

# Don't forget store brands; quality, value have grown

Weekly grocery shopping is one area where you may be paying too much. And one of the least painful ways to save money is to try store brands.

For some, store brands conjure memories of plain-package "generics," which a generation ago became synonymous with tasteless and cheap.

But nowadays store brands are quite good, and regularly buying them could save hundreds of dollars a year, without ever clipping a coupon. A family of four spends upwards of \$8,000 a year on food and housekeeping supplies, according to government statistics.

Though savings may seem small on individual items, it adds up, says Gary Foreman, editor of The Dollar Stretcher Web site ([thedollarstretcher.com](http://thedollarstretcher.com)). Choosing store brands, or private-label brands, could save more than 30 percent per item.

"For people looking to adjust their budgets, groceries is the place to do it," Foreman said. "You spend more on your house and car, but it's hard to do anything about them. With groceries, you can make a relatively large impact on expenses without making a major lifestyle change. And buying store brands is one of the best ways to cut your grocery bill."

Here are things you might not know about store brands, whether potato chips, laundry detergent, ice cream or even blue jeans.

**■ They're good quality:** "What we found is that many times the store brand is at least as good—maybe not better, but at least as good—as the national brand," said Tod Marks, a senior editor at Consumer Reports magazine, which in its August issue tested store brands.

For example, Consumer Reports found that Wal-Mart's Great Value Slider brand of food storage bags was as good as Ziploc bags, which cost 75 percent more.

**■ Some are better:** Stop & Shop and America's Choice "Fruit on the Bottom" yogurts were the best the magazine tested, beating out Dannon and Yo-plait. And Costco's Kirkland Signature Premium paper towels rated as good as Bounty and better than Brawny.

**■ You know who makes this stuff:** "The dirty little secret of the manufacturing business is that many of the companies behind the national brands are also the same names behind the store brands," Marks said.

Birds Eye vegetables, Chicken of the Sea tuna and Bausch & Lomb eye-care products all make store brands, too, although the contents of the products may vary from the nationally advertised brands. Manufacturers often customize ingredients to the specifications of a supermarket retailer in order to target a certain price.

**■ It's about personal preferences:** Especially with food, it's difficult to say which brands are better than others because taste is so subjective.

"It's a matter of testing them and see what your family likes," Foreman said, adding that just because you don't like a store brand cream corn doesn't mean you will dislike its green beans.

Then ask yourself the value question, "Is the national brand so much better it's worth paying more?" If the answer is yes, look for manufacturers' coupons and use them at a double-coupon supermarket. That way, you may get the name brand for about the price of a store brand.

**■ You don't always need the best:** One strategy for getting better value is to determine which top-of-the-line products you must have and which you don't care so much about. For example, Puffs facial tissues were clearly superior to both store brands and rival Kleenex in the Consumer Reports tests. But that might mean you buy Puffs when you have a cold or during hay fever season when you need an especially soft and high-quality tissue. At other times, a cheaper brand might suffice.

**■ Over-the-counter medications are a good bet:** Examine the active ingredients in store-brand medicines. Often they're the same as the name brands, meaning they had to meet standards of the Food and Drug Administration.

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