two-minute noodles (only if you have them, not essential to the flavour, I just add them without the flavour sachet if I have them to make the soup more filling)

Method:

Put your chicken carcass in a large pot and add enough water to cover. Add everything else except the noodles if using and bring to the boil. Simmer gently for an hour until the meat has fallen off the bones. Take the pot off the heat and remove the bones when cool enough to safely do so, then break up the two-minute noodles if using and add them to the soup. Return to the heat and cook another few minutes until the noodles are soft.

Recycled Roast

If you have a roast dinner one day, you can have a Recycled Roast the next! Forgive the rather unflattering name, I have referred to it this way for years and have been unable to come up with anything more exotic! This wee gem was told to me by Simple Savings member Squirrel a very long time ago. It makes a really delicious and filling meal, not to mention super frugal. We enjoy it so much, we try to make sure we always have enough roast meat left over to make this!

All you need is leftover roast meat (whatever you have – beef, chicken, anything works well). First, put your oven on to 180°C to warm up. Slice your meat thinly and place in a casserole dish. If you have some leftover gravy, even better but if not, make some more on the stove top and pour over the meat. Top with either leftover roast potatoes (or parboil some and slice). Brush the top of the potatoes with a little butter and bake in the oven for around 20-30 minutes until golden and cooked. You can also use leftover pumpkin, kumara or parsnip and pop slices of these under the potato slices. Serve accompanied with steamed vegetables for a super yummy and filling dinner!

SOS (Save Our Salad) Dressing!

I love salads! Unfortunately I am the world's worst salad maker. My salads are woefully boring, mainly because I just can't be bothering doing all that chopping and fluffing around but also because depending on the time of year many salad ingredients can be so expensive. Thank goodness my friend shared his made-up recipe with me! This has saved many a boring salad when I haven't had much to put in it! I make up a batch and store it in a clean, empty dressing bottle in the fridge so I always have some on hand. Perfect for green salads, tomato salad, Asian-style noodle salads, you name it!

Ingredients:

50ml soy sauce
50ml sweet chilli sauce
Capful or two of rice vinegar (just use the bottle cap)
Juice of half a lemon
Capful of olive oil

Method:

Put all the ingredients together in a clean bottle or container. Shake well to combine. Store in the fridge and shake before using. Splash all over your salad as required!

Star Wars Stew

This recipe comes from the \$21 Challenge book and I've been making it since I was nine years old! I've included it here as well because it really is a good way to use up all those tins in your pantry that usually gather dust; not to mention it's really cheap to make. Note this does take three hours to cook (you could even bung it all in the crockpot if you want) but it's worth it and with all the sports our family does it's a good one to just shove in the oven and leave for the afternoon. My boys can eat a LOT and wolf this down the way they do everything but this recipe makes enough that there is always some left over for a second meal!

Ingredients:

1 tbsp vegetable oil
450g sausages, cut into three
2 onions, chopped
175g bacon, chopped
1 small tin baked beans
1 small tin sweetcorn (or you can use frozen)
1 large tin chopped tomatoes
1 bay leaf
Salt and pepper
2 large potatoes, peeled and thinly sliced
50g cheese, grated

Method:

Preheat the oven to 150°C. Heat the oil in a large casserole and brown the sausages, then remove and set aside. Add the onion and bacon to the casserole and sauté gently until browned. Throw the sausages back in, as well as the beans, sweetcorn and tomatoes. Add the bay leaf, season well with salt and pepper and give it all a good stir. Top with the sliced potatoes and season again. Then cover with a lid or foil and cook in the oven for around two and a half hours. Remove the lid or foil and turn up the heat to 190°C and cook for another half an hour to brown the potatoes. Finally, top with the grated cheese and return to the oven until the cheese has melted.

Very Yum Tom Yum Soup!

I LOVE Asian food (with the exception of chicken's feet!) and Tom Yum Soup is my very favourite. I have tried many variations over the years and have dabbled in several home-made versions but this one has been voted the best! I adapted it from a Tom Yum Gai recipe to include more vegetables and while it may not be truly authentic, it is truly delicious and healthy too! I make it all the time in a big pot for lunch and find it really cheap to make; I just throw in whatever I have in the garden, as well as anything wilting in the fridge. Our supermarket has chicken breasts at crazy prices every six weeks or so and I buy as many as I can afford and freeze them individually so I always have one on hand when the soup craving hits! However, you can leave out the meat and just make a vegetarian version, it's just as delicious. Part of the beauty of this recipe is it's so adaptable; I have made it when I have literally nothing to put in it except courgette, cabbage and tomatoes – not even an onion – and it's still just as good as always! The base ingredients such as the Tom Yum paste, lemongrass and fish sauce all use a small amount so each jar/bottle lasts a long time and will make you many batches of yummy Tom Yum!

Ingredients:

2 tbsp peanut oil (you could use any oil but I do find peanut makes a difference)
½ onion, finely chopped
2 spring onions, chopped
2 tomatoes, chopped
4 cups water
1 chicken breast, cut into bite-size (or omit for a vegetarian version)
2-3 mushrooms, chopped
2 stalks lemongrass (I use a jar and ½-1 tsp is fine)
1 tsp crushed ginger (I cheat and use the jar stuff)
1 tbsp fish sauce
2 tbsp Tom Yum paste
Extra vegies, whatever you have (I usually use silverbeet, capsicum, courgette and broccoli)
Decent splash of lime juice
Lemon juice to taste (optional)
Fresh coriander if you have it

Method:

Heat the peanut oil in a large pot. Add the chicken, onion, spring onion, lemongrass and ginger and cook for a couple of minutes, stirring so it doesn't stick. Add the water, fish sauce, Tom Yum paste and all the vegies. Add the lime juice and coriander if using then bring to the boil and simmer at least 10 minutes (I usually do 15-20 but as long as the chicken and broccoli is cooked through basically). Add lemon juice to taste if required. Done! Enjoy it by itself or with rice or noodles. This makes a hot, spicy soup which I love, however, if you find it's too spicy for your taste, you can cool it down by adding a little coconut cream.

A Bit o' Baking

And it is only a bit, I apologise! I would like to claim that I spend hours in the kitchen whizzing up all manner of baked delights for my growing boys but I don't. Basically I stick to the same three muffin recipes and it is these which get us through. They all make 12 decent sized muffins, are easy to throw together and are practical and 'no-mess' for lunch boxes. And, even though I've been making them for years, I've never had any complaints from the boys so they can't be too bad!

Banana Choc Muffins

I got this recipe from a fellow kindy mum before my eldest son started primary school. He's now in Year 13 at high school! As you can imagine, after so many years I can make these in my sleep and I have never met a child who doesn't like them. I make them so often I always keep a supply of ripe bananas in the freezer just for the purpose! These muffins have fed many a rugby team (in fact I even used to use them as a bribe to get lazy 1st XV players to training!) and it wouldn't be a teenage party at our house without a gaggle of kids in the kitchen all asking me to make them some. No sooner are they out of the oven than they're devouring them, even if it means burning their mouths on the chocolate chips. In fact one night they begged me to make them and I obliged as usual only to find to my horror that I had no bananas and all the shops were closed. No problem, I just crossed my fingers, made the recipe as usual and served them up with a giggle as 'no-banana' muffins. Amazingly the kids still went crazy over them and said they tasted just as good as always!

Ingredients:

2 cups self raising flour (or 2 cups flour, 3 tsp baking powder)
½ cup sugar
½ cup chocolate chips (you can use white chocolate if you want, whatever you have)
½ tsp salt
100g melted butter
1 cup milk
1 egg
1 tsp vanilla
1 cup mashed banana (2-3 ripe bananas)

Method:

Preheat your oven to 220°C. Put flour, sugar, chocolate chips and salt together in a large bowl and mix. In a separate bowl, melt the butter, then stir in milk, eggs and vanilla. Add your mashed bananas to the wet ingredients, then add to the dry ingredients and fold together until just combined. Spoon into muffin pans or cases and bake for 12-15 minutes or until they spring back when pressed in the middle.

Chunky Cream Cheese and Any Fruit Muffins

Many people would view cream cheese as a luxury item. I see it as an almost-necessity. I use it instead of butter on toast or bagels, on baked potatoes, in mashed potatoes and – if I haven't already scooped too much of the pot already – in these muffins. There are many recipes for cream cheese muffins but don't bother with the ones which tell you to stir in the cream cheese – it's the chunky-ness of this recipe that makes it so awesome. I kid you not; every adult who has ever sampled these says 'Wow – these are the best muffins EVER'. Even with the cream cheese they're not messy or gooey so are fine for lunch boxes. We used to take them fishing but had to stop as everyone would fight over who got to eat the most! I usually use tinned peaches to make this recipe as I always grab a tin or two on special and they are heavenly but you can use strawberries, apricots, whatever you have.

Ingredients:

2 cups flour
¾ cup sugar
4 tsp baking powder
1 tsp cinnamon (or any similar kind of spice will do)
75g butter
1 egg
½ cup sour cream (if you don't have this you can substitute with yoghurt or milk)
¼ cup juice (I usually use the juice drained from the peaches)
1 ½ cups fruit, chopped
125g firm cream cheese, chopped into cubes

Method:

Preheat oven to 200°C and prepare your muffin tins. Put the first four ingredients together in a large bowl and mix to combine. In another bowl, melt the butter and gently mix in the sour cream, juice, egg and fruit pieces. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and fold together just enough to combine; don't over mix. Add your cream cheese cubes and gently stir through the mixture – try and keep them chunky! Spoon into your muffin pans and pop in the oven for 15-20 minutes or until muffins are golden and spring back when you touch them.

Sloppy Choccy Cupcakes

Call me a lazy cook but I REALLY do not like fluffing around with things that need icing; especially when I have lunch boxes to fill! I like this recipe because it's delicious and moist, you don't need to ice them (although you can if you want) and it uses just the most basic of ingredients which I always have on hand. Plus they're super quick and easy to make; just chuck everything in a bowl, no mucking about! The mixture really is sloppy when you make it but don't panic, I promise they'll turn out perfect. As well as taking them to school, my boys love one warmed up in the microwave and served with ice cream for a cheap and easy dessert!

Ingredients:

1 2/3 cups flour
1 1/2 cups sugar
2/3 cup cocoa
1 tsp salt
1 1/2 tsp baking soda
100g butter, melted
1 1/2 cups milk
2 eggs
1 tsp vanilla essence

Method:

Preheat your oven to 180°C. Put all the ingredients in a large bowl and mix together until well combined. Pour the sloppy mixture into your muffin trays (I always use muffin cases) and bake for around 20 minutes or until the cakes spring back when you touch them.

Penny Pinching Puddings

I make no apologies, as the mother of teenage boys these are all chocolate! But I love the fact you can make the most basic of fridge and pantry ingredients taste so good. We don't eat puddings that often and when I do make one it's usually my Happy Fruit Crumble from the \$21 Challenge book as it's so quick to make and I can adapt it easily to use up whatever sad looking fruit I have on hand. However, these ones are the ones which come out for birthdays, special occasions and when we just want some good old-fashioned comfort food!

Chocolate Self Saucing Pudding

Ohh this pud is so rich! This recipe was given to me more than 20 years ago by Liam's godmother and every single time we went there for dinner I would beg her to make it! Now I have the recipe to make it myself and everyone I make it for loves it too!

Ingredients:

Pudding:-

100g butter
1 ¼ cups flour
¾ cup sugar
1 egg
1 tsp vanilla essence
2 tsp baking powder
1 tbsp cocoa
2 cups boiling water
Milk to mix

Sauce:-

½ cup brown sugar
1 tbsp cornflour
¼ cup cocoa

Method:

Preheat your oven to 180°C. Beat butter, sugar, egg and vanilla together in a large bowl. In a separate bowl sift flour and baking powder together, then fold into beaten mixture. Add milk a little at a time, stirring, until the mixture is pourable. Pour into a greased pudding dish, then mix the three sauce ingredients together in a small bowl and sprinkle over the top. Carefully pour the boiling water over the back of a spoon onto the pudding. Bake for 35 minutes or until the pudding springs back when lightly touched.

Mailbox's Birthday Cake

My 17-year-old is going to kill me for sharing this! As a pre-schooler, young Master Liam was very fond of the TV programme 'Blue's Clues'. Among Blue the dog's many friends was a talking mailbox (as of course, all mailboxes are) and one day it was Mailbox's birthday on the show. Liam found this episode so exciting that for the rest of the day we had to pretend it really WAS Mailbox's birthday and have a party, complete with cake. I wasn't quite sure what a birthday cake for a mailbox should taste like but this one did the job and has been made countless times ever since – and is STILL called Mailbox's Birthday Cake, much to Liam's embarrassment! This makes a good sized cake and I love this recipe because it's so quick and easy; just sling it all together and zap it in the microwave! Like the sloppy cupcake recipe it's moist and tasty enough to enjoy plain in lunch boxes or warmed up with ice cream, or you can go all out on special occasions and dress it up on a fancy plate with chocolate ganache icing and strawberries, sprinkles or whatever. Enjoy!

Ingredients:

2 eggs
1 cup sugar
1 cup milk
1 cup oil (I use canola but whatever you have)
3 tbsp golden syrup
1 tsp baking powder
1 tsp baking soda
1 ½ cups flour

Method:

Put all the ingredients in a large microwave-proof bowl and mix thoroughly until smooth (you can use a food processor, I just can never be bothered cleaning it after!) Grease a microwave ring cake tin, pour in your mixture and microwave on high for 10 or 11 minutes until the cake springs back when touched. Leave to cool a little, then turn out of the tin.

Note: When we want to be a bit posh and have the right ingredients on hand we make this simple yet very rich sauce by melting a packet of dark chocolate Melts together with a cup of cream and stirring until smooth and glossy. Pour over the cake and keep any excess in a small jug for your children to enjoy with more cake for breakfast the next morning. Did I say breakfast? Oops sorry, that's just MY kids!

Upside Down Chocolate Peachy Pudding

I was so lucky as a child to have a father who LOVED puddings and a mother who was exceptional at making them. How we weren't all the size of houses with all she fed us I don't know! I've no idea how she managed to make them as well as our main meal every day either, travelling to and from her full time job but she did and it's always been one of my favourites. I still have this recipe she wrote down for me on Victoria Plum notepaper from when I was little and when I want to make a cheap and cheerful pudding as a treat for the boys, this is always the one I think of. It's the brown sugar which makes it extra yummy!

Ingredients:

4 oz flour
4 oz sugar
4 oz butter, softened
1 oz cocoa
2 eggs
1 tin peaches, drained
Brown sugar for sprinkling

Method:

Preheat your oven to 180°C and grease a regular size, square cake tin or oven dish. I do it the old fashioned way, with butter or marg for this recipe rather than oil spray, makes it tastier I think! Sprinkle the bottom of the tin generously with brown sugar, then arrange your drained peaches over the bottom. Cream the butter and sugar together until light and fluffy, then add the eggs and cocoa. Sift in the flour, then fold all the ingredients together. Place spoonfuls of the mixture on top of the peaches until all the fruit is covered and the mixture is all used. Bake in the oven for 30-40 minutes. Enjoy with cream, ice cream, or milk, it's all delicious!

Other favourites from the \$21 Challenge book

The following recipes have also helped me to get through in recent months when the cupboards have been very, very bare. I haven't re-produced them here as they can all be found either in the \$21 Challenge Survival Guide, available free on the Simple Savings website or in the \$21 Challenge book, which you can also purchase from the Simple Savings online shop. If I say so myself, it's quite good. If you already have a copy, hooray! You can go and grab your book and try any of the following right now!

Home-Made Sausage Rolls – These have been brilliant when I have no bread to make sandwiches for lunch boxes but I do have sausages in the freezer and an abundance of vegies to use up! So delicious, once your kids try these, no others will compare!

Sophie's Really Good Cheese Scones – Again, these have been a lifesaver when we've had no bread. This awesome recipe has only three ingredients yet is better than any café cheese scone you will ever come across!

French Onion Chicken – This yummy recipe contains soy sauce and tinned tomatoes, two of my staples, 'nuff said!

Jackie's Home-Made Burgers – In other words, what we have for dinner when we have mince but just about nothing else!

Jackie's Potato Cakes – Make a little bit of meat go a very long way. Such a frugal meal, yet one of Ali's favourites!

Toad in the Hole – What do you get when you don't have much except sausages, flour, eggs and milk? A hearty, filling meal kids love!

Fruity Yoghurt Muffins – These always get made when Ali cons me into buying yoghurt pots and then leaves them to expire in the fridge. Which is often, bless him...

These are just a few of the \$21 Challenge recipes we have compiled over the years. The \$21 Challenge has been a part of the Simple Savings community since 2006. Back then, I did it for fun and to see what I was capable of. Now I no longer have a choice – but I still love to see what I'm capable of! If you have never tried it for yourself, give it a go; it is brilliant for so many reasons. Most people who try it find they eat better for a week on less money than during a normal week! The best way to learn what the \$21 Challenge is, how it came about and why it's so good is to read the first two chapters of the book for free on the Simple Savings website. You can find them here <https://www.simplesavings.com.au/downloads#21> Dollar Challenge. I hope it helps you as much as it has helped me!

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