

DOLLAR STORE GOURMET

■ You may be surprised by foods you'll find at local dollar stores — and what you can make using \$1 ingredients.

BY JOE STUMPE
The Wichita Eagle

When I bumped into a great cook I know in the food aisle of a Dollar Tree store recently, she gave me an enigmatic smile.

Was she embarrassed to be caught in this one-price-buys-all emporium? Or signaling that we shared a valuable secret?

Soon I had my answer.

"I cut my grocery bill in half by coming here first," she confided before rolling her rapidly filling cart away.

I can't claim to have saved that much, but after weeks of visits to Dollar Tree and a rival, Dollar General, I see their appeal.

With food prices climbing higher, more grocery shoppers may give dollar stores a look. There are at least 37 such stores in the Wichita area, according to the current telephone directory.

Here are a few common perceptions about dollar stores and what I actually found:

■ **Perception:** Dollar stores are only good for bulk goods and pantry basics such as pasta and canned tomatoes.

■ **Truth:** This was the happiest surprise, as I found sun-dried tomatoes, roasted red peppers and other "gourmet" products for great prices.

■ **Perception:** Dollar stores sell products that are damaged or have reached their expiration dates.

■ **Truth:** I found no evidence of the latter. It did seem as if there were a few more dented cans than you'd find in a supermarket.

■ **Perception:** Dollar stores sell only obscure "off" brands.

■ **Truth:** In fact, the products are a pretty good mix of nation-



Photos by Bo Rader/The Wichita Eagle

Like other recipes on this page, everything in this appetizer platter and pasta dish came from a dollar store. Plate, tableware, place mat and wineglass also came from the store.

WHERE DO YOU PUT YOUR \$1 TO GOOD USE?

In addition to dollar stores, several stores in the Wichita area have an aisle, an endcap or a place devoted to \$1 merchandise.

Have you found an area store where your buck has a lot of buying power? Tell us about it on our Wichitalk blog at <http://blogs.kansas.com/wichitalk/>.

al name brands and others you probably won't recognize. Some of the latter are regional brands or come from other countries, but all that we sampled passed the taste test.

Dollar stores say they can sell



Food products sold in dollar stores are a mix of nationally known brands and others you've probably never heard of.

at low prices by using their bulk buying power, taking advantage of product overruns by other vendors and keeping their own costs low, according

to the stores' Web sites.

"Our buying power is not to be taken lightly," Dollar Tree spokeswoman Shelley Davis said of the Virginia-based

chain, which boasts more than 3,200 stores in 48 states, including seven Dollar Trees in Wichita.

About 40 percent of the chain's food products come from outside the United States, which is why you might find brands of sweet pickles from India or roasted red peppers from Turkey that you wouldn't find in, say, Dillons. But other imports, such as Barilla pasta from Italy, are well known.

Dollar store drawbacks

What drawbacks to dollar stores did I find?

■ **Not everything is actually a dollar and/or a good deal.**

Of the big four chains with locations in Wichita — Dollar Tree, Dollar General, Family Dollar and Big Lots — only

GOOD DEALS

Here are some products we found for \$1 at Dollar Tree and Dollar General stores:

- 12-oz. jar roasted red peppers
- 12-oz. jar sun-dried tomatoes packed in water
- 2.5-lb. bag long-grain rice
- 1-lb. box Barilla pasta
- 9-oz. jar pimento-stuffed green olives
- 16-oz. jar salsa
- 1 bag (15 count) flour fajita-size tortillas
- 7-oz. box Carr's stoned wheat crackers
- 10-oz. jar marinated mushrooms
- 1 can (20 oz.) pie filling (chocolate, key lime and other flavors)
- 8-oz. jar minced garlic
- 1 bag (3.5 oz.) dry-roasted almonds
- Graham cracker piecrust
- Dried herbs and spices, 50 cents to \$1 each per bottle
- 1 box (18.25 oz.) Duncan Hines yellow cake mix
- 1 tub (15 oz.) Pepper Jack cheese spread

the first still sells everything for a dollar or less. About two-thirds of the products sold in Dollar General, for example, cost more than a dollar. One dollar for a can of tuna, as some dollar stores charge, is actually more expensive than the supermarket.

■ **Organization and cleanliness also vary** from store to store, even within the same chain.

■ **Products are limited and not always available.**

Dollar stores sell packaged products with long shelf lives. There are no fresh sources of protein or produce (at least not for a dollar). As for packaged goods, that great deal you found last week may not be on the shelves today.

KEY LIME PIE WITH COCONUT MARSHMALLOW 'MERINGUE'

A quick and easy twist on egg white-based meringue, the marshmallow-and-coconut combo that tops this pie is addictive. Substitute chocolate pie filling for key lime if desired. Cost of pie, which makes 8 to 10 servings, is about \$3.50.

1 graham cracker piecrust

2 cans (20 oz. each) key lime pie filling
2 cups mini marshmallows
3 tablespoons unsweetened grated coconut
Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
Spoon pie filling into piecrust.
Spread marshmallows evenly over

filling and sprinkle with coconut.
Bake about 15 minutes or until marshmallows and coconut are lightly browned.
Remove pie from oven and cool on rack. Refrigerate at least 4 hours before serving.
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DOLLAR STORE DELUXE PASTA

A restaurant might add some freshly grated Parmesan to this dish. But with the strong flavors provided by the sun-dried tomatoes, olives and other ingredients, tasters didn't really miss it. As it is, the cost of the recipe, which makes 6 to 8 servings, is about \$2.50.

- 1 cup salsa
- Vegetable oil
- 5 fajita-size flour tortillas (from 15-count bag)
- 1 can (20 oz.) chili with beans
- ½ cup Pepper Jack cheese spread (from 12-oz. tub), heated in the microwave until spoonable
- Place salsa in a wide-mouthed bowl.
- In a large skillet, heat 1 teaspoon oil over medium-high heat. Add a tortilla to the skillet and cook about 10 seconds per side, or until tortilla
- 1 lb. penne pasta
- ⅔ cup sun-dried tomatoes (the kind that come packed in water or oil), chopped
- 2 whole roasted red bell peppers (from a 12 oz. jar), cut into strips
- ½ cup pimento-stuffed olives, sliced
- ¼ cup chopped roasted almonds or other nuts
- 3 tablespoons olive oil or olive-vegetable oil blend
- Minced garlic (from jar) and Italian seasoning to taste
- Kosher salt and freshly cracked pepper, to taste
- Cook pasta according to package directions and drain. Toss pasta with remaining ingredients and serve.

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CHILI-CHEESE ENCHILADAS

begins to puff up, soften and lightly brown in spots; do not cook until crispy.

With tongs, dredge both sides of the tortilla through the salsa until lightly moistened with salsa (try not to tear the tortilla). Place the tortilla on a cutting board and repeat with the remaining salsa.

Divide the chili between the tortillas, top with cheese spread and roll up. Place enchiladas in a lightly greased 9x13-inch baking pan and top with remaining salsa from bowl.

Bake in a 350-degree oven about 30 minutes or until enchilada filling is bubbly.

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DOLLAR STORE VINAIGRETTE DRESSING

We wondered how an inexpensive oil blend and balsamic vinegar would work in our favorite vinaigrette formula. The answer — just fine, and for pennies a serving.

- 3 tablespoons soybean-olive oil blend
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- ½ teaspoon minced garlic

Kosher salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste
Whisk together oil, vinegar and garlic until well blended. (Or, place in a small plastic storage bowl with a tight lid and shake vigorously.) Season to taste with salt and pepper. Toss with lettuce or spinach.
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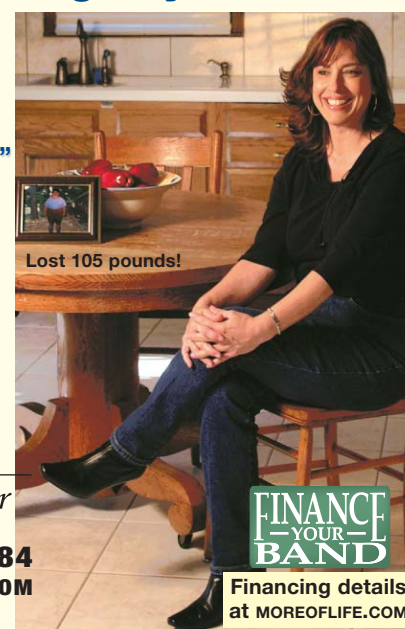
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