Managing grocery budgets and eating a healthy diet can be a challenge in the best of times. However, serving healthy, balanced and tasty meals does not have to break the family food budget. Shop smart and concentrate on foods high in nutrition value for the price.

When it comes to eating healthfully and staying within the food budget, portion sizes are major considerations. Current guidelines suggest that the majority of adults need about five ounces or less of foods from the meat and beans group daily. Many Americans eat much larger amounts of meat each day. Meat is typically one of our higher priced foods. Managing our portion size of high priced foods alone could help reduce family food costs.

Have you tried a flat iron steak? In 2002 Dwain Johnson, a meat science professor with the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, in cooperation with researchers from the University of Nebraska were working to identify undervalued portions of the beef carcass. More than 5,600 muscles were evaluated for flavor and tenderness. The flat iron steak, found deep within the shoulder muscle in a cut known as the chuck was found. The majority of this meat was being either used as roasts or ground for hamburger because of a tough piece of connective tissue (gristle) running through the middle. Once the connective tissue was removed an incredible piece of tender, flavorful, easy to prepare steak became known.

Initially, this cut was unique to restaurants but, due to consumer demand, national retailers began carrying the cut in 2007. Sales of flat iron steak have soared. It is now the nation’s fifth best-selling steak. If top chefs find flat iron steak “affordable and profitable” so can the average family. According to Johnson, “the cut is as tasty and tender as more expensive steaks, yet affordable enough for the average family to enjoy on a regular basis and it costs a lot less than a choice filet or strip steak.” The North American Meat Processor meat buyers guide lists flat iron steak as the second tenderest cut of beef, after the tenderloin. In addition to being tender and affordable, flat iron steak is rich in protein, moderate in calories, low in fat and cholesterol, rich in vitamin B12, zinc and iron.

Flat iron steak is also reasonably quick and easy to prepare. Steaks are excellent for dry-heat cooking methods such as, grilling, broiling, roasting and stir-frying. Plus, flat iron steak can take on numerous flairs depending on your preferences. Cook up a multicultural feast today! And remember, you can't tell by looking. Use a food thermometer to be sure your meat is done. USDA recommends beef (NOT GROUND BEEF) be cooked to an internal temperature of 145°F.

Pan-Seared, Cocoa-Spiced Flat Iron Steak with Pineapple Salsa (Latin American flavors)

Prep Time: 10 minutes
Cook Time: 20 minutes (including heating the skillet)
Stand: 5 minutes
Yield: Makes 4 servings

Ingredients:
1 (1-lb.) flat iron steak
Seasoning:
1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon ground allspice
1 Tablespoon unsweetened cocoa powder
1 Tablespoon chili powder
The trick to a great crust is to use a very hot skillet; a large cast-iron skillet, heavy stainless steel skillet or grill pan works best. Have your hood fan on high—there will be some smoke.

Combine all seasoning ingredients. Pre-heat skillet over medium heat until hot. Lightly oil (or spray) the flat iron steak and spread an even layer of the dry seasonings over the entire steak. Cook steaks 5-7 minutes on each side for medium doneness. Season with salt as desired. Remove to platter; keep warm.

Salsa:
1/2 cup canned, crushed pineapple, drained
1/4 cup red onion, minced
1 Tablespoon fresh cilantro, rinsed, stirred and chopped
1 medium tomato, seeded and diced

Combine all ingredients and toss well. Let sit to marinate while preparing the seasoning and cooking the meat.

Add a side of brown rice and a romaine lettuce salad and have a great meal.

This research team won the 2004 International Meat Secretariat (IMS) Prize for Meat Science and Technology. It’s the first time that a North American team has won the research prize. IMS is a non-profit association of meat and livestock organizations worldwide.

If you have a question, write to Heidi Copeland, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS Extension--Leon County, 615 Paul Russell Road, Tallahassee, FL 32301-7099; or call the Extension Office 487-3006, between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m. weekdays.

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