STORE BRANDS STRETCH YOUR FOOD DOLLARS

As we get close to the upcoming holiday season it’s time to find ways to slash prices on the food budget. Family and friends will be joining us at the table and grocery bills rise during this time. One simple tactic is to shop store brands, which account for 25% of products in the grocery store.

Advertising attempts to convince us name brand equals superior taste and quality, but the research doesn’t support the pitch. According to the book, Mindless Eating, by Brian Wansink, “multiple studies have tested popular brand names next to inexpensive store brands and most people can’t pick their brand once it’s out of the package and into a bowl.” Why then do we waste money on buying name brands? “We don’t want to think we are cheap and more importantly we are conditioned to have positive expectations of the famous brand names.”

The October 2013 issue of Consumer Reports did their own tests of thirteen popular foods – cashews, cranberry juice, frozen shrimp, ice cream, ketchup, maple syrup, mayonnaise, mixed vegetables, shredded mozzarella, and trail mix. In every case they found a store brand that was just as good. In four cases the store brand was even better. Cost comparisons were all over the board with brand name products costing up to 64% more.

Taste is the number one criteria shoppers use to select food, followed by price. Preferences vary tremendously so you have to take a risk and try some unfamiliar store brands and see if there really is a difference. Accept ahead of time, some products will just not satisfy you.

Buy only small quantities to try them out first. For instance, I once bought a popular granola bar from a warehouse store assuming my ever ravenous sons would gladly devour it. Wrong, they hated it and I was stuck with dozens of the product. Sneakily, I brought them as a dessert to the annual soccer banquet table. It’s against my philosophy to waste food and by simply cutting the bars into triangles and arranging them on a fancy plate they became tempting to the crowd.

Ideally each store would have a simple listing of store brands to pick up when you walk in the store. Based on my own research looking at store websites and visiting retailers there is no such list. Shoppers need it, so ask them to provide one. If enough people speak up, they may respond. See you in the grocery aisle!

For more information about the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County Office check out our website http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county. University of Maryland Extension programs are open to all persons and will not discriminate against anyone because of race, age, sex, color, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, religion, ancestry, or national origin, marital status, genetic information, or political affiliation, or gender identity and expression.

Deborah Rhoades, MA, RD, LDN, is a licensed Registered Dietitian and Extension Educator in Family and Consumer Sciences.

DHR:ls