

'Hybrid meals' provide dinnertime staples

... at budget prices

BY GREGORY KARP

The Morning Call

It's no secret that saving money on food starts with more time in the kitchen and less time in restaurants. But a third meal choice falls in between. Call them hybrid meals.

Restaurants remain a nice treat, but more Americans are buying a prepared, ready-to-eat entree at the supermarket and bringing it home, where they can fix side dishes.

Countless supermarkets have expanded beyond offering only prepared sandwiches and salad bars. They now offer such hot dinnertime staples as rotisserie chicken, meatloaf and lasagna, along with more unusual dishes.

The supermarket industry calls them home meal replacements. A recent report from food service consultants Technomic Inc. found three of five consumers say they buy more supermarket-prepared meals. Consumers say they buy an average of 80 supermarket-prepared meals

at least one prepared meal in a typical month.

Americans' spending on dining out had been steadily growing, accounting for a greater portion of overall food spending. A four-person household had spent an average of about \$5,600 a year on dining out, according to the latest federal Consumer Expenditure Survey.

But as the recession set in and consumers cut down on their spending, hybrid meals have become a compromise — offering convenience with a nod to frugality.

"I think there is a lot of stuff you can buy premade that would be difficult or time-consuming to make yourself," said Shel Horowitz, author of "The Penny-Pinching Hedonist" and operator of FrugalFun.com.

"You can provide a much richer dining experience at a reasonable cost."

Juli McGlynn of New York finds hybrid meals a good solution when her budget and time are tight. Her budget and time are tight. Her budget and

time-to-eat rotisserie chicken," she said. "I buy it for the week and use it for quesadillas, burritos, salads, pasta, homemade pizza and on its own."

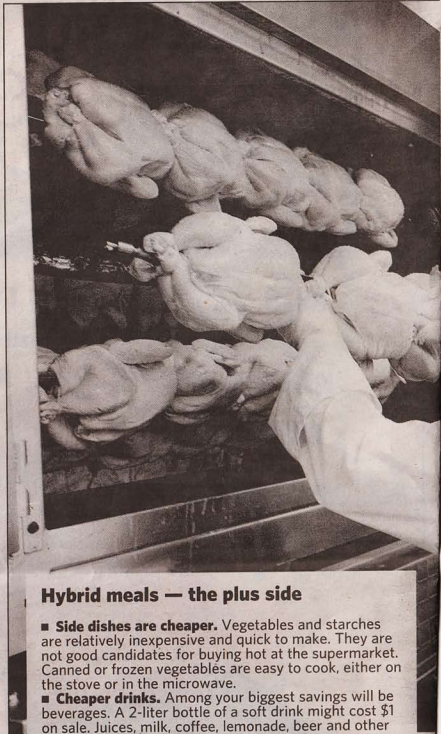
Her sides are often simple: canned chickpeas, corn, black beans or kidney beans. "It is healthy, cheap and, when seasoned appropriately, delicious and goes a long way," she said. She also adds prepared chicken to frozen dinners to make them more substantial.

Savings can add up.

A hybrid meal with a \$10 premade chicken, can of green beans, package of rice and bottle of juice might cost about \$17 for a family of four.

"You can do a hybrid of cooking from scratch and preparation," said Alicia Rockmore, chief executive of Buttoned Up Inc., a company that helps people get organized.

She suggests busy cooks plan to take off three nights a week and plan shortcut meals on those evenings. The key is to give themselves permission to use such shortcuts as hybrid meals, Rockmore said.



Hybrid meals — the plus side

- **Side dishes are cheaper.** Vegetables and starches are relatively inexpensive and quick to make. They are not good candidates for buying hot at the supermarket. Canned or frozen vegetables are easy to cook, either on the stove or in the microwave.
- **Cheaper drinks.** Among your biggest savings will be beverages. A 2-liter bottle of a soft drink might cost \$1 on sale. Juices, milk, coffee, lemonade, beer and other typical dinnertime drinks also can be a place to save.
- **Hidden savings.** Hybrid meals are taxed less because they cost less. You also don't have to pay a gratuity at the supermarket, as you would at a restaurant.

— GREGORY KARP