

Temperature a key to drinkable box wine

By Helen Thompson, NPR

Bag-in-the-box wine doesn't have the classiest of reputations. It's usually cheap and in the past at least, has been aimed at less sophisticated consumers. But in recent years, boxed wine has tried to buck the stereotype, whether by gussying up the product packaging or simply putting higher-quality wine in the box.

Still, if you're planning a holiday party and you want to try one of the new-fangled versions, don't think the fancy new packaging is going to protect your wine from going off any better than the old fashioned bottle, scientists say. In fact, it may be worse in some instances.

Temperature is a key factor in a wine's shelf life. "There's common knowledge in the wine industry that you shouldn't keep your wine in a warm place," says Helene Hopfer, a post-doctoral chemist and food sensory scientist at UC Davis, especially if you plan to keep it around awhile. That's because the warmer the wine, the faster oxygen reacts with the compounds inside, which causes the wine to lose some of its aromatic compounds and turn a darker color. Basically, it becomes vinegar.

Hopfer and her colleagues wanted to see how different packaging strategies held up at different temperatures and recently published their results in the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry. They put the same California Chardonnay in five different packages: natural cork, synthetic cork, screw cap, and two kinds of bag-in-box containers. For three months, they stored the wine at three different temperatures: 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 C), 68 degrees

Fahrenheit (20 C), and 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 C).

They chemically analyzed the wine periodically, and a panel of tasters ultimately evaluated the wines' smells, tastes, and looks. At 68 degrees Fahrenheit, the bag-in-box wines showed small differences from the bottled wine, but at 104 degrees Fahrenheit, they aged significantly more quickly than bottled wine. (For what it's worth, the researchers didn't find a significant difference between real cork, fake cork, and screwtops.)

Temperature is something to think about when it comes to wine, says Hopfer. "You often get wines that are thermally damaged if you ship across the country because there can be huge temperature differences during transport."

And while many of us would expect a vacuum-sealed bag to do a better job of keeping oxygen out than a breathable cork, it's not the case. The bag component of bag-in-box wines is made of a thin plastic polymer (polyethylene or polypropylene) that's actually pretty easy for oxygen to cross. Whereas "if you look at the glass bottle, the only way oxygen can get in is through the cork," says Hopfer.

Perhaps the more important finding is that at the colder temperature, boxed wine had basically aged the same as bottled wine. That's because companies have been layering different oxygen-stopping polymers over the initial breathable layer. "They've fine-tuned that bag for the wine industry," she says.

So, if you're stocking up wine for this season's holiday parties, boxed wine can meet your grape expectations. Hopfer advises: "The cooler, the better."

Study offers support for taxing soda and other junk foods

By Karen Kaplan, Los Angeles Times

Want to get people to eat more salad and less junk food? Make vegetables cheaper and soda more expensive.

It's not exactly a new idea, but a study out Tuesday offers some fresh support for those in favor of using sin taxes and subsidies to steer people toward a more healthful diet.

The study, published online by PLoS Medicine, is a meta-analysis of 32 other studies that use statistical modeling to gauge the impact of various tax and subsidy policies. Overall, it found that consumers buy less of something when the price goes up and they buy more of it when the price goes down.

For instance, for each 1 percent increase in the price of a carbonated soft drink, consumption was predicted to fall by 0.02 percent. When it comes to saturated fat, a tax that raised the price by 1 percent was also predicted to reduce consumption by 0.02 percent.

But there was a twist: The tax would prompt people to switch from fatty dairy foods to foods that were higher in salt, sugar and total calories, undermining the reason for the tax in the first place.

On the flip side, mathematical models predicted that reducing the prices of fruits and vegetables by 1 percent would lead to a 0.35 percent increase in consumption, the meta-analysis found. Two of the studies suggested that a subsidy for high-fiber foods would translate into lower consumption of foods that have a lot of saturated fat.

But some models also predicted that if produce became cheaper, people would wind up eating less fish too.

Influencing what shoppers put in their shopping carts is only part of the battle. At the end of the day, the goal of any tax or subsidy is to make people healthier. On this score, some of the models are even less encouraging.

Three studies in the meta-analysis attempted to make a connection between taxes and health, and their combined estimate was that a tax on dairy foods high in saturated fat would lead to an increase in death due to cardiovascular and coronary heart disease. In addition, taxes targeting junk foods in general had the unintended consequence of causing more deaths due to stroke and cardiovascular disease.

In both cases, the study authors wrote, it wasn't that eating less saturated fat or junk food made people unhealthy; whatever they were eating instead of the taxed foods was to blame.

Subsidies seemed to be better than taxes at promoting good health. Two of the three studies examining the health outcomes of fruit and vegetable subsidies predicted a reduction in premature deaths due to cardiovascular or coronary heart disease, stroke or cancer.

It's important to remember that mathematical models can go only so far in predicting real-world outcomes. And there are some real-world experiments involving food taxes and subsidies that bear watching, according to the study authors:

- Denmark has implemented a tax that's the equivalent of \$3.13 per kilogram of saturated fat on foods whose saturated fat content exceeds 2.3 percent.

- France levies a tax of 0.036 euros (5 cents) per liter of sweetened beverages.

–Hungary has introduced a flat tax of 10 forints (5 cents) per food item that's high in total fat, sugar and salt.

The health benefits (if any) of these policies have not yet been evaluated. Studies are sure to come, but even if these countries were to find that fewer of their citizens are dying of heart attacks or diabetes, there's always some guesswork involved in figuring out how much credit should go to the taxes.

This is not a problem American researchers will have to deal with soon. Proposals to tax unhealthful foods are routinely vilified as “nanny state” initiatives that impinge on consumers' right to eat as many Flamin' Hot Cheetos as they'd like, and wash them down with gallons of Orange Crush. Just last month, voters in El Monte and Richmond rejected measures to tax sugary drinks in the name of good health.

Caltrans Meyers' enclave becomes a village of seasonal workers sleeping and eating onsite

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – Aromas of freshly made food waft from a nondescript building tucked off Highway 89. Three hot meals a day are served here. Boarders are upstairs sleeping – in the middle of day.

Today starts week four of winter at the Meyers' Caltrans

depot.

When it's storming out – and it doesn't have to be white stuff that is falling from the sky – the heavy equipment operators are working 12-hour shifts. There may be no time for breaks.

“Anything dealing with our highways we take care of,” Mark Wagener explains during lunch Dec. 5. “There's so much sand on the road we have to clean the catch basins regularly.”



Twelve-hour shifts at the Caltrans kitchen in Meyers are routine for Claire Neville. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Rocks are sliding on the road and storm drains are backed up. Most of the mop up is done by hand.

When it's snowing, Wagener is in a plow truck or grader.

This seasonal facility usually operates from sometime in November through April. Though there was the year it opened in October.

Any city, county, state or federal employee can eat here. Lake Valley personnel and California Highway Patrol officers are dining on Dec. 5. Each meal is \$4.

The lunch crew can put sack lunches together so workers stay nourished throughout their shift.

On Wednesday, heavy equipment mechanic Walt Wimsett and Wagener are relishing the meal in front of them as they sit in the dining area that seems a bit like a cafeteria. The difference is the quality of food.

“This is the best meatloaf I’ve ever had,” Wimsett says. “This reminds me of the cooking I grew up with.”

Real mashed potatoes and green beans are also on his plate. Pudding is available for dessert.

Wagener enjoys fish Fridays the most. He said the choice of a half dozen items from shrimp to salmon to chowder keeps him filled up.

Keeping workers fed

Dennis Russo has been cooking here since 1996 – having been a cook for nearly 50 years. Caltrans has 15 cooks in the state – mostly in snow country. The closest facilities like this to Tahoe are the one at Caples Lake and the two on Interstate 80.

Russo has three people helping him make sure there is plenty of food for the crew. And like any restaurant, it’s a bit of a guessing game to know how many mouths there will be to feed on any given day.

Russo said after a while he’s gotten good at knowing the forecast and figuring out how many workers will be on duty.

It’s a full commercial kitchen that is capable of producing meals for the masses.

Beef ribs with an Asian rub are on the counter. That’s what was served for dinner last night.

Soup is always available. So are fresh fruit and a salad bar.

"We do cookies, cakes, pies. They are spoiled," Claire Neville, one of the cooks, says with a smile.

She said newbies to the Meyers' family – and a family is what they consider themselves – can gain 20 pounds in a season. Healthy and not so healthy items abound. For instance, on Wednesday homemade cinnamon rolls with frosting were whipped up for breakfast. But fresh fruit and yogurt are also available.

The breakfast sandwiches are one of the more popular items first thing in the morning.

Dinners run the gamut from pork, fish, beef – to steak about every 10 days. Burger bars, fresh chili over a hotdog, chicken Monterey and seven-spice chicken are some of the favorites.

Home away from home

Some of Caltrans' employees live nearby and go home at the end of their shift. More than a dozen are in town for the next six months.

Russo is one of them. He has a room upstairs. He calls Oakdale home the rest of the year.

Their quarters are sparse. Rooms are on the second and third floors, off hallways that look like a rundown hotel, or maybe an old college dorm. The worn brown carpet has seen better days. Rooms have twin beds, a sink, closet, dresser and old TV. Down the hall are the communal bathroom and laundry facility.

Towels and sheets are cleaned by a service, but clothing must be laundered by the individual.

On the first floor near the entrance is a break room of sorts. It doubles as a family room. A pool table, foosball, television and comfy couches fill the room.

“If it snows, there are no days off until the sun shines,” Russo says.

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Food waste a low priority for restaurants

By Eliza Barclay, NPR

A row of restaurants in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of Washington, D.C., looks tantalizing – there are Vietnamese, Italian, New American.

But if you walk around to the alley at the back of this row you might gag.

Dumpsters packed with trash are lined up, and they get emptied only twice a week. Which means a lot of food sits here, filling the block with a deep, rank odor.

Some of the Dumpsters aren't properly sealed, so there are grease and putrid juices pooling beneath them. They may attract pigeons, rats, cockroaches, ants or flies, says Robert Corrigan, who runs the New York Rodent Control Academy. The academy trains restaurant workers on how to keep pests away. He says Dumpsters filled with restaurant garbage are one of the main reasons pests are multiplying across the country.

“Even a half a lemon that drops off a Dumpster and rolls underneath a stairwell – tiny flies will lay hundreds of thousands of eggs on that half a lemon,” says Corrigan.

Even when the Dumpsters are emptied, the problem of food waste is just moved somewhere else. Dump trucks transport thousands of tons of food waste every day to landfills. That's where food waste becomes Jean Schwab's problem.

"Food waste is huge," says Schwab, a senior analyst in the waste division at the Environmental Protection Agency. "Food waste is now the No. 1 material that goes into landfills and incinerators."

Schwab says food waste from restaurants makes up 15 percent of all the food that ends up in landfills. And all that food doesn't just take up space and attract pests – it's also changing the climate.

"Because it rots so fast, basically it starts to generate methane really quickly," says Schwab.

Methane is a greenhouse gas that's 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide. And reducing methane emissions from sources like landfills is one of the Environmental Protection Agency's biggest priorities in the fight against climate change.

But in spite of the fact that as much as 10 percent of the food a restaurant buys ends up in landfills, hardly anyone in the restaurant industry gives it a second thought.

"It's just another thing we're used to as a restaurant professional ... the amount of garbage that's thrown out on a nightly basis," says Cruz Goler, head chef at Lupa, an Italian restaurant owned by Mario Batali in New York City. "It can be a little staggering, I guess, but that's just what happens."

Back in Cleveland Park, Logan Cox, executive chef of Ripple restaurant, says chefs obsess over the quality of their vegetables and their technique. They want to make sure everything looks and tastes just right. But food waste comes in low on the long list of priorities.

"I've never taken the time to weigh or measure how much we do throw away," says Cox.

According to Jonathan Bloom, who wrote a book last year called *American Wasteland*, consumers are part of the problem, too. "There's about a half-pound of food waste created per meal served," says Bloom. "That's taking into account both back-and front-of-the-house waste. So restaurants and the customers are both joining forces to waste a whole lot of food."

About three cents of every dollar consumers spend on food away from home ends up in the trash. And that doesn't even include the food left on your plate or the slimy lettuce forgotten in the fridge.

Chris Moyer of the National Restaurant Association says getting restaurants to focus on food waste is a big challenge. Food scraps, of course, are inevitable, but a lot of food waste is still edible.

The hardest part for many restaurants may just be getting the workers to become aware of how much edible food they waste every day. A few years ago, when Moyer was managing a big chain restaurant, he wanted to show his cooks there were plenty of opportunities to reduce waste. So he took away the garbage can.

"You'd be surprised, once you take away the garbage cans, if people have to ask permission to throw something away how little you throw away," says Moyer. "It was really quite amazing."

But Moyer says getting the whole industry to take on food waste is going to take a lot of training and education – that's what the NRA is trying to do with its ConServe program. And as we've reported, Unilever's food division now has a program called United Against Waste.

But habits are harder to change than the menu.

“The hardest part about doing anything to benefit the planet, benefit your bottom line is behavioral change,” says Moyer. “Because that’s really what we’re talking about – changing mindsets, changing behaviors.”

Death cap mushrooms taste good, but have fatal consequences

By Cynthia Hubert, Sacramento Bee

It is a killer disguised in a luscious package.

Amanita phalloides, the mushroom suspected of fatally poisoning four elderly people at a Loomis care home, is commonly called the death cap.

The death cap draws in mushroom hunters with its sturdy stem and smooth, bald top, ranging in color from bronze to greenish yellow, and then kills – it is almost singularly responsible for fatal mushroom poisonings worldwide.

“These mushrooms are very, very sexy,” said Todd Mitchell, a Santa Cruz physician who is leading a national study of an antidote to toxic mushroom poisoning. “They look very attractive in the field. They grow virtually side by side to chanterelles, and they look very robust. They smell quite sweet, and by all accounts are quite delicious.”

In Northern California, they grow abundantly during the fall and early winter, typically sprouting beneath live oak trees. The fungi, which contains a toxic protein that can cause permanent liver and kidney damage, sicken hundreds of people a

year in California. On average, a half-dozen people suffer serious poisonings from the mushrooms annually and one or two die, said Dr. Kent Olson, executive medical director of the California Poison Control System.

Death caps are the primary suspects in the illnesses last month of six people at the Gold Age Villa in Loomis, four of whom have died.

Lilia Tirdea, a caregiver who cooked meals for residents of Gold Age Villa, picked wild mushrooms on the grounds of the care home, then cooked and served them in a gravy for dinner on Tuesday evening, Nov. 6.

By Thursday, nearly everyone who lived at the care home was terribly ill.

At first the home's owner, Raisa Oselsky, who was not home when Tirdea served the mushrooms, suspected a rampant case of the flu. But after speaking with Tirdea, she realized that of the home's six residents, only one had not eaten the mushroom dish. That person was fine.

Everyone else, including Tirdea, ended up in area emergency rooms.

Barbara Marie Lopes, 87, a spirited woman who raised three daughters on her own and worked for decades as an aircraft mechanic at the former McClellan Air Force Base, died Nov. 9. So did Teresa Jania Olesniewicz, 73, who was a physician in her native Poland before she came to the United States in the 1970s.

A week after the two women's deaths, officials announced a third fatality tied to the mushroom gravy: Frank Warren Blodgett, 90. On Thursday, Dorothy Mary Hart, 92, was the fourth to die.

Tirdea and one other person were recovering from the

poisonings as of late last week, officials said.

Appeared to be the flu

In the quaint confines of Gold Age Villa, Lopes, whose memory was fading but otherwise was fairly healthy, enjoyed watching TV, playing cards and keeping company with other residents and staffers, said her daughter Annette St. Urbain.

"They were all friends," St. Urbain said. "Raisa and the rest of the staff were wonderful to my mother. We have no animosity toward them at all."

Lopes, who stood just 5 feet tall, was raised on a farm in South Dakota, her daughter said. After moving to California, she took a job at McClellan inspecting aircraft.

"She was our own little Rosie the Riveter, small enough to fit into the nose cones" of planes to check for debris, said St. Urbain. "She was very proud of her work."

Besides her children, her daughter said, Lopes' great loves included big-band music, dancing and solving jigsaw puzzles. Lopes had a strong faith in God and "above all, taught me forgiveness," St. Urbain said.

Lopes had developed a tricky left knee, nerve pain from a bout with shingles and memory problems. She moved into Gold Age Villa nearly two years ago and was happy there, her daughter said.

On the Thursday evening after Lopes ate the poison mushrooms, St. Urbain got a call from Oselsky, telling her that Lopes was ill with what appeared to be the flu. Early the next morning, she heard from an emergency room doctor at Sutter Roseville hospital who said Lopes was near death from wild mushroom poisoning.

"I thought, 'Mushroom poisoning? What?'" St. Urbain recalled. She contacted other relatives and headed to the hospital.

Lopes was conscious when they arrived, even joking, St. Urbain said. But within hours, she was dead.

"It was just a sad mistake. A lapse in judgment," St. Urbain said of the circumstances of her mother's death. "I feel terrible for everyone."

A fatal accident

Oselsky declined to talk to a reporter when approached at the care home last week. "We are having a hard time here," she said, and referred all questions to her attorney.

"She is very, very distraught about the whole situation, very concerned for everyone affected and their families," said the lawyer, James Hazen.

The California Department of Social Services has determined that the poisonings were accidental. Even so, Tirdea no longer is allowed to work in care facilities licensed by the state.

Regulators have deemed Tirdea a "threat to the health and safety" of clients, according to a report issued last week. But she will not face criminal charges. A police investigation concluded that "this was an accident," said Placer County Sheriff's Lt. Mark Reed.

Reed was among those who interviewed Tirdea and others at the care home about the poisonings.

"At first you hear about something like this and you think, 'Well, all of the sudden all of these people were sick from food that someone gave them. Was there some sort of sinister motive or foul play?'" said Reed.

"Then we found out the caregiver herself picked the mushrooms and thought they were good to eat. She served them up, and she also got sick. We determined that there was no criminal intent. It's just a tragedy all the way around."

Gold Age Villa, which is perched on a hill amid equestrian property along Horseshoe Bar Road, continues to be licensed to care for up to six people ages 60 and older. Residents of such residential care facilities usually require less intensive care than those in nursing homes, although caretakers are available around the clock, said social services department spokesman Michael Weston.

Oselsky has held a license to operate the home since 2007, and the facility has an unremarkable record with state regulators. Following an inspection earlier this year Gold Age Villa received one citation, for “excessive water temperature” in its faucets.

The type and scope of the tragedy at Gold Age Villa, Weston said, “is like nothing that I can recall. We have had cases of where a fire killed a number of people, but something like this is highly unusual.”

The culprit

The apparent culprit, the death cap mushroom, is one of several toxic fungi that grow in California.

In the north state, the death cap generally grows under live oak trees, but recently has been found alongside pine trees in Marin County, among other places.

“They look pretty good, almost identical to an edible variety,” Olson said. But they contain deadly amatoxins, a protein that the body has trouble eliminating. Amatoxins cannot be killed by heating, Olson said.

Initial symptoms of mushroom poisoning include abdominal pain, vomiting and severe diarrhea. Symptoms may not surface for six to 12 hours.

Once consumed, the mushroom’s toxin attacks the lining of the gut, causing fluids to “pour out of the system” and leading to

life-threatening dehydration, Olson said. The amatoxins then get absorbed by the liver, damaging it and other vital organs. At that point, patients often need a liver transplant to survive.

The earlier the treatment, the better the prospects for recovery.

Typically, patients receive intravenous fluids to replace those they have lost, along with high doses of penicillin to prevent the poison from being absorbed by liver cells, said Olson. Doctors may also give them activated charcoal as an antidote.

People who consume a “mild to moderate” amount of toxic mushrooms and get treatment before they become severely dehydrated stand an 80 percent to 90 percent chance of survival, experts said.

A new treatment may lead to even better recovery rates, said Mitchell.

Since 2009, he and colleagues have been leading a national study of a drug derived from milk thistle that is showing promise, he said.

More than 60 patients have received the intravenous drug, called Legalon SIL, including one of the six people sickened in Loomis, Mitchell said. That person survived, he said.

Lopes and Olesniewicz had already died by the time the surviving patient received the investigational drug, he said. The fourth person whose death officials attributed to mushroom poisoning, Dorothy Mary Hart, did not receive the Legalon treatment, nor did Blodgett.

Their stories, said Olson, should serve as a warning to Northern Californians who stumble across enticing patches of mushrooms while hiking, exploring or mowing the backyard.

“The lesson I would take from all of this is to never eat a mushroom that has not been properly identified by an expert,” said Olson.

Time to enter holiday cookie contest

Lake Tahoe's *The Weekly* magazine is looking for holiday cookie recipes.

The inaugural Christmas Cookie Contest gives everyone the chance to show off his or her baking talents. Everyone is welcome to enter their favorite, original recipe in the contest for the chance to win a gift certificate to Spindleshanks Wine Bar & Bistro in Tahoe Vista.

It's easy to enter. Just drop off a dozen tasty cookies, along with the recipe at *The Weekly* office in Carnelian Bay between 10am and noon Dec. 4, to be judged in the contest.

All types of Christmas cookies are welcome, and kids will be encouraged to enter their creations, as well. (Kids will be judged in a separate category.)

The winning recipes will be featured in the Dec. 13 Christmas edition of *The Weekly*.

The rules:

- 1 dozen cookies must be submitted no later than noon on Dec. 4 (please use a recyclable plate).

- All types of cookies are eligible for the contest.
- All recipes must be original recipes.
- Kids are welcome to submit cookies, as well, and will be judged in a separate category.
- Each entry must include a the name, phone number and hometown of the cook, as well as a complete, typed recipe. Include all ingredients, serving size and any tips on preparation.
- Cookies will be judged *The Weekly* staff.
- The winner(s) will have the recipe(s) featured in the Dec. 13 edition, along with a photograph of them. Winner(s) will be required to return to the office on Dec. 5 for a photograph.

All questions may be sent to editor@tahoethisweek.com or call (530) 546.5995, ext. 102. *The Weekly* is located at 200 Center St. in Carnelian Bay at the corner of Highway 28 (directly across from Gar Woods).

Forget what the foodies and gourmands tell you

By Mehmet Oz, *Time*

There's nothing like a block of frozen spinach to make you feel bad about your family dinner. There's good food and bad food and pretty food and ugly food—and then there's the

frozen-spinach block. By any rights, this is not something you should want to eat. The picture on the box looks lovely, and the very idea of eating spinach is healthy. But what you find inside is a frosty, slightly slimy, algae-colored slab.

Somewhere out there—maybe just a five-minute drive from your house—a farmer's market is selling fresh, organic leaf spinach that might have been sprouting from the soil an hour ago. This, as we're told by any number of glossy cookbooks, TV cooking shows, food snobs and long-winded restaurant menus, is how we're supposed to eat now. It may be more expensive than that frozen block of spinach. And more perishable. And more complicated to prepare. But it's all worth it because it's so much healthier than the green ice from the supermarket. Right?

Wrong. Nutritionally speaking, there is little difference between the farmer's-market bounty and the humble brick from the freezer case. It's true for many other supermarket foods too. And in my view, dispelling these myths—that boutique foods are good, supermarket foods are suspect and you have to spend a lot to eat well—is critical to improving our nation's health. Organic food is great, it's just not very democratic. As a food lover, I enjoy truffle oil, European cheeses and heirloom tomatoes as much as the next person. But as a doctor, I know that patients don't always have the time, energy or budget to shop for artisanal ingredients and whip them into a meal.

The rise of foodie culture over the past decade has venerated all things small-batch, local-farm and organic—all with premium price tags. But let's be clear: you don't need to eat like the 1% to eat healthily. After several years of research and experience, I have come to an encouraging conclusion: the American food supply is abundant, nutritionally sound, affordable and, with a few simple considerations, comparable to the most elite organic diets. Save the cash; the 99% diet can be good for you.

This advice will be a serious buzz kill for specialty brands and high-end food companies marketing the exclusive hyperhealthy nature of their more expensive products. But I consider it a public-health service to the consumer who has to feed a family of five or the person who wants to make all the right choices and instead is alienated and dejected because the marketing of healthy foods too often blurs into elitism, with all the expense and culinary affectation that implies. The fact is, a lot of the stuff we ate in childhood can be good for you and good to eat—if you know how to shop.

Of course, there's a lot to steer clear of in the supermarket. Food technologists know what we like and make sure we always have our favorites. So alongside meat and fruits and veggies, there's also pasta, jelly, chips, pizza, candy, soda and more. Is it any wonder two-thirds of us are overweight or obese? Is it any wonder heart disease still kills so many of us?

So let's take a tour of the supermarket in search of everyday foods we can reclaim as stalwarts of a healthy diet. We'll pick up some meat and some snacks too, and we'll do a fair amount of label reading as we go. We'll even make a stop at the ice cream section. (I promise.) But let's start in the most underrated aisle of all: frozen foods.

Frozen, canned – and good?

It was in the 1920s that the idea of freezing fresh vegetables into preserved, edible rectangles first caught hold, when inventor Clarence Birdseye developed a high-pressure, flash-freezing technique that operated at especially low temperatures. The key to his innovation was the flash part: comparatively slow freezing at slightly higher temperatures causes large ice crystals to form in food, damaging its fibrous and cellular structure and robbing it of taste and texture. Birdseye's supercold, superfast method allowed only small crystals to form and preserved much more of the vitamins and freshness.

In the 90 years since, food manufacturers have added a few additional tricks to improve quality. Some fruits and vegetables are peeled or blanched before freezing, for example, which can cause a bit of oxidation—the phenomenon that makes a peeled apple or banana turn brown. But blanching also deactivates enzymes in fruit that would more dramatically degrade color as well as flavor and nutrient content. What's more, the blanching process can actually increase the fibrous content of food by concentrating it, which is very good for human digestion.

Vitamin content is a bit more complex. Water-soluble vitamins—C and the various B's—degrade somewhat during blanching but not when vegetables are steamed instead. Steaming is preferable but it takes longer, and many manufacturers thus don't do it. The package will tell you how the brand you're considering was prepared. Other vitamins and nutrients, including carotenoids, thiamin and riboflavin, are not at all affected by freezing, which means you can eat frozen and never feel that you are shortchanging yourself.

Canning is an even older type of preservation; it's also quite possibly the single most significant technological leap in food storage ever conceived. Developed in the early 19th century by an inventor working for the French navy, canning is a two-step process: first, heat foods to a temperature sufficient to kill all bacteria, and then seal them in airtight containers that prevent oxidation. Not all food comes out of the can as appetizing as it was before it went in. Some fruits and vegetables do not survive the 250F heating that is needed to sterilize food and can become soft and unappetizing. And in decades past, food manufacturers had way too free a hand with the salt shaker. That is not the case any longer for all brands of canned foods. A simple glance at the nutrition label (which itself didn't exist in the salty old days) can confirm which brands are best.

As with frozen vegetables, fiber and nutrient content usually

stay high in canned foods. Some research indicates that carotenes, which can reduce cancer rates and eye problems, may be more available to the body following the routine heat treatment. What's more, canned foods are bargain foods. In an April study led by dietitian Cathy Kapica of Tufts University, nutritionists crunched the cost-per-serving numbers of some canned foods vs. their fresh counterparts, factoring in the time needed to prepare and the amount of waste generated (the husks and cobs of fresh corn, for example). Again and again, canned foods came up the winner, with protein-rich canned pinto beans costing \$1 less per serving than dried, for example, and canned spinach a full 85 percent cheaper than fresh.

Food on the hoof, fin and wing

I live in a vegetarian household, so I simply don't have the opportunity to eat a lot of meat at family meals. But I am not opposed to meats that are served in an appropriate portion size and are well prepared. Your first step is deciding what kind of meat you want and how you want to cook it.

There's no question that free-range chickens and grass-fed, pasture-dwelling cows lead happier—if not appreciably longer—lives than animals raised on factory farms. They are also kept free of hormones and antibiotics and are less likely to carry communicable bacteria like *E. coli*, which are common on crowded feedlots. If these things are important to you and you have the money to spend, then by all means opt for pricier organic meats.

But for the most part, it's OK to skip the meat boutiques and the high-end butchers. Nutritionally, there is not much difference between, say, grass-fed beef and the feedlot variety. The calories, sodium and protein content are all very close. Any lean meats are generally fine as long as the serving size is correct—and that means 4 to 6 ounces, roughly the size of your palm. A modest serving like that can be

difficult in a country with as deep a meat tradition as ours, where steak houses serve up 24-ounce portions and the term meat and potatoes is a synonym for good eating. But good eating isn't always healthy eating, and we're not even built to handle so much animal protein, since early humans simply did not have meat available at every meal. Sticking with reasonable portions two or three times a week will keep you in step with evolution.

Preparation is another matter, and here there are no secrets. Those burgers your kids (and probably you) love can be fine if they're lean and grilled, the fat is drained and you're not burying them under cheese, bacon and high-fructose ketchup and then packing them into a bun the size of a catcher's mitt.

Chicken is a separate issue. In my mind, there is nothing that better captures where we have gone wrong as a food culture than the countless fried-chicken fast-food outlets that dot highways. Fried chicken is consumed literally in buckets—and that's got to be a bad sign. What's more, even at home, frying chicken wrecks the nutritional quality of the meat.

Indeed, chicken is so lean and tasty it can actually redeem a lot of foods that are otherwise dietary bad news. I don't have a problem with tacos, for example, if you do them right. A chicken taco is a better option than beef, and a fish taco is the best choice of all. All the raw ingredients are available in supermarkets, and what you make at home will be much healthier than what you get when you go out.

There's even goodness to be found in some of the supermarket's seemingly most down-market fish and meats: those sold in cans. One great advantage to canning is that it does not affect protein content, making such foods as canned tuna, salmon and chicken excellent sources of nutrition. Canned salmon in particular is as nourishing as if you caught a fresh salmon that afternoon. It's also easy to prepare: you can put it on a salad or serve it with vegetables and have dinner ready in

minutes.

Let's also take a moment to celebrate the tuna-salad sandwich, which is to lunch what the '57 Chevy is to cars—basic and brilliant. Sure, there are ways to mess it up, with heaping mounds of mayonnaise and foot-long hoagie rolls. But tuna is loaded with niacin, selenium, vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids, and a sandwich done lean and right, on whole-wheat bread with lettuce and tomatoes, is comfort food at its finest with little nutritional blowback.

Still, some of these cans are land mines. Plenty of products include flavor enhancers such as sugar, salt and MSG. And there are canned meats that really are nothing but bad news. Vienna sausage is the type of food that keeps us heart surgeons in business. As for hot dogs and luncheon meats like salami and bologna, just don't go there. They're way too high in nitrites and sodium to do you even a bit of good.

Guilty pleasures

To me, ice cream is a sacred food. When I was a boy, my father would drive me to the local ice cream store on Sundays. We would spend the half-hour car ride talking, and I got to know my dad better through these conversations. It wasn't really about the ice cream; it was about time spent together. I even made the decision to become a doctor in that very ice cream store—something, perhaps, about the sense of well-being I was experiencing. I have used ice cream as a family focal point with my own children, and to this day it is an indicator of an occasion. Ice cream should be in your life too. What's more, it's not even a bad or unhealthy food.

For starters, the protein and calcium in ice cream are great. And some of the ingredients in better ice creams are good for you too, including eggs (yes, eggs, a terrific source of protein and B vitamins and perfectly O.K. if your cholesterol is in check) and tree nuts such as walnuts, almonds, cashews

and pistachios. As with most other foods, the problem is often the amount consumed. A serving size is typically half a cup, but that's a rule that's almost always flouted, which is a shame. Overdoing ice cream not only takes its toll on your health but also makes the special commonplace. I often say that no food is so bad for you that you can't have it once – or occasionally.

Peanut butter has none of the enchanted power of ice cream. It's a workaday food, a lunch-box food—and an irresistibly delicious food. The allegedly pedestrian nature of the supermarket is perfectly captured in the mainstream, brand-name, decidedly nongourmet peanut butters lining the shelves. But here again, what you're often seeing is a source of quality nutrition disguised as indulgent junk.

Peanut butter does have saturated fat, but 80 percent of its total fats are unsaturated. That's as good as olive oil. It's also high in fiber and potassium. But many brands stuff in salt and sweeteners as flavoring agents, so read the labels. Sometimes supermarket brands turn out to be the best.

And guess what? Preserves and jams without added sugar can be great sources of dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C and potassium, and whole-wheat bread is high in fiber, selenium, manganese and more. So by shopping right and being careful with portions, we have fully redeemed that great, guilty American staple: the PB&J.

Snack foods are a different kind of peril, but if there's one thing Americans have gotten right, it's our surpassing love of salsa. Year after year it ranks near the top of our favorite snack foods, especially during football season. I think salsa is a spectacular food because it's almost always made of nothing more than tomatoes, onions and cilantro and usually has no preservatives. And remember, those tomatoes contain lycopene, a powerful antioxidant that helps battle disease and inflammation.

Another great south-of-the-border staple is guacamole. Its principal ingredient is, of course, avocados, which are loaded with the happiest of fats: the unsaturated kind that help prevent heart disease. They are also rich in vitamin K (over 50 percent of your recommended daily intake from just half an avocado) and vitamin C. But keep portions in check to hold the line on both calories and sodium.

Finding something to scoop up those dips is a problem. Tortilla chips fried in lard and covered with salt are simply not a good idea. Baked pita chips (ideally unsalted) are great, but there's no way around the fact that they're pricier than tortilla, potato and corn chips.

The beauty of simplicity

Pretty much any aisle in any supermarket has foods that you might think mark you as a culinary primitive but are worth considering. Pickles? Sure, they're loaded with salt, so read labels and exercise care, but they're high in vitamin K and low in calories, and the vinegar in them can improve insulin sensitivity. Baked beans? Pass up the ones cooked with bacon or excessive sweetening, but otherwise, they're a great source of protein and fiber.

Meanwhile, the condiments section has mustard—extremely low in calories, high in selenium and available in a zillion different varieties, so you'll never get bored. Popcorn? Absolutely, but go for the air-popped, stove-top variety instead of the microwavable kind covered in oils and artificial butter flavorings. And chocolate! Ah, chocolate. Stick with dark — 65 percent cocoa — and don't overdo the portions. I know, that's not easy, but do it right and you'll get all the antioxidant benefits of flavonols without all the calories and fat.

Throughout the developed world, we are at a point in our evolution at which famine, which essentially governed the rise

and fall of civilizations throughout history, is no longer an acute threat. And we know more about the connection between food and health than ever before – down to the molecular level, actually.

This has provided us the curious luxury of being fussy, even snooty, about what we eat, considering some foods, well, below our station. That's silly. Food isn't about cachet. It's about nourishment, pleasure and the profound well-being that comes from the way meals draw us together.

Even foods that I have described as no-go items are really OK in the right situations. I recently enjoyed some fantastic barbecue after a long project in Kansas City, Mo., and I certainly ate the cake and more at my daughter's wedding. As with any relationship that flourishes, respect is at the core of how you get along with food—respect and keeping things simple.

Mehmet Oz is a vice chairman and professor of surgery at Columbia University, a best-selling author and the Emmy Award-winning host of "The Dr. Oz Show".

Endurance athletes using caffeine to keep them going

By Murray Carpenter, NPR

The Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii, is an extreme event – a 2.4-mile swim, followed by a 112-mile bike ride, topped off by a marathon.

Throughout the event, racers drink plenty of fluids and eat energy bars or gels. Most also take a performance-enhancing substance that is legal and effective – caffeine.

“While I’m racing, caffeine is actually a pretty important part of my day, particularly in the Ironman, where it’s such a long race,” says Sarah Piampiano, a professional triathlete.

She integrates calories and caffeine into her race-day diet using energy gels. Each contains 50 milligrams of caffeine, which Piampiano calls a “shot.”

“Before the race, I typically take one gel that has one shot of caffeine in it, and then when I get onto the bike, each hour I take one shot of caffeine,” explains Piampiano. In the last half of the marathon, she ups her dose to two shots every 20 minutes.

“Caffeine has been well-known to be a beneficial drug to use during sport. It’s been studied for many years over a variety of different types of sports; it will improve your performance,” says Matthew Ganio, director of the University of Arkansas Human Performance Laboratory.

But, he says, it is important to take the right dose.

“The general consensus is 3 to 6 milligrams per kilogram of body mass, and it can be quite a bit. The example being, an 80-kilo individual needing 6 milligrams per kilogram body mass – that’s four strong cups of coffee,” says Ganio.

But instead of guzzling coffee, many athletes rely on products, such as energy gels, that allow them to better quantify their caffeine. Brian Vaughan is CEO of GU Energy Labs, which makes gels that blend carbohydrates, amino acids, electrolytes and caffeine.

“The top-end athletes, the pros, want to be able to meter out caffeine during the course of an endurance event. It’s always

nice to have that second wind, late in the race, where you can energize the mind, stimulate the mind, with the central nervous system response of caffeine," says Vaughan.

Some researchers urge restraint. University of Connecticut doctoral candidate Evan Johnson says caffeine works best when used judiciously.

"You find a lot of people who constantly ingest caffeine throughout the day and therefore need alcohol or some sort of sleep aid to get to bed, and then in the morning are so groggy they need caffeine again," Johnson says. He calls it a "vicious cycle of supplementation."

That's what happened to players on England's soccer team. They took caffeine pills to amp up for a recent World Cup qualifying game and then needed sleeping pills to wind down.

Some athletes say they avoid caffeine because it makes them jittery, or it bothers their stomachs. Others, like triathlete Sam Gyde of Belgium, take a less systematic approach.

"I have a very busy life and a very busy work, and I train a lot, so I just drink lots of coffee so I am naturally very caffeinated. During training and racing, I use gels, which contain caffeine, and it's not with any purpose, but I'm more or less like a heavy caffeine user," says Gyde.

It seems to work for Gyde; he has won his age group twice at Kona. And you may not have to be an Ironman to benefit. A recent Australian study showed that caffeine enabled sedentary men to work out more vigorously.

The side effects of ingesting so much caffeine are still being elucidated, however. The Food and Drug Administration announced last week that the agency is investigating several deaths that could be linked to energy drinks.

Thanksgiving dinner does not have to break the bank

By Lauren Salkeld, Epicurious

Thanksgiving may be a holiday about plenty, but some years your wallet simply won't support that much abundance. With these 10 money-saving tips, your Turkey Day can still include an impressive feast.

Read on for ways to save on groceries, plus ideas for making even the most humble ingredients shine.

1. Serve Soup: It might seem extravagant to serve a first course, but a few inexpensive ingredients can make a spectacular soup that will help fill guests' bellies when the main course is a little skimpy. Plus: Many soups call for aromatics like onions, carrots, and celery, which you probably already purchased to make stuffing, or to stuff inside the turkey cavity. Potato-based soups, such as our Sweet Potato Soup with Buttered Pecans or Creamy Fennel and Potato Soup, might be your best bet; potatoes and sweet potatoes were not dramatically affected by the drought and so prices are not expected to rise this year. Other options include Butternut Squash Apple Soup, Cream of Cauliflower Soup, and Chestnut Soup with Sourdough Sage Croutons.

2. Brine Your Bird: Purchasing a supermarket turkey, instead of an organic, heritage, or farmers' market bird, is an easy, obvious way to save money. To get the best flavor and texture from your bargain bird, brine it. To dry brine, rub the turkey in a salt and herb mixture, and let it sit in the refrigerator (brining usually takes about an hour per pound). To wet brine, soak the turkey in a salt-water solution (herbs, spices, and

aromatics can be added as well as other liquids like beer or molasses), in the refrigerator, for several hours or overnight.

3. Pick a Star Herb: Fresh herbs might seem like a high-ticket item, but if you don't already own the dried alternative, fresh is the way to go. You can often buy a bunch for a few dollars and they'll deliver tons of flavor. Also consider that even though dried herbs seem like a better deal, they'll likely expire, and lose their flavor before you get a chance to use the whole container. To save money, pare down your herbs to one or two and use them in different ways throughout the meal. And if you have any extra, dry them for using later.

4. Shop Seasonally: In-season ingredients are likely to be less expensive so build your menu around those. Brussels sprouts are at their peak right now making them a much more economical option than green beans. Another tip: Rather than roasting whole Brussels sprouts, shave or shred them for a more bountiful presentation. The leaves can be sautéed or served raw. Try our recipes for Shaved Brussels Sprout Salad with Fresh Walnuts and Pecorino and Sauteed Shredded Brussels Sprouts with Smoked Ham and Toasted Pecans.

5. Scratch and Save: If your kitchen is well stocked with basics like flour, butter, sugar, and yeast, it often makes more financial sense to bake from scratch. So skip the frozen pie dough and the par-baked rolls, roll up your sleeves, and make pie dough and rolls from scratch.

6. Buy Frozen or Canned: We usually prefer fresh vegetables, but canned or frozen veggies are a great way to save money at Thanksgiving. If your family loves corn pudding or green peas on Turkey Day, check the price of frozen – many brands are flash frozen and will still have all the flavor and nutrition of fresh. Canned pumpkin is usually cheaper than fresh and most recipes are designed for it, so it's a smart way to save. Plus, unlike in 2011 when pumpkins suffered because of

Hurricane Irene, the drought had little effect on these sturdy crops and prices are expected to remain flat this year.

7. Make Dessert Multi-Task: Dessert will leave a lasting impression so you don't want to scrimp too much. But if you're smart about it, you can hit several nostalgic holiday notes in one fantastic finale. Try our recipes for Pecan Pumpkin Pie or Caramelized Apple and Pecan Pie.

8. Dress Up Dessert: Add an extra flourish to dessert and your guests will likely forget that the overall meal wasn't as bountiful as usual. Heavy cream can be a little pricey (and prices are expected to be high this year) but a little goes a long way. Pick up a pint and whip it into light, lofty whipped cream that will make simple pies and cobblers seem more special. Vanilla ice cream will do the same.

9. Improvise to Save: Buying a large package of something when you only need a small amount is a big waste of money. If your pie recipe calls for shortening and you don't already have some on hand, use butter instead. If your cranberry relish includes orange zest but you only have lemons and limes, they can easily be substituted.

10. Make It a Potluck: If hosting Thanksgiving is threatening to break the bank, don't be afraid to ask for help. That can mean enlisting a few guests to pitch in with side dishes, dessert, or wine. It can also mean turning the feast into a potluck. Big communal meals are fun, and because everyone puts their own spin on dishes, they make for an interesting, diverse meal.

Nebbiolo fans congregate to discuss their favorite varietal

By Mike Dunne, Sacramento Bee

Varieties of grapes and styles of wine often develop fan clubs.

There's Zinfandel Advocates & Producers, the International Riesling Foundation and the Rhone Rangers, to name a few that have been around awhile.

The most obscure and most hopeful just might be Nebbiolo Enthusiasts & Believers. It's a casual group led by Tom Hill, a New Mexico wine enthusiast especially keen on nebbiolo, and Ken Musso, a former Burlingame firefighter who tends a vineyard planted to nebbiolo in El Dorado County.

Once a year, they gather maybe 30 or 40 fellow travelers to talk about the grape and the wine it yields and to taste examples that range from old to new. This year's session was convened in late June on a patio of Karmere Vineyards & Winery in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley.

Participants were mostly growers and vintners, and much of their discussion focused on where and how to grow nebbiolo so it would produce expressive wines, how to handle the grapes so their wines would be commercially and critically successful, and how to persuade consumers that here is another wine worth making room for at the table.

Virtually everyone in the group developed their passion for nebbiolo by way of barbaresco and barolo, widely seen as the wines that show nebbiolo at its most profound. Barbaresco and barolo hail from the Piedmonte region in northwest Italy. They

provide the historic template, but it isn't necessarily fitting for California, where growing conditions and winemaking traditions are far different from what they are in Italy.

In addressing this point, Sacramento grocer Darrell Corti, long a student and advocate of Italian wines and the principal speaker at the NEB gathering, urged the assembly to get over whatever dreams they might entertain about producing barbaresco and barolo in California.

Nebbiolo in California may be capable of yielding a wine that is quite good, especially if it is treated like pinot noir, producing a wine light, graceful and charming, but it won't be barbaresco and barolo, Corti warned.

The subsequent tasting, involving about 20 nebbiolo-based wines, most of them Californian, showed that while the grape has potential in the state, its acceptance by consumers will take an attitude adjustment. The wines generally were bright but so thin in color that they could be mistaken for rosés – orange-tinged rosés. Yes, their tannins were fierce, but beyond them often resided a playful and refreshing cherry fruitiness.

Their smell often was enticingly floral as well as fruity. Their flavor sometimes carried a nuttiness evocative of sherry. Their structure was solid, their acidity zingy, which helped explain why some older nebbiolos on hand, from both California and Italy, had aged splendidly.

Ken Musso had a couple of his wines on hand, including his current nebbiolo, the Due Vigne di Famiglia 2008 El Dorado County Musso Family Vineyard Nebbiolo. Two years ago, I wrote here of his 2007 version of the wine, describing its smell as ripe yet fresh, its flavor juicy with cherries, berries and autumnal nuts, and its acidity surprisingly zesty for a California wine.

The 2008 continues that family resemblance, though the cherry fruitiness is more lush, the oak less pronounced. Both are sturdy wines, meant more for rich cuts of beef than seafood or poultry.

With the 2008, Musso blended 10 percent barbera into the nebbiolo, which he credits with giving the wine deeper color, a fruitier flavor and more complexity. He continued his practice of aging the wine in 300-liter hogsheads of Hungarian oak, a technique he learned of while visiting estates in Piedmonte.

Musso's nebbiolo vineyard is 2,400 feet up the Sierra foothills at Garden Valley. There, the soil runs to decomposed slate high in rocks and low in nutrients. Nevertheless, nebbiolo flourishes in that setting, at least when it comes to producing canes and leaves. As to grapes, his nebbiolo vines are stingy and unpredictable.

"It's vegetative as all heck. It enjoys growing leaves more than fruit. Nebbiolo is very difficult to coax grapes out of," Musso said. When he walks through his stand of nebbiolo as harvest nears, he no longer is surprised to find maybe half a dozen vines in a row with no grapes at all, then one with maybe 2 pounds of clusters, another with 6 pounds.

"They seem to take turns," he says of individual vines. "We'll get a good crop one year, but the next they'll take a breather."

Despite the challenges both in vineyard and in the marketplace, Musso is so committed to nebbiolo and so encouraged by results that he's grafted some of his dolcetto vines to nebbiolo, expanding his plot of the variety to 3 acres.

At his tasting room, people were enjoying and interested in his dolcetto, but when he brought out his nebbiolo, they got really excited. Curiously, tasters interested in the nebbiolo

have been younger rather than older, and they've come at it with an interest solely in trying something new, without barbaresco or barolo framing their expectations, says Musso.