

# Create Gourmet Meals From Ordinary Dishes Without Breaking The Budget



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## What Is Your Definition Of Cooking Budget Gourmet Meals

Cooking gourmet can mean as many different things as there are ingredients in the grocery store. So, before you actually begin cooking gourmet meals on your budget, you have to define what it means to you. Take a look at the following general definitions of what gourmet dining means to different people:

**Appearance** - If you define gourmet as the way a dish appears, you can learn a few techniques for creating new and exciting presentations of your meals without spending a lot of money.

**New** - If your definition of gourmet means trying something new, there are hundreds of different foods that you can give a try without worrying about your budget.

**Exotic** - If your definition of gourmet food relates to exotic tastes, you'll need to find creative ways to find these exciting new flavors without breaking the grocery budget.

Now let's look at a few helpful tips to find ways to introduce gourmet ingredients and style to your meals, while keeping your budget in mind:

### Be Open to New Main Ingredients

Cooking gourmet on a budget isn't always about adding exotic spices or ingredients. Sometimes by choosing a cut of meat that's different from your usual choice, you can create a dish that's fresh and brand new to you – what you would call gourmet. Whether you're cooking beef, lamb, chicken, pork, seafood, or vegetarian, there are always new items to try.

Remember, oftentimes what we now consider routine was once considered gourmet or unusual fare. Just think about tilapia, for instance. This run-of-the-mill fish wasn't always that way. When first introduced, it was quite exotic to many people outside of the fishing world. So, look for main ingredients that you haven't heard of before. The advantage is often translated into savings on your budget simply because of supply-and-demand. When a food is first introduced to a market it isn't very popular, which means the price will often be more reasonable. It's only after a certain product gains popularity that markets feel comfortable raising their prices. Less popular items can be found around the edges of the meat, fish, poultry, and produce counter, so that's where you may find something new to try.

### Mix Up Your Flavors

Along with new main ingredients, you will also bump up the gourmet value of a meal without spending a lot of money by trying new combinations of spices and seasonings. You don't have to spend a lot of money on spices, just use the ones you have in new ways. Instead of always adding basil and oregano to spaghetti sauce, why not sprinkle in a bit of fennel seed? When you make your family's favorite chili, imagine what a little espresso stirred in during the last half hour of cooking would do. Intrigued? Don't forget chili powder in your chocolate frosting and nutmeg in your eggs.

Spices and seasonings are not the only ingredients that could use a shake-up when it comes to gourmet cooking on a budget. Have you added pureed pumpkin to your black bean soup yet? It adds a smooth creaminess that is decidedly gourmet, especially when sprinkled with toasted pumpkin seeds. How about crushed pineapple to your pasta and shrimp primavera? Just look through your refrigerator, freezer, and pantry and see what would happen if you decided to throw out all the rules. I bet you would come up with great new meals that are gourmet-style on a tight budget.

### **Quality Counts**

The whole factor of good, gourmet taste relies on quality. There are items you can skimp on and items where you need to spend a bit more to get the good stuff. It's hard to know the difference until you actually use both, but one example that comes to mind is balsamic vinaigrette. There is a price range where you reach a good quality, and anything below that doesn't measure up. The reason is the aging. You want a good, thick, rich vinaigrette for your salads or marinades, otherwise you may as well be using vinegar.

With this in mind, there are choices to be made that will help you cook gourmet and stay within your budget. Yes, spend the money on good quality when it counts, then save money on items that are the same across the price spectrum. For example, after you spend money on a good vinaigrette for your salad, don't spend money on expensively priced croutons. You'll find a variety of prices, but all croutons are pretty much created alike. Or, just make them at home for the cheapest, and best tasting, option.

### **Think Local**

Utilizing your local farmer's market is a great way to go gourmet without spending a lot of money. Reducing the middleman keeps the price low and you might just get to try their new crops. Think about investing in a crop share at a local farm or look into small starter farms.

You are likely to find unusual items, too, because most local farms produce a wide variety of produce simply because they can. They don't have to worry about satisfying a vast market; just the locals. The local farms are typically very accommodating and love to talk about their crops, and will find new varieties for you to try. They are also interested in finding new ways to cook and serve their crops so more people will buy them. If you see something unusual at your local farmer's market, talk to the farmer about it, cook it up, and report back. In that way, you'll get lots of new information for new foods to add to your gourmet-style of dining.

### **Shop Ethnic Stores**

If your definition of gourmet cooking is to try exotic foods, then try shopping at ethnic grocers. Usually their food is cheaper than similar food in the big chain store, and you have a better chance of finding what you were looking for. If you need to find that special fruit used in that Indian dish, then your best bet is shopping at an Indian grocery store. It is surprising how many different ingredients you can find in a real Italian, French, or Asian food store than you can find in the 'ethnic aisle' of your grocery store.

When you get into an authentic ethnic store, you may feel confused. The packaging may not be clear to you and the items may be completely unknown. That's great! That's exactly what gourmet cooking on a budget is all about. Ask for help. Tell the proprietor that you are new and want to try something that isn't expensive, but has flavors that are different and exciting. It may help to bring in recipes or pictures of dishes you find appealing, then go from there. Shop for one dish at a time to keep your head from exploding! There's a lot of information to absorb, but just give it time. A few more visits to your local ethnic food store and you'll be cooking like a pro.

### **Everything is Exotic to Somebody**

If your definition of gourmet cooking on a budget is to perk up your basic dishes with exotic ingredients, do you automatically think of far off places with names you can't pronounce? You don't have to travel the globe for something unusual. Oftentimes, our own region offers ingredients that would be considered exotic to others. There may even be foods in your area that you have yet to discover. Your very own region and culture could be hiding quite a few foods that are exotic.

Keep an open mind and try to expand your palate with local cuisine. Explore the heritage of your region to discover the rich abundance of native cuisine. Look at the indigenous ingredients first, then the ways the natives prepared the dishes using what they had. These dishes are often the basis for an entire cuisine. Just consider what we know now of Cajun cooking. This is an example of regional ingredients cooked in the way their ancestors did using what was available to them. It's time to explore your own backyard. You'll find when you cook your own region's gourmet cuisine, the ingredients are fresher and cheaper, and easier to find, of course.

If you want to cook gourmet on a budget, it really just takes a few simple choices. Figure out how you define gourmet cooking, then start exploring all the options. When you put these tips to work, you'll be surprised how inexpensive cooking gourmet can actually be.

## **Turn Ordinary Dishes Into Gourmet Meals With One Simple Ingredient**

Sometimes all it takes is one simple ingredient to turn your everyday recipes into a gourmet meal. There are literally hundreds of single ingredients which, when added to your dish, will transform the entire flavor profile of the food.

You may recognize these ingredients, but when used in new ways, they become something totally different. Very simple spices like rosemary added to your baked chicken and potatoes or ingredients like prosciutto on your Hawaiian pizza, will change things up quite a bit. I can think of three extremely versatile ingredients to jazz up almost any dish you can make. Let's take a quick look at these simple ingredients:

### **Heavy Cream**

One of the classic ways to instantly transform a dish is with the use of heavy cream. Take a chicken Parmesan dish, for instance. If you want to give this dish a gourmet finish, try adding heavy cream to the tomato sauce. Not only will it tone down the acid from the tomato, it also adds a rich, creamy dimension to the entire dish.

Do you have a pile of recipes that call for cream of mushroom soup? Substitute a heavy cream white sauce thickened in a simple roux made of butter and flour and, voila!, you have a gourmet dish instead of a cafeteria-style casserole.

Heavy cream also works well for soups and chili. If you have a beef and barley soup that just seems bland with beef stock, try adding a little heavy cream to give the soup depth. The cream will also give a boost to the beefy flavor. Classic chowders and creamy soups will always benefit from a splash of heavy cream.

You can even add heavy cream to your routine breakfast foods. Use cream instead of milk when you make French toast and you have just added a little ooo la la! Whip heavy cream into eggs for the ultimate light and fluffy omelet delight.

You may not want to totally replace milk with heavy cream simply because the fat and calories are rather prohibitive to most diets. However, heavy cream, when used sparingly, is a great resource to keep in your refrigerator. It possesses unique qualities that makes it that special ingredient that becomes your secret to those extraordinary meals.

### **Capers**

Who would have thought these little green berries could make such an impact on the culinary scene? With the addition of capers, you give your dish a swift kick in the pants it never saw coming. The small little pickled berries have a distinct salt and vinegar taste that will transform any typical dish into a Mediterranean dance on your flavor palate. Capers are what the word 'piquant' was invented for.

Capers are a secret ingredient that gives everything from meat to pasta an incredible gourmet flare. To start cooking with capers, you may want to think of a simple sauce. Turn a routine

creamy lemon sauce into a mouth-watering burst of flavor with the addition of a few small capers. This lemony sauce would be perfect drizzled over grilled or baked fish, turkey, chicken, or even vegetables.

The next time you create your classic Minestrone, give it a gourmet kick by stirring in capers. There's no reason you can't give the same kick to your favorite spaghetti sauce, too. Italian cooking is the perfect match for capers.

Don't forget seafood dishes including steamed shellfish and creamy chowders. And, even something as simple as egg salad, deviled eggs, or tuna sandwiches can be given the gourmet treatment by adding capers. Surprisingly, breakfast dishes are very adaptable to this blast of taste from capers. Savory scrambled eggs, omelets, and frittatas are made even better with the addition of this flavor powerhouse.

The use of capers has caught on in many cultures, but not so much in American cuisine, yet. For some reason, not many people attempt to experiment with the flavor profile of the capers, and even go so far as omitting them in classic dishes that call for capers. The next time you see capers in a recipe, include them. And, the next time you want to give one of your regular recipes a big piquant flavor boost, consider adding a sprinkling of those little green capers. Your plain recipes will earn the title gourmet.

## **Pesto**

This ingredient is actually an ordinary recipe that packs an extraordinary wallop. Typically, pesto is nothing more than a simple mix of basil, garlic, olive oil, and pine nuts. Many people make their own pesto at home in a variety of ways. Or, if you prefer, you can always find fabulous pesto at your favorite grocery store.

Pesto is great to dress-up and flavor-up grilled meats, fish, seafood, and chicken, or to create many gourmet-style pasta or rice dishes. Because the flavor has a strong basil base, you should also consider adding a teaspoon or so to a pot of spaghetti sauce, lasagna, soup, or any recipe that would benefit from the addition of basil and a nice little kick.

Add this fantastic blend of ingredients to turn a basic deli-cuts sandwich into a gourmet treat. Mix a bit of pesto in mayonnaise to make a unique spread that will perk up a simple ham, turkey, or Club sandwich. Pesto added to the oil and vinegar dressing on a classic Caprese salad will wed the flavors of the tomato, basil, and fresh mozzarella cheese into a gourmet delight.

What about pesto for breakfast? When you break down the pesto into the basic ingredients, you can see how any omelet, scrambled eggs, or frittata would benefit. But, don't forget muffins or cornbread, too. Just a dab of pesto will make a pan of cornbread something entirely different than you'll ever find at one of those breakfast chain restaurants.

That's what budget gourmet cooking is all about – turning your kitchen into a gourmet kitchen, easily and simply. How simple to keep a few ingredients handy that will do the job without having to dig up recipes or spend a lot of money. Jazzing up your standard recipes with one

simple ingredient is an easy and affordable way to offer your family new dishes without having to scour through countless gourmet magazines for ideas. Grab one of the ingredients from above, or try one of your own, and turn up the notch a tad the next time you serve your favorite dishes.



## **Gourmet Cooking Right Out Of Your Own Pantry**

Gourmet cooking doesn't have to start with the most expensive ingredients in a specialty shop. On the contrary, cooking gourmet can actually be done within a reasonable budget and, quite often, with the ingredients you already have on hand. Let's take a look at five simple ingredients you can probably pull out of your pantry right now:

### **Cinnamon**

Not only is cinnamon easily accessible, but its qualities enhance a wide variety of foods and beverages. Many of the most pungent dishes served in fine restaurants, from French toast to bread pudding to acorn squash soup to braised short ribs to coffee, most likely will have cinnamon as one of the key ingredients. Offering a unique taste to any dish, cinnamon gives you the "what's that wonderful flavor?" moment. Not only does cinnamon offer a warm flavor that lingers behind the scenes, but it has health benefits, as well. Cinnamon is believed to boost metabolism, which may be reason enough to add this simple seasoning to your list of gourmet ingredients.

### **Crepes**

While crepes can't be considered a solitary ingredient, they should be thought of as a gourmet item for the simple reason that they make an ordinary gathering of fruits, vegetables, cheeses, and the like something special. Using typical ingredients you may have on hand already, fill simple crepes with cream cheese and strawberries, top them with raisins and dried cranberries, and you have a beautiful plate suitable for any fancy restaurant. There are literally hundreds of ways to make crepes. Dress up a crepe with caramelized plantains, a chocolate hazelnut spread, or spinach, goat cheese, and toasted pine nuts. Even the crepe itself can be made sweet or savory with interesting new ingredients. Anytime you think of making pancakes, waffles, or even a wrap or sandwich, think again, and make crepes instead for that gourmet touch.

### **Roasted Garlic**

If you think roasted garlic is a delicacy, only available at upscale restaurants, it's time to revisit your beliefs. Now, we're not talking about the stuff you buy in the jars, we're talking about true gourmet-style roasted garlic right from your oven. This is an incredibly easy gourmet treat that is easy to do and yields great results in both the aroma you add to your kitchen and the beautiful presentation and taste. Simply cut the entire head of garlic in half, so the cloves are exposed, place on tin foil, drizzle oil over the exposed garlic cloves, seal the foil, and cook in the oven at 350 degrees Fahrenheit for 40 to 45 minutes. When done, let cool and squeeze the garlic bulb; the cloves will pop right out. Mash and use for wonderful garlicky dips or in mashed potatoes, or any dish where a bit of the gourmet flare is desired.

### **Citrus Zest**

Orange, lime, or lemon zest is a great way to add a gourmet touch to your everyday dishes. A little added citrus zest will change the flavor profile of the most basic dish. There are many ways

to use citrus zest. Take orange zest and add it to a simple syrup to serve atop vanilla or chocolate ice cream. Lime zest is the key ingredient that turns an ordinary Mexican or Thai dish into a gourmet treat. Lemon zest brightens up fish and chicken and is often used as the secret ingredient in marinades. And, don't forget your vegetables. You can just add salt, pepper, and butter to roasted broccoli, but why not add a sprinkling of lemon zest for that "Wow" factor. Be sure when you zest your citrus that you remove only the bright peel, and not the white fiber underneath, as this has a bitter taste in all citrus. Also, you can dry citrus zest so you don't have to waste any. Just zest the whole fruit, use what you want fresh, and set the rest out on a plate to let dry. Store tightly sealed in the refrigerator for best results.

### **Toasted Nuts and Seeds**

Toasting nuts and seeds brings out the natural oils and enhances the flavor. Once toasted, these aromatic powerhouse ingredients can be added to many basic dishes to give them a gourmet boost. One favorite is toasted pine nuts, which can be used in so many ways. A simple dish is just tossing toasted pine nuts with goat cheese, fresh asparagus, and pasta to create a flavor profile you will want to experience again. Another nut that is versatile is the toasted almond. Not only can you toss them with salads, pasta, and vegetables, but you can also crush them and use as you would normally use flour or bread crumbs for coating chicken, fish, or even beef. The next time you see a variety of nuts or seeds in the grocery store, think about how they would toast up, and add a gourmet twist to your recipes.

Gourmet cooking doesn't have to be difficult or filled with wacky ingredients you've never heard of before, or can't get in your regular grocery store. A fresh new outlook on your everyday ingredients can make a huge difference in taste and quality. Cooking gourmet may be easier than you ever imagined when you start rethinking what you have in your very own pantry.

## **Enjoy Eclectic Gourmet Cooking On A Budget In Your Very Own Kitchen**

By definition, an eclectic gourmet is someone who doesn't have a preference for certain types of food, but instead, enjoys trying new things from around the world. These food-enthusiasts are looking for distinct tastes rather than being stuck on certain ingredients. They also are on a hunt for different methods of cooking, from the traditional saute to the Tandoori of India there is a wide variety of cooking methods to explore.

### **Think Long Term to Understand Real Value**

When the eclectic gourmet is shopping, he or she is thinking long term when it comes to purchases. For instance, a jar of tahini, gourmet balsamic vinaigrette, small capers, or exotic mushrooms, can be a bit high for the budget. But when you understand these products will probably last for a long time because you use very little in a dish, the cost falls within the realm of possibility.

Thinking long term when it comes to more expensive ingredients is helpful when it comes to meal planning, too. The trick is to buy in the largest amount possible to keep the price lower and to have on hand for as many meals as possible. With a pantry shelf or refrigerator well stocked with just a few gourmet ingredients, you can try new dishes easily and without the added effort of shopping around again.

### **Budget Friendly Gourmet Baking**

Baking is another way the eclectic gourmet can experience new flavors within a limited budget. In general, baking ingredients are similar for many cuisines and a good stash of baking essentials will last a long time. Most baking ingredients can be found to be fairly inexpensive as a whole, so you can afford to stock up on a variety of grains and flours to bake up gourmet treats any time without spending a fortune.

With a couple turns of the rolling pin or twist of the wrist, a warm wonderful aroma will be wafting from your oven, and you can enjoy gourmet pastries and breads for only a few dollars each. Take time to master the art of garlic naan, or rich cream-filled pastries from Italy. Try your hand at baked delights such as the dough wrapped mochi ice cream from Asian cultures. With just a little practice and the right ingredients, you can produce gourmet baked goods at budget prices.

### **Turn Leftovers Loose with New Flavors**

For a true eclectic gourmet on a budget, re-purposing leftovers to make an entirely new meal is an excellent way to go. Rather than just plating up your leftover steak dinner the same way you had it last night, take the ingredients and turn them into something new. Thin slice that steak and toss it in with stir fried vegetables and spicy chili sauce in a fajita. Take the mashed potatoes and mix them with roasted garlic and use as a base for your thick and rich seafood chowder. And that roasted chicken can easily be shredded and blended with a creamy yogurt curry sauce and served over Japanese noodles.

Even leftover chicken noodle soup can get a gourmet bump by adding tamari, bamboo shoots, and bean sprouts. Just because a food is ordinary doesn't mean you can't make it extraordinary with a few simple ingredients you already have on hand. Leftovers are the perfect opportunity to try really eclectic cuisine without destroying the budget because the dish has already been prepared and paid for. It's the ultimate way to stretch your dollar without risking a lot.

Just because you're trying to cook a variety of eclectic cuisine doesn't mean you have to break your budget. Gourmet cuisine can be found anywhere at any price, you just have to know how to find it. You don't need to spend a fortune cooking fun, eclectic gourmet meals. The eclectic gourmet is a smart gourmet!

## **Unusual Ingredients To Turn A Mundane Dish Into A Gourmet Meal**

Gourmet cooking is a great way to spice up your life. "Sure, I'd love to cook gourmet," you say, "but it is too rich for my budget." This all depends on how you define gourmet. If it is a new taste you are looking for, then a simple combination of spices like rosemary and cracked black pepper on your popcorn might be gourmet. If more wild ingredients are what you're looking for, then all it takes is a little imagination and a willingness to give new foods a taste. Let's take a look at a few gourmet ingredients that can perk up any mealtime:

### **Tahini**

Typically an ingredient used in Indian dishes, tahini is also great for most dishes where a spicy peanut flavor is needed. Whisking tahini together with some oil and a little apple cider vinegar makes a fantastic Asian inspired salad dressing. A glass jar of tahini will probably cost about ten dollars, but a little bit goes a long way. Just to give you an idea, a tablespoon is all that is needed in a very large dish of hummus. Keep your tahini in the fridge to ensure freshness and to help your investment stretch out over a longer period of time. To estimate the expense over the lifetime of a bottle of tahini, you're looking at only a dollar or two a month.

### **Kudzu**

Yes, this is the green vine you see taking over the side of the highway. Believe it or not, this legume, native to China, can be used in a variety of gourmet ways. Its root can be powdered and used to thicken soups and stews, or used as a coating for fried foods. The greens of the kudzu vine can be used in salads or boiled like collards or turnip greens to give your favorite dish a new taste. To make it even more exotic or gourmet, the flowers can be made into a jelly, deep fried, or just used as an edible garnish or in a salad.

### **Quinoa**

Often mistaken for a grain, quinoa is a small, round seed, extremely nutritious, a complete protein containing all the essential amino acids, and a terrific source of dietary fiber. This versatile food, which was not that long ago considered a rare gourmet food, is a great gluten-free substitute for rice or small pasta. Quinoa has a mild nutty flavor and comes in several varieties. It can be used in soups, casseroles, as side dishes and cold salads. You can even germinate quinoa and use it as you would any sprout on a salad or sandwich.

### **Dragon Fruit**

Also known as pitaya or pitahaya, dragon fruit has a similar texture and taste of a kiwi. Packed with enzymes and vitamin C, dragon fruit can be used in fruit salads, to make a cocktail, or even mashed up to help tenderize meat. Not only is dragon fruit a tasty treat, it also makes a great presentation. The skin is inedible, but pretty, so use it as a garnish to make your dish look like a gourmet masterpiece.

### **Anchovies**

Many people are afraid of this gourmet ingredient. The first thought is salty; the next thought is pizza. But, there is so much more to this tiny miracle from the waters. Instead of thinking about a small fish in a can, think of the qualities it holds. Just like soy sauce, anchovies have a salty component to their unique flavor. Coupled with a smokey taste and a kick you can feel in the back of your throat, anchovies can be used to turn a good meal into gourmet. You'd be surprised how many of your favorite restaurant dishes can attribute that wonderful piquant burst of flavor to anchovies.

First, define gourmet for yourself. Then, pick some creative ingredients, preferably ones you have yet to try, and give it a whirl. Don't think about the food you are eating, but instead, research the ingredients and figure out their flavor profiles. Then work from there. Happy gourmet dining!

## **How To Eat Gluten-Free Gourmet Meals From Morning To Night**

Gluten free is thought to be one of the most difficult types of diets to shop for and to cook for. However, a gluten-free diet often yields itself quite well to a gourmet menu. Let's look at some of the choices for a full day of meals that are both gluten free and have a certain gourmet appeal:

### **Breakfast**

This is the time of day that is meant for a gluten free diet. Many foods are naturally gluten free, and when they are not, you'll often find direct substitutes to make the ingredients work for you. The first food we think of for breakfast is eggs. Eggs are a naturally gluten-free food. Other essentials you may consider for a gourmet frittata include ingredients like onions, cheese, chicken sausage, pancetta, and asparagus. Fill up an omelet with veggies and meats and not only do you have a healthy breakfast that is extremely filling, but you can enjoy this gourmet feast while remaining gluten free.

### **Sweet and Salty Snacks**

Treats and snacks, especially sweet ones, can be tricky for the gluten-free diet. If you're limiting your snacking to fruits and nuts, take heart. There is no reason you should have to keep the same old boring snacks on hand when there are so many ways to go gourmet. Using gluten-free baking ingredients, you can make a chocolate dipped almond biscotti or even amaretti cookies. The same goes for salty snacks. Don't just grab a gluten-free bag of corn chips. Give your salty snack a gourmet style and taste. Mix up wonderfully flavorful dips and spreads using Greek yogurt, natural peanut butter, and fresh avocado, lime, and a wide variety of vegetables, herbs, and spices. Gluten-free snacking means fresh, whole ingredients which lends itself very well to a gourmet treat.

### **Salads**

Probably the easiest to adapt to a gluten-free diet are salads. All vegetables are considered gluten free, so making a fresh salad that is out of this world is extremely easy to do. But, you don't want to linger in salad boredom day after day using the same old tired vegetables. To bump up the gourmet factor, try some of the following ingredients in your next salad:

- mango
- almonds
- jicama slaw
- feta cheese
- shallots
- lentils
- lime
- remoulade sauce
- fennel
- cumin

These are just a few items to think about the next time you go salad shopping. There are literally thousands of variations you can create with gluten-free salad ingredients; you just need to stop thinking about what you've always used, and start thinking 'gourmet.'

## **Entrees**

Just think fresh, fresh, fresh, and you'll be on your way to developing a menu of meals that are not only gluten free, but gourmet, as well. Wholesome ingredients like fresh fish, lamb, beef, seafood, and chicken will get you started. Fresh vegetables and fruits used in unusual ways will give your entrees a decidedly gourmet flare. Many Asian inspired dishes lend very well to a gluten free main course. A spicy Thai-style lettuce wrap followed by lime and ginger smothered Hawaiian chicken can make for a great gourmet dinner or lunch. Take a gourmet vacation around the world with gluten-free dishes based on many cultural cooking styles. This is a wide-open arena for cooking gluten-free and gourmet at the same time. Just look at the great foods you can eat on a gluten-free diet and use them in new ways. That's what gourmet cooking is all about.

## **Desserts**

Passing on the usual cakes, cookies, and pies isn't difficult on a gluten-free diet when you have so many other gourmet options available. How much more gourmet can you get than a decadent dessert like chocolate covered fruit? Try a variety of fruit dipped in a chocolate shell coating. Or for something more exotic, try making a balsamic reduction and drizzle over a medley of berries. You could also make a sweet frozen yogurt with pomegranates or other fun fruit. If you are striving for an over-the-top gluten-free gourmet dessert, make a dulce de leche crème brulee using condensed milk, vanilla, sugar, eggs and a pinch of salt. It's simple and oh so gourmet!

Eating gluten-free doesn't mean giving up your gourmet tastes. In many ways, the foods that are gluten-free are the ingredients most desirable in gourmet cooking. Think about the freshest, most colorful and flavorful food items in your grocery store and you'll find a wealth of gluten-free ingredients among them. Now just mix them up and use your imagination to create your gourmet gluten-free day.



## **Cook Italian Gourmet On A Budget By Keeping A Few Simple Tips In Mind**

Spaghetti and meatballs is always a great way to cook Italian style meals, but as-is, it is not exactly considered gourmet. Cooking gourmet Italian on a budget means doing things a little differently around your house at dinner time. There are a few things you need to do to switch up basic Italian cooking for gourmet Italian cooking. Let's take a look at some ideas for cooking Italian gourmet within a tight budget:

### **Take the Time to Cook**

Believe it or not, you will not find a little lady in Italy cooking an entire meal in under thirty minutes. And no, you won't hear a "ding" coming from a microwave before a gourmet Italian meal is served. You would be surprised at the difference it makes in the taste of the meal when you actually take the time to cook a meal from scratch – just like authentic Italian cooking is done in Italy.

Flavors develop over time and if you are just reheating something previously flash-cooked, you will not get the true gourmet flavors you are trying to achieve. In a tomato sauce, for instance, the spices you use are fully developed in the acidity of the tomato. Once broken down or developed, the oils in the sauce become enhanced with the flavor of the spices and infuse throughout the dish. Because you take the time to actually cook the dish correctly, you get an entirely new flavor than you would if you rushed the process.

Several techniques, like toasting seasonings and nuts, as well as crushing herbs and spices, take time, and are done for a reason. Infusing oils with seasonings and herbs is another technique you'll find in Italian cooking that takes planning and time. Again, there is a reason for these steps, and the proof is in the flavor. Time taken for these methods can make the difference between basic dishes and gourmet meals.

### **Learn About the Culture**

Okay, so you are asking what the culture has to do with cooking gourmet Italian. That is a great question. And the answer might surprise you a bit.

Technically, learning about the culture makes absolutely no physical difference to the dish itself. Nope, none. If you tried the dish before learning about the culture and after, the results would be the same. Except, studies have shown that people who throw themselves into another culture begin to pick up on the slight variations and derivations in cuisine. By learning about the culture, you are effectively changing the taste of the dish in your mind, and raising your expectations.

By immersing yourself in the culture, you will begin to gain a better understanding of why certain ingredients are used in the region. You will begin to look for these ingredients more prominently in your own cooking. The reasons ingredients became prevalent in a culture or region usually has a story, and that story adds to the flavor of the dish, both physically and emotionally.

### **Learn Which Ingredients You Can Skimp On**

There are some ingredients that take a regular dish to an outstanding level. These are the ingredients where quality matters most. When you learn what ingredients are most important to the gourmet appeal of a cultural dish, you will pay a little extra for that, while skimping on other, less dramatic ingredients. Not only will your dishes be superb, but you will also pay less than trying to go all out on all of the products.

In Italian cooking, there are some basic ingredients you can usually skimp on in price. These items often include dried spices and most grains. Depending on your area, many times frozen or canned produce are a wise choice rather than buying fresh produce, which may not be that fresh in your area.

On the other hand, the ingredients most Italians seek quality in is olive oil, pasta, and breads or doughs. There is a definite benefit to choosing the best available quality in these foods. Not all olive oils are created alike, and there are varieties to consider for different dishes. Pasta, when made properly, takes a special touch, and these gourmet pasta products make all the difference in a proper Italian pasta dish. So, spend your money wisely, where it matters most, and save on the less fussy ingredients.

When you attempt to take your Italian dishes from ordinary to gourmet, your meals will turn out more like the ones made in the Italian bistros and less like the ones in the freezer section when you use these basic suggestions. Gourmet Italian cooking doesn't require a cooking class in Tuscany, but it does require some smart choices in technique and ingredients.

## **Cook Caribbean Gourmet On A Budget With Just A Few Inspired Methods**

Dreaming of a getaway vacation to the Caribbean? Why not give yourself a quick escape to the Islands in the comfort of your own kitchen? Cooking Caribbean inspired gourmet dishes can give you a lift while leaving your wallet intact. You can transform your kitchen into the next best thing to a beach-side hammock. Let's take a look at a few methods to set an Island cuisine mood:

### **Make Your Own Seasonings**

Many of the store bought seasonings are not only overpriced, but are also not authentically accurate. These prepackaged seasonings are often watered-down versions which cater to a mediocre palate. But, you want to cook gourmet and authentic! Your palate does not want to be babied.

Making a blend of authentic Caribbean seasonings is simple. With your own perfect blend, you can transform a basic Caribbean inspired dish into the gourmet meal it was meant to be. Do the research before you start shopping. Stick with authentic spices. You'll find many recipes for Caribbean spice blends, and it will take some time to sift through them.

In order to stay within your budget, it is usually best to buy spices in bulk. Spices will last a long time when stored properly, so consider a higher investment in the beginning and it will even out over the long haul.

It's well worth the time and trouble researching and creating your own spice blends. When you find that perfect blend that suits your taste, you are well on your way to turning ordinary island fare into Caribbean gourmet cuisine.

### **Use Traditional Cooking Techniques**

The best way to achieve gourmet greatness is to use the same techniques as the gourmet chefs. Learning techniques doesn't mean you have to go out and buy the same equipment; there are ways to use what you already have and modify your cooking style. For instance, if you don't have a large cast iron pot to help sear meats, a large stock pot will often do the trick.

Learning techniques straight from the culture you are trying to emulate is a great way to capture the authentic and gourmet flavors of the Caribbean islands. And while there are so many islands, you can pull from a wealth of different styles to accommodate your taste buds. When you begin to cook like the culture you are trying to copy, your food begins to taste more and more like it should.

Expand your research into cooking techniques beyond the cooking channel and recipe books. Oftentimes, travel shows and books give a more well-rounded look at cooking authentic dishes. As a matter of fact, you may want to start your research in the travel section of the library before you even choose recipes. Many travel writers intersperse their travel-logs with very colorful descriptions of the local cuisine, usually based on the streets of a village, that will give you a basis for your understanding of a region's cultural style and taste.

## **Serve Your Meal Authentically**

Many Caribbean meals are served in the center of a large table surrounded by a large group of family and friends. In order to gain some similarity to this style of gourmet dining at your next large gathering, why not plan a pot luck style dinner?

Gather your hungry friends and family together for a pot luck meal with huge bowls and platters of Caribbean inspired food in the center of a large table. This shared meal is a great way for many people to enjoy a gourmet meal without any one person spending too much money. And, this method of dining emulates the Caribbean lifestyle very well.

This type of meal also lends itself well to a wide variety of dishes from various regions. While one person brings arroz con pollo, another person may bring jerk chicken, and yet another person may try their hand at fried plantains. This will give you and your guests the truest experience of Caribbean gourmet. You'll be enjoying this wonderful island treat in a typical Caribbean fashion, with many people sharing a large meal filled with a variety of spicy, delicious, gourmet dishes.

If you're looking to create gourmet Caribbean food on a budget, start right here. You'll find you can easily recreate an Island feeling in the aroma of your homemade spice combinations, the authentic cooking techniques, and the ambiance of the meal service itself, when you follow these simple tips. Cooking gourmet Caribbean cuisine doesn't have to be expensive, you just have to learn to cook it right!

## **Cook Cajun Gourmet On A Budget By Keeping It Authentic**

Deep in the heart of Louisiana, out of the exile of a group of Acadians, a culture was born. Out of that culture a unique style of cooking was birthed and thrives today. The Cajun style cuisine is one of the most sought after cooking styles in the nation.

It can be easy to cook a gourmet Cajun cuisine on a budget, but you have to keep a few things in mind - flavor profiles, traditional ingredients, and authenticity. Let's take a look at a few tips to get you on the right track:

### **Use Authentic Cajun Flavor Profile**

Stereotypes abound in Cajun cooking. One in particular is that all Cajun food is very spicy. While many of the dishes found in Cajun cuisine are made with spicy ingredients, the goal is not to singe the roof of your mouth. Instead, the term you want to learn is "flavor profile." When you learn about authentic ingredients in Cajun cooking, you find an underlying flavor profile that may, at times, be spicy and hot, but is just as often sweet and smooth.

One familiar flavor profile is found in Tabasco. While it is often used in the traditional red beans and rice dishes, the heat is often an afterthought. It is the vinegar undercurrents that help make the dish what it is and brings all the flavors together. If this were not the case, a milder Tabasco would never have made it to market.

If you taste-test a variety of hot sauces, you'll find a wide range of heat, which proves it's not all about the heat. It is more about the sweet or tangy background taste that lingers on the palate and enhances the warmth as it crawls down to the belly and up into the sinuses. Think of the heat of the sauce as the vehicle for moving the other flavors around the body.

True, Cajuns do like their heat, but you can often use sauces and spices that compliment the ingredients in the dish without adding an extreme bit of heat. As long as it fits in a similar flavor profile, you can add a variety of seasonings. Again, think tangy vinegar and sweet hidden flavors.

Of course, any Cajun meal is laced with a liberal dose of cayenne pepper and bay leaves. Once you get those two flavors infused, the rest is a matter of taste. Again, the flavor profile follows suit; both cayenne and bay leaf offer a deep, woody flavor with a touch of heat and smoke.

### **Use Authentic Cajun Ingredients**

Another way to create gourmet Cajun meals is to use authentic ingredients used in actual old time Cajun recipes. There is no reason to be afraid of ingredients you may not be familiar with. Cajuns have been cooking with things like grits, crawfish, okra, Andouille sausage, and boudin for a good, long time. Not only do these ingredients bring a rich array of flavors, they also introduce some new textures to add to your gourmet palate.

That's not to say that all Cajun ingredients will be desirable to all palates. Some of the ingredients are rather exotic and you don't have to venture into those areas if you don't want to.

You may shy away from things like blood sausage, nutria, and frog legs, and that's alright. There is still a bounty of harvest to fall in love with outside of the swamp. Just cook like a Cajun; always sprinkle joy and love generously when cooking, and you can't miss.

### **Use Authentic Cajun Methods**

Most authentic Cajun dishes begin with some kind of roux. You can't make jambalaya or gumbo without it. Simply put, a roux is a thickener made with oil or butter, and flour. This roux is made unique in Cajun cooking because there is a color wheel you want to follow – the darker the roux, the deeper the Cajun flavor becomes. You'll find a good gourmet Cajun gumbo begins with a “chocolate color” roux. There is some trick to cooking the perfect roux, and this is a technique that any gourmet Cajun cook needs to perfect. Find the right balance in a roux, and you find the perfect Cajun dish.

The “Holy Trinity” refers to the basis for almost all Cajun dishes. Put simply, you need green pepper, onion, and celery, sauted until just tender, to start your recipe. A large, heavy pot or skillet is the Cajun cooks best friend. Put any of your nonstick stuff aside and opt for a cast iron Dutch oven or deep cast iron skillet. Get one pot going with your roux and another with your Holy Trinity and your kitchen will be transformed to a Cajun kitchen on the Bayou.

### **Give Your Everyday Recipes a Cajun Twist**

You can even switch up the gourmet by adding some Cajun flair to your everyday meals. Cabbage and black eyed peas cooked with a little Andouille sausage can offer an entirely different taste experience than your typical preparation. Don't wait to use okra in your gumbo; go ahead and use it in any soup to thicken it up and add an interesting texture. Sprinkle cayenne pepper on your oven fries. Make a dark roux the next time you make beef gravy to give your gravy more depth.

If you're not ready to experiment too much with spices right now, choose a popular Cajun seasoning blend like Tony Chachere's to sprinkle on soups, potatoes, vegetables, seafood, meat, fish, or even eggs to give your basic meals a Cajun kick. These packaged seasonings are a good all-around seasoning experience especially for people just learning to enjoy Cajun flavors.

Using Cajun ingredients in your everyday meal preparation gives you an opportunity to experiment with the different flavors without going all out trying to learn new recipes. If you're not ready to buy a tub of crawfish quite yet, just season up a familiar fish with Cajun seasonings. Before you know it, you'll be moving into more unfamiliar territory... and loving it!

Cajuns are all about cooking with ingredients they found on the land, in the sea, and in the air. They cook big meals to feed hungry people. Cajuns also know how to spice up a meal. So, why not don your chef's hat and spice up your food with a little down-South inspiration. Look at the flavor profiles in a typical Cajun dish, then choose ingredients that are unique to Cajun cooking, and just have fun with the new flavors and textures. You never know what you will come up with, and enjoy!

## Cook Southwest Gourmet On A Budget By Going Beyond Tacos

Southwest cooking doesn't have to mean just tacos and tortilla soup. Southwestern cuisine is a unique blend of flavors and spices, influenced by the Spanish colonial settlers and Native American tribes, as well as our Mexican neighbors. With all of this influence, there is absolutely no reason you should ever get tired of Southwestern cuisine.

This is one cuisine that is extremely budget friendly, even when kicked up a notch or two into gourmet territory. Here are a few ways to transform your everyday Southwest dishes into gourmet style:

### Swap Out Other Recipes with Southwest Ingredients

One of the great concepts of gourmet cooking is that you can take any basic dish and transform it by adding new tastes and textures. You can even take a classic dish from one region and totally change it to represent another part of the world.

For instance, if you were to take an Italian style dish like lasagna, and make it with some Southwestern ingredients, you will get an unusual and delicious variation on an expected meal. Just imagine adding corn, black beans, and chilies to the sauce while topping it off with Oaxaca cheese. Lasagna just got a passport to another hemisphere!

Use this technique as an affordable way to change up your everyday dishes, the ones you make over and over again, and give them a new spin to keep even you guessing where the flavor will end up. Take a look at your recipes and see if you can't choose ingredients from another region to entirely change the dish. It's fun to see, and taste, the results.

### Try Variations on the Same Ingredient

If you are already well-versed in Southwestern cooking, you still have the option to gussy it up by adding new tastes and textures to your favorites. For instance, substitute pork for beef in some of your recipes. You can also add heavy cream or even sour cream to some of your dishes to give it a richer feel on the palate and cut some of the heat out of the chilies.

Here are a few suggestions to try if you wanted to substitute ingredients in your favorite dishes in order to come up with gourmet-style Southwestern meals:

- **Cheese:** Queso Fresco-Casero, Panela, Queso Blanco, Oaxaca, Asadero
- **Chiles:** Anaheim, Poblano, Ancho, Pasillas, Guajillos, Jalapenos, Chipotles, Serranos, Chiles de árbol, Cayenne, Habaneros
- **Herbs and Spices:** Cumin, Coriander, Cilantro, Epazote, Annato Seed
- **Core Ingredients:** Agave, Black Beans, Corn, Figs, Mango, Nopales, Pumpkin, Sunflower Seeds



## Experiment with New Ingredients

Southwest style cooking has a large number of unique ingredients which are amazing tools for bumping up the gourmet factor. With food items like yucca, tomatillo, nopales, jicama, blue corn, and even cactus, you can cook for a month without ever repeating a key ingredient. Don't limit these ingredients to just dinner, either. Try these unique ingredients for breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as breads, desserts, and snacks.

Many of these ingredients can be found at local stores with a little effort in the search. They are generally inexpensive, or they last for a long time which factors the price down per use. Experimenting with new ingredients is always fun and can open your eyes to new possibilities and different ways to cook the same dish. This is especially fun if you've already been cooking Southwest style for a while.

The easiest and quickest way to cook Southwest gourmet cuisine on a budget is to mix typical Southwestern ingredients into your favorite meals. You'll also want to try substituting ingredients within the same category or experiment with a completely new ingredient list. No matter what you decide to do, affordable Southwestern gourmet cuisine is no further away than your kitchen stove.

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