

PUGET SOUND CONSUMERS'  
**CHECKBOOK**  
**Highlights: Supermarkets**

The latest issue of *Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK* magazine, available at [www.checkbook.org](http://www.checkbook.org), compares local supermarkets for price and quality, evaluates membership warehouse stores and Trader Joe's, and gives tips on how to save on groceries anywhere you shop.

**Comparing supermarkets for price and quality**

CHECKBOOK compared prices at local supermarkets using an apples-to-apples market basket of 152 items, and compared quality based on surveys of CHECKBOOK and *Consumer Reports* subscribers. Highlights include:

- The area's price leaders were Walmart and WinCo. Compared to average prices at Albertsons, QFC, Safeway, and Fred Meyer (the "big-chain average"), prices were 17 to 19 percent lower at Walmart and 16 percent lower at Winco. For a family that spends \$200 per week at the supermarket, a 16 to 19 percent price difference could total \$1,660 to \$1,975 a year.
- Among the area's four largest chains—Albertsons, Fred Meyer, QFC, and Safeway—Fred Meyer was the clear price winner. Fred Meyer's prices for CHECKBOOK's full market basket were nine percent lower than Albertson's and Safeway's. A nine percent difference could save a family that would otherwise spend \$200 per week at Albertsons or Safeway more than \$900 a year by shopping at Fred Meyer.
- Haggen, Target, and Thriftway also offer low prices. Target's and Haggen's prices were both about six percent lower than the big-chain average. The store CHECKBOOK surveyed for the Thriftway brand offered prices that were about seven percent lower than the big-chain average. At the time CHECKBOOK's article was published, Haggen's future was in question: It had recently filed for bankruptcy and planned to close 100 locations in Arizona, California, and Nevada.
- Albertsons' and Safeway's prices were the highest among the area's four largest chains. Prices at surveyed Albertsons and Safeway stores, which in the Puget Sound area are now owned by the same company, were about three percent higher than those at QFC. This is a reversal from all of our previous price surveys, which found that QFC offered the highest prices of the big chains.
- On the quality side, Albertsons, Safeway, Walmart, and WinCo rated low for "quality of fresh produce," "quality of meats," and "overall quality." Among the big four chains, QFC received the highest overall ratings and Albertsons and Safeway the lowest. On CHECKBOOK's "overall quality" question, 63 percent of QFC's customers rated it "superior," compared to 60 percent for Fred Meyer and 47 percent for both Albertsons and Safeway. WinCo was rated "superior" overall by 57 percent of its surveyed customers. Only 31 percent of Walmart's surveyed customers rated it "superior" overall.
- The highest-rated outlets are all small operators—Ballard Market, Central Market, Metropolitan Market, and PCC Natural Markets were all rated "superior" for produce quality and for overall quality by more than 85 percent of their surveyed customers.
- PCC Natural Markets and Whole Foods Market had the highest prices in CHECKBOOK's survey; Whole Foods had prices about 48 percent higher than the big-chain average, and PCC's were 66 percent higher (keep in mind both chains sell a limited number of comparable items included on the survey). On the other hand, both PCC and Whole Foods consistently receive high scores for quality of fresh produce and meat, which account for many of the items CHECKBOOK could compare between other supermarkets and PCC and Whole Foods.

**An Alternative to the Supermarket—Trader Joe's**

- Trader Joe's received higher overall ratings than any of the big chains on CHECKBOOK's survey of customers, yet Trader Joe's prices were about the same as the big-chain average.

- Trader Joe's carries a much more limited selection of products than traditional supermarkets—only 43 percent of the items in CHECKBOOK's market basket were available there—so its customers will also have to shop elsewhere.

### **Buying in Bulk—Warehouse Clubs**

- For purchasing certain grocery items, membership warehouse stores offer low-cost alternatives to supermarkets. CHECKBOOK surveyed Costco and Sam's Club.
- For the items that could be compared, based on unit prices (price per pound, for example), the surveyed membership warehouse stores offered dramatic savings. The surveyed Costco store, for example, beat the QFC store it was compared to by a whopping 31 percent. And compared to that QFC store, the savings were about 29 percent at Sam's Club.
- Most consumers will not be able to do all their shopping at a warehouse store. An option is to buy what you can at a warehouse store and then buy remaining products at a supermarket, purchasing national brands of the cheapest size. Following that method with a Costco store and an Albertsons or Safeway store, a shopper could expect to save about 14 to 15 percent compared to shopping at Albertsons or Safeway alone.

### **Money-saving tips wherever you shop**

- Plan meals and make lists and stick to them. This will help limit impulse buying and multiple shopping trips. Shoppers can make a list of commonly purchased items in the order they come to them in the aisles, then print copies or save it in a smart phone. Mark up the list before each supermarket trip.
- Don't shop while hungry.
- Keep track of wasted food and adjust quantities purchased on future trips.
- Shop specials. If an item is priced exceptionally well, buy in quantity.
- Consider substituting store brand or generics for national brands. When CHECKBOOK allowed the substitution of cheaper generic and store brands for about one-sixth of the items in its price-shopping market basket at the big chains, the total cost for the basket dropped by about five percent.
- Go online for coupons. Most manufacturers have printable coupons on their websites, and shoppers can get even more from sites such as SmartSource.com, Coupons.com, or RedPlum.com. Some stores allow you to add coupons onto your store loyalty card via store websites and apps.
- Buy inexpensive cuts of meat and learn ways to cook them. Or eat less meat to save money.
- Avoid stores' spending traps. It's no coincidence that impulse items are located at the ends of the aisles and dairy items are often located in the rear of the store. Stores know the more items you pass en route to what you need, the more likely you are to pick up items you didn't intend to get.
- Eat what's in season. Savings change with growing seasons. Also compare the price of fresh produce to frozen or canned.
- Compare weights when selecting item-priced produce. One head of lettuce may be significantly larger than another yet cost the same.
- Don't pay for small conveniences. Slicing your own cheese and chopping vegetables saves money.
- If the least expensive stores are not convenient for every week's shopping, keep them in mind for times when you will be going by them anyway.

*The media may draw freely on the information on supermarkets in the new issue of Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK magazine and at [www.checkbook.org](http://www.checkbook.org). CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or [jlettis@checkbook.org](mailto:jlettis@checkbook.org) to schedule.*