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City Beat

Dietary Restrictions

Can man (and woman) live on food stamps alone? Our writer finds out.

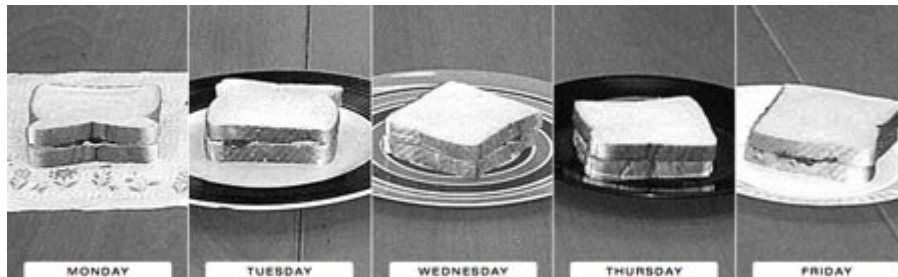
by *Doron Taussig*

HEALTH

Forty-six dollars and thirty-four cents. That's how much our budget came out to for five days. A dollar fifty-five a meal for each person.

At the time we figured this out, my wife and I were sitting on a picnic blanket in Fairmount Park, enjoying a lunch that cost \$14.90 (I had a turkey club wrap, she a spinach salad; we each had a Gatorade). It was the day before we began the "Food Stamp Challenge," a campaign organized by the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger in which middle-class people lived for a week on the equivalent of food stamps. About 30 people signed on to take the challenge this July; we decided to do it for just five days. I was treating it as work.

As I explained to the numerous friends and co-workers who would attempt to buy me food over the course of the week, the idea behind the experiment was not for people like us to pretend to be poor. Rather, it was to test a government claim. Our calculation of \$46.34 was based on the maximum allowable food-stamp benefit for a household of two. Most food-stamp beneficiaries actually receive less, and are expected to supplement their benefit with income. But the maximum, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, is supposed to be sufficient to provide a nutritious diet.



I'd like to think that I began the experiment with an open mind. Last year, I wrote a story about Philadelphia's "Food Maze," the network of soup kitchens, food pantries and government benefits that poor Philadelphians have to navigate to get "emergency food."

While I found a terribly inefficient system of food distribution [Cover, Sept. 22, 2005], I also encountered inefficient use of that system — one woman I met spent stamps on crabs' legs — and I was curious to see how I would fare.

I would be lying if I said I didn't have some competitive juices flowing, too. This may seem wildly inappropriate to the occasion, but when Julie Zaebst of GPCAH advised me not to worry if I couldn't make it through the week, I got a little indignant.

What follows, then, is the diary of a middle-class 25-year-old and his gamely wife, garnering all their wit, will power and resources to feed themselves on a food-stamp budget. We intended to make it.

Shopping

Because we weren't pretending to be poor, we began the challenge by driving to the Superfresh on Delaware Avenue, where we could use our Clubfresh card (though it's probably worth noting that many people on food stamps don't have a car or a nearby supermarket).

In a typical five-day week, we spend about \$60 on groceries, plus two or three takeout lunches and numerous supplementary items like sodas or snacks on the run. To get down to \$46.34, our plan was to have a simple breakfast (granola bars or cereal), a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with yogurt for lunch and a smattering of affordable dinners (rice and beans, scrambled eggs, etc.). We had drafted a shopping list, and estimated this would cost us about \$33.

In the grocery store, that number gradually began to climb. Several items that we had chalked up to "a couple bucks" ended up being closer to three dollars, a distinction that makes a big difference when you can only spend three dollars 15 times. As a result, we became servants to "Sale" signs. Usually, I look at a sale as a special bonus on a desired item, or as the deciding factor between, say, Honey Nut Cheerios and Honey Bunches of Oats. But as our tally climbed, sale signs became marching orders — which meant instead of Nature's Valley granola bars (\$3.29), we got flimsy Special K bars with vanilla icing (\$2 on sale); instead of Cheerios, we got America's Choice Shredded Wheat (which tasted no different than the box it came in).

For the most part, though, we got our shopping done, and with the Clubfresh card, spent just \$39, even snagging some cookies for dessert and a case of Diet Pepsi to keep us awake through the afternoons. With \$7 left in our pockets, we embarked on our week of relative deprivation.

Monday

The Special K bars *suck*.

I also miss the orange juice I usually drink in the morning, but that's really a matter of interrupted routine. My lunch is fine, except that I left my Pepsi at home and have to choose between a) being sleepy all afternoon, or b) spending a dollar on a Coke from the office vending machine. I spend the dollar.

Once home, I run into another problem: We forgot to budget for snacks. My solution is to have the peanut butter do double-duty, and I find it to be highly acceptable. Dinner's good, too — we make pasta (usually, my wife buys whole wheat pasta, but it was too expensive; I actually like this better) with defrosted frozen spinach and tomato sauce. We have to grate cheddar cheese instead of parmesan, but we survive.

And for dessert: peanut butter.

Tuesday

I'm feeling a little hungrier than usual this morning, so I complement my Special K bar with a spoonful of PB. Lunch, identical to yesterday's, is light and, let's say, *pedestrian*, but for dinner we have the best of our grocery take: chicken drumsticks with broccoli (full disclosure: to make it through this, we had to use some condiments, like butter and bread crumbs, that weren't part of the budget), and some of the cookies for dessert. It's terrific.

Still, a very big problem surfaces today: When I get home after work and go for my afternoon snack, I find that the peanut butter jar does in fact have a bottom, and I'm more than halfway there. This means a chunk of our remaining cash will have to be spent on replenishing it. Also, as my wife observed with one eye on my stomach, half a jar of peanut butter is a lot to consume in 36 hours.

Wednesday

I am sitting at the table in *City Paper's* kitchen, staring dourly at my thin, sad sandwich.

We put the paper out on Wednesday mornings, which means lunchtime is occasion for a treat. Nothing spectacular — maybe just Nick's Roast Beef, or a Cosi salad — the key is that you socialize, and you get

to decide what you're in the mood for. But on this food-stamp budget, socialization is not really an option, and the element of choice that makes eating a form of recreation is gone. Food is no longer fun.

When I get home, my foul mood worsens. My wife is a runner, and a mild exercise addict. When she doesn't get to break a sweat for a while she assumes the personality of an electric fence. She hasn't exercised much this week because she doesn't want to be hungry when all she's having for dinner is scrambled eggs, and her patience has burned off like so many calories.

Now, she tells me she's been cheating on me: eating illicit cookies when I'm not around. She even opens up a Gatorade and defiantly takes a swig.

Thursday

Unbelievable. I go to get my lunch out of the refrigerator, and find that someone has stolen my Pepsi. I'm forced to slip another single into the vending machine; later in the day, we spend \$1.50 on a bottle of water while walking around in the heat. This pretty much eliminates any possibility that we might get some nice supplement to our dinner of rice and beans, which includes no meat and few vegetables.

Friday

I have a confession. We technically did not complete our five-day week. We *could* have. We had our normal, unpalatable breakfast, leftover rice and beans for lunch, and could have had a can of tuna we never used for dinner. But we didn't want to. It was Friday night, we had endured since Monday morning, and we wanted to go out.

And that pretty much sums up the experience. Living on food stamps is possible, especially if you have access to an affordable grocery store, but it's also exceedingly unpleasant: monotonous, unhealthy, enervating, and so fragile that minor mistakes — or mishaps, like someone stealing your Pepsi — can send you reeling for days. Indeed, when I checked in with the Coalition, post-challenge, they said that most participants had a similar experience. They were able to design an affordable diet, but they were miserable on it. Many cheated and several quit.

Just one more thought. When I finished my week, I decided it would be interesting to call up Roy Washington, a 55-year-old blind man I met last year at a West Philly food pantry, to see what his diet was like during the Challenge. Washington receives just \$10 a month in food stamps, far below the maximum benefit, and relies heavily on his government income and emergency food. When I first met him, he spent his days traveling from pantry to pantry, collecting supplies and hoping he'd be lucky enough to cross paths with some meat.

Now, he says, things are "basically the same." For breakfast he eats cereal, and if he has some meat, he'll mix it with pasta and make big pots, which he'll dip into over and over. It's boring, arduous and not that healthy. In other words, it's the Food Stamp Challenge, ad infinitum, but for Washington, there's no big dinner waiting when he finishes.

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