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UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO

College of Agriculture

BUYING CONVENIENCE FOODS

No. 5

Market Basket Mastery Series

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IDAHO Agricultural
Extension Service

Bulletin 361
June 1961

BUYING CONVENIENCE FOODS

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ARE you short on time or money? Should you buy prepared mixes, heat-and-serve bakery products, ready-to-bake rolls, canned and frozen cooked foods, baked pies and cakes???

Hobby or Chore

To some of us, preparing food is interesting, relaxing, and fun. So naturally we spend more time doing it. On the other hand, nearly one-third of today's homemakers work away from home and many others have small children who require much time and attention. So time is at a premium. To these homemakers, processed foods are lifesavers.

In Grandmother's day the "long way" was necessary, but today's homemaker has the choice of preparing foods at home or buying them partly or completely ready-to-cook and serve.

What has happened to the Idaho potato is a good illustration of what is happening to food in general. About 40 per cent of our potatoes are now being used for potato granules and other potato products, most of which are convenience items. Your supermarket can offer at least 20 varieties at the produce counter, in the freezer, or on the grocery shelves. Prices range from a penny or two a serving to as much as 17 cents a serving. How much do potatoes cost at your house?

Which to Buy

To decide whether convenience foods are a good buy for you, ask yourself . . .

"How much time do I have for preparing food?"

"Is my time more valuable at other jobs?"

"Would I be getting my money's worth in the amount of pre-preparation done for me?"

“How does the quality of my home-made product compare to the quality of the convenience food? Does my family like it as well as what I prepare?”

“How important is cost to me?”

“Is quantity just right or too much for my family? Must the entire contents of the package be used at one time? Or, can I use just part of the package and save the rest for another time?” Usually—

FOOD	TIME	COST
Homemade and home produced	takes most time	is cheapest
Partially prepared	takes less time	costs more
Ready-to-serve	takes least time	is most expensive

But there are exceptions to this rule. Sometimes convenience foods will be as cheap or cheaper than homemade products. In 1958, the USDA made a preliminary study of 63 foods in a “convenience” form and the same 63 foods in a less-processed form. In this pilot study the difference in consumer price averaged less than 1 per cent. On \$100 worth of groceries the average homemaker was adding only 61 cents to cover the cost of built-in maid service. Some of the convenience foods included in the study were: packaged frozen-ground beef patties, cut-up ready-to-fry chicken, frozen precooked sausage, breaded ready-to-fry shrimp, instant coffee, frozen french-fried potatoes, frozen chopped spinach, frozen concentrated orange juice, chilled orange juice, and cake, cookie, biscuit and pie crust mixes.

The only true way to know which is the better buy for your money is to compare the costs and the quality of the homemade and the commercially packaged.

When you check the cost of your home-prepared foods with convenience foods, choose those that are alike for comparison. For example, compare the cost of a yellow cake mix with what it would cost you to make a similar yellow cake. The cost of a fancy or extra rich cake that might be baked at home should not

be compared with a plain product, mix, or purchased cake.

There are many mixed meat-and-vegetable products both canned and frozen on the market. When choosing, compare quality as well as cost per serving. Are you getting your money's worth in meat and vegetables?

Comparing Costs

How do you make cost comparisons? First, write down the recipe. Then find the store price and household-unit price for each ingredient. For example, let's use this

Yellow Cake Recipe

Cost	Ingredient	Cost	Ingredient
	2 cups flour		2/3 cup milk
	1/4 teaspoon salt		1 1/4 cups sugar
	2 teaspoons baking powder		2 eggs
	1/3 cup shortening		1/2 teaspoon vanilla

TOTAL COST _____

You might find filling out a chart like this helpful.

FOOD		BUYING		COMMON HOUSEHOLD	
Kind	Description	Unit	Price	Unit	Price
<i>Flour</i>	<i>All-purpose, white enriched</i>	<i>10 Lbs.</i>	<i>\$1.20</i>	<i>1 Cup</i>	<i>3c</i>

As an illustration we filled in the columns for one of the ingredients. The price for a 10-pound sack of flour was \$1.20. Since there are 4 cups of white flour to a pound, 1 cup costs 3 cents. The Idaho leaflet, "Know Your Measures" gives the number of common household units per pound for many foods. It is available from your Extension Home Agent. So, in the

yellow cake recipe, the cost for 2 cups of flour would be 6 cents.

After finding the cost for all the other ingredients in the cake recipe we would know the total cost of this recipe. (Since the amount of baking powder, and seasonings called for are so small, their cost would have little effect on the total. Therefore, it wouldn't be necessary to include them. This would be generally true with spices, also).

Before comparing the cost of your cake to the ready-mix, remember to add the cost of any additional ingredients to the price of the ready-mix.

Now you know which is your best buy in terms of money. But don't forget to think of the other points, your time, personal preference, personal satisfaction—mentioned earlier.

Before Buying

Even if you have decided that convenience foods are "for you", read the labels. Compare costs and other features of all brands available for each type of convenience item. For example, some cake mixes give more servings from a package than others. Some call for more additional ingredients than others. Some mixed meat-and-vegetable products may include more meat and vegetables than others.

To compare fairly you need to figure the total cost (adding the price of any extra ingredients). Then determine the cost of a serving for the different brands. Knowing what a serving will cost for each will give you a truer indication of the best buy for your money.

Facts About Convenience Foods

They are:

Time savers. To many users, this is their most important advantage.

Convenient.

A "never-fail" product. For the beginning homemaker, they spell easy, sure success.

Easy to prepare.

For the best results in using all types of processed foods, follow directions for storage, preparation, and service, as given on the label. Remember their storage life is not indefinite.

Convenience foods are becoming better and cheaper. No longer is it always cheaper to make your own. Consider your supply of time, energy, and money. Watch the prices and shop wisely. Many convenience foods are excellent products that are gaining in popularity each year. Each person should check her own products with the convenience foods she likes and compare cost and quality before concluding that convenience foods are or are not good buys.



This is No. 5 in the series "Market Basket Mastery." Others are:

1. First Aids to Food Buying.
2. Buying Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.
3. Buying Canned and Specialty Foods.
4. Buying Meat.

Published and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, by the University of Idaho Agricultural Extension Service, James E. Kraus, Director; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating.

10M 6-61