Smart Shoppers Know

If you’re trying to watch the pennies in the grocery store these days like most of us, I hope you’re familiar with shopping strategies and unit prices. Unit prices tell you the truth about how much you’re getting for your money. If you haven’t found them yet, you are still at the mercy of the store, the manufacturers, the advertising and the placement specialists.

The who specialists? The placement specialists. They study how people shop and buy. They’ve figured out how to stock the shelves so that we spend our money on what gives them the most profit. For example, have you ever noticed that the plain oatmeal is on the bottom shelf? That’s their work. People don’t look down to shop. Plain oatmeal has very little processing, no fancy “New!!” flavors to advertise, no special toys for the children hidden inside. Plain oatmeal is healthy. It costs less than instant, flavored, single serve, or other versions. You get more food for your money and more nutrition from plain oatmeal. Yet it’s on the bottom shelf. So one hint for getting the most benefit for your buck is to look down at the lower shelves when you shop.

You want to look up too. Other better buys are often on the top shelf. In fact, you want to look any place other than right at eye level on the shelves. The foods placed at eye level on the shelves are usually the ones with the highest profit margin for the grocer, not the best buys for you. They are also frequently, especially in the cereal aisle, lower in nutritional value, such as high sugar cereals. They’re right where a child
riding in a grocery cart can see them and begin “Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, I want that one!”

Other places you want to shop carefully are the ends of the aisles. Those “Special” shelves, the end caps, often have the exact same food and price as in the aisle. Sometimes the brand or package size on the end is actually more expensive than the brand in the aisle. They’re often not what we were planning to buy. But, because it looks like it’s a special price, we pick up a box whether we need it or not. Because it’s ‘On Sale’. We tend to trust the sign that says it is ‘Special’, so we buy. Our mistake!

Finally, read the Unit Price on the shelf sticker. Different stores have it in different locations on the sticker. It might be in the top right or left corner, or in a lower corner. But if you get close enough to read the fine print you will see that in addition to the price of the whole package in large numbers, there is another price. It is often ‘price per ounce’ or ‘price per piece’. This is the important price. Look for the lowest.

For example, if a 16 oz box of macaroni costs 89¢ and a 14 oz box costs 84¢, which one gives you more food for your money? The unit price will tell you! The unit price of the 16 oz box is 5.5¢ per ounce, while the price per ounce of the 14 oz box is 6¢. The smaller box is actually more expensive for the amount of food you get. If the macaroni in the smaller box cost the same price per ounce it would only cost 77¢, not 84¢. You’re paying 7 cents more than you should for this box.

Or look at it this way: for the extra nickle cost of the larger box, you get one whole extra cup of cooked macaroni! That’s a pretty inexpensive meal. This week’s recipe is a soup that will warm you and fill you up. It only uses 4 ounces, or a quarter of a box of small shells or other macaroni. If you can’t find cannelini beans you can use
great northern or navy beans. The beans provide protein for your meal, so all you need to add is some whole grain bread and salad or another vegetable for dinner. Enjoy!

**Italian Pasta and Beans**

4 tsp oil 3/4 C chopped onion (1 medium)
3/4 C chopped celery (2 ribs) 2 cloves garlic, minced
1/4 C chopped parsley 1 C tomato sauce (Italian seasoned optional)
1 C water 1 20-oz can cannellini beans
1 1/2 C small shells or macaroni pinch of ground pepper

Boil pasta according to package directions but without adding salt. Drain. In a saucepan heat oil over medium-high heat. Add onion, celery, garlic and parsley. Stir and cook until vegetables are tender but not browned. Add tomato sauce, water and pepper. Heat to boiling, reduce heat and simmer 10 minutes uncovered. Stir occasionally. Add beans with liquid from can. Simmer 5 minutes more. Add cooked pasta, stir and simmer 5 more minutes. Serve hot. Serves 4 - 6.