**Good Cheap Eats Author Q&A**

1) Good Cheap Eats is both a book and a blog. Which came first, and how did you start writing about budget friendly cooking?

Good Cheap Eats (the blog) is an offshoot of my parenting and lifestyle blog, Life as MOM. I didn't want to inundate readers with food talk but I really wanted to talk about food. So, about five years ago I created a second blog in order to feed that culinary passion of mine.

I've always written about budget-friendly cooking. Before I began blogging, I worked as a freelance writer for parenting magazines. Since they say to write what you know, I have always written about good food on a budget. That's one of my favorite things in life.

2) Budget cooking can seem daunting or bland to some. How did you get your start? Why the need to cook more economically?

My life's mission has really been to make the most of what I have, whether that's time with my family, money in the bank, or food on hand. I find that when resources are limited, it actually forces one to be more creative. Necessity is the mother of invention, you know.

I've always been one to economize. When I quit teaching to stay home with my first child, I started reforming my cooking habits, learning to make things from scratch instead of buying the convenience products at the store. We found that homemade was not only cheaper but it tasted better. As the years have gone by, our family has realized the health benefits as well.

Despite my frugal ways, about 7 years ago we found ourselves deep in consumer debt. That's when things got really serious and I challenged myself to see how little I could spend and still feed my family great meals. Today we live debt-free and feed a small army of six children all while cooking on a budget.

3) This is your third cookbook, can you talk a bit about the process? How did you find your publisher, and what's it like being a published author?

In college I dreamed of writing a cookbook. I loved food, and let everyone around me know it. After I went into teaching, I mourned the fact that I had not followed a journalism/culinary background. Twenty years ago that was how you found cookbook writing opportunities.

I started writing freelance for parenting magazines and then started blogging. Once I started Good Cheap Eats, the dream to write a cookbook would not die. I squelched it for awhile, but it kept coming back.

A fellow food blogger, Erin Chase, who has successfully published cookbooks guided me to a book by Elizabeth Lyon about how to write a book proposal. I labored over that proposal for a month. A book editor read it and basically rejected it out of hand. I cried for days.

When I finally had the courage to tell Erin what he said, she picked me up, dusted me off, and connected me with a fabulous agent who helped me polish the proposal and shop it to a number of publishers. Within two weeks time, we had find the right match for the book and Not Your Mother's Make-Ahead and Freeze Cookbook was born. Since it has been such a good seller, it's nice to know that one person's critical opinion didn't kill the dream.

As for the experience of writing the past three books, I have to say that it was such a boon to be connected with the Harvard Common Press. All the people that I work with are very personable and fun to work with. I feel like we've worked really well as a team to build three great books. I've heard horror stories about other publishing houses and other author experiences and am so pleased to say that my people are not like that.

Four years ago -- after I wrote the first proposal -- I was walking through the cookbook area of the local bookstore and prayed that mine would someday be on those shelves. Now they are. It truly is an answered prayer.

4) As a mother of six, what's your biggest challenge when it comes to getting dinner on the table?

Making enough! Some days the kids just keep eating and eating and there are rarely leftovers. The second biggest challenge is probably the pickiness. Only one kid child currently struggles with food fears, but it does stretch my patience sometimes.

5) What are your top 2-3 tips for stretching grocery budgets?

1. Use what we have. So often we go buy more instead of thinking creatively about what we have on hand. They say Americans waste 25% of their food. The average home cook can therefore cut his or her budget by 25% just by using up what they have and not letting good food go to waste.

2. Plan out your meals to build on one another. When I was first married, I loved meal planning. But, I also spent as much to feed two of us as I do know to feed 8 of us! The trick is to make the meals use common ingredients. If you find a sale on a specialty item or buy in bulk, make a plan to use the whole thing. For instance, if you buy sour cream for a recipe, then make sure that you plan several other meals within the next couple weeks that also use sour cream so that you don't waste that investment.

3. Shop the sales. Once I know what we have and that I'm planning meals to use those up effectively, I don't typically buy something more unless it's on sale. I let the sales dictate what meat or vegetable we have that week, if I don't have a stock on hand already. If I see a killer sale on a regular staple, I stock up and freeze what we can so that we get it at the best possible price.

6) What is/are your favorite recipe(s) in the book?

I love them all, but some of my favorites include Poblano Chile Enchiladas, Creamy Herbed Tomato Soup, Cheesy Polenta, Cajun Grilled Chicken Salad with Creamy Scallion Dressing, and the Brownie Cheesecake Bars.

7) You shot all of the photography for the recipes yourself, what was that like? How did you go about teaching yourself the right techniques?

The photos in this book do a good job of capturing my journey as a photographer. Many were actually fairly older photos from my archives, taken with a pocket-sized point and shoot. About a year ago I took the plunge and invested in a DSLR (the Canon Rebel T3i) and that was a game changer. My only regret is that I didn't buy one five years ago. Of course, I didn't have the money five years ago, but whatever.

My husband is great at reading directions and fully investigating a new gadget or tool. I am not. I just start playing with something and hope that it works. However, with the camera, I've had to start reading directions. I Googled some Youtube videos as well as read Lindsey Ostrom's *Tasty Food Photography*. I also have several photog friends who give me tips.

I'm clearly still a novice photographer, but as I take the photos for my next book, I'm thrilled to see that my shots are improving. Now, I just need to make sure that there are more pics of my kids than there is of my cooking!

8) As a food blogger, what's your favorite aspect of being part of the community?

Since I publish two blogs, [Good Cheap Eats](http://goodcheapeats.com/) and [Life as MOM](http://lifeasmom.com/), I've never really thought of myself as a "food blogger" as much as I have as a "blogger". Food bloggers are people who take much better pictures than I do!

That said, I think my favorite aspect of the blogging community is the camaraderie and the synergism that comes from finding a friend who not only gets you but is also going to take the time to brainstorm and help you create great content. I love bouncing ideas off one another and finessing good ideas into great ones. I have a few blogging friends who really do have my best interests in mind who I can turn to for encouragement, advice, and counsel. They are people who are okay with switching from business talk to real life talk, who I exchange texts and phone calls with, who feel totally cool sleeping on my office floor when they come to visit, and who love on my kids.

Those are perks to this job that I didn't see coming, but which really make my life richer.

9) What's the one recipe ingredient you depend on regularly (besides staple items like salt and pepper)?

 Currently, I am really into individually-frozen chicken tenders from Trader Joe's. In my old age, I've gotten forgetful about thawing things in the freezer. If I have a bag of chicken ready to go, I don't have to worry about it. They cook so well from frozen and I can pull just what I need. While they are just a tad more expensive than the big packages of chicken breasts, their convenience helps me avoid fast food on those nights when my other plans go awry.

10) What's your go-to appliance in the kitchen?

I am actually a small kitchen appliance fiend. I have some pet gadgets that really make my life in the kitchen easier. My top five are the immersion blender, the electric griddle, the panini press, the food processor, and the bread machine.

11) How is writing a cookbook different from writing your blog?

Writing cookbooks takes a little more foresight into the future. I focus on "evergreen" recipes and cooking tips that will stand the test of time since that book is going to serve in someone's kitchen for the next ten years. With a blog post, I can go with the trends a bit more and talk about what works today. I think regular readers of my blog get to witness my growth and transition as a home cook, while those who add my books to their collections get the fruit of that labor. I think one really complements the other.

12) What does a well-stocked pantry always consist of in your home?

This is a hard one to condense into a short answer. I've written an entire blog series on the topic. <http://goodcheapeats.com/tag/pantry-staples/>

Typically I lean on a collection of baking ingredients, canned tomatoes, dried beans, pasta, rice, and polenta, potatoes (sweet and regular), onions, and an extensive spice collection. I have a separate freezer stash and get an organic produce box every week or so. I focus on whole foods as much as possible and stock up whenever I see a good sale on something I know we will use.

13) Are there any ingredients that are worth it to splurge on and buy organic?

Years ago, I made the baby step of moving to organic produce. If the organic variety is out of my price range, I lean on the Clean Fifteen and avoid the Dirty Dozen. I would love to move to organic meat and dairy, but it's just not doable for us. I focus on items that are free of added hormones, when possible.

We splurge on good coffee, cheese, and wine, but within reason, even then. I don't buy on the high end of any of those things, but I avoid the low end at all costs. It shows.

14) What foods should you buy vs make at home? (salad dressings, condiments, bread, etc).

My heart is with homemade. I love making my own salad dressings, pasta sauce, salad dressings, spice mixes, and baked goods. I can almost always make those items healthier, cheaper, and tastier when I make them myself. My husband and daughters make homemade corn tortillas and we are just getting into making our own Asian "fake-out". Homemade is a great way for us to enjoy restaurant flavors on a budget.