



Highlights: Supermarkets

The latest issue of *Bay Area Consumers' CHECKBOOK* magazine, available at www.checkbook.org, compares local supermarkets for price and quality, evaluates 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, WinCo, FoodsCo, FoodMaxx, and Target. Walmart's and WinCo's prices each averaged 24 percent lower than prices at surveyed Lucky and Safeway stores. Prices at FoodsCo were about 17 percent lower than prices at Lucky and Safeway. Target's and FoodMaxx's prices were each about 12 percent lower than Lucky's and Safeway's. For a family that spends \$200 per week at the supermarket, a 12 to 24 percent price difference could total \$1,250 to \$2,500 a year.
- On average, Lucky's and Safeway's prices were about the same, and there was little store-to-store price variation within each chain.
- The largest chains and the low-priced options received relatively low ratings for quality. Lucky and Safeway rated toward the bottom of the list for "quality of fresh produce," "quality of meats," and "overall quality," but so did their much-lower-priced competitors.
- A few chains deliver higher quality than Lucky and Safeway while offering about the same prices. Raley's and Nob Hill had about the same prices as Lucky and Safeway, but Raley's and Nob Hill received much higher quality ratings.
- Sprouts Farmers Market offers very low produce prices, 38 percent lower than the Lucky/Safeway produce average, and got much higher produce quality ratings than the big chains.
- Prices at the area chains rated highest for "quality of fresh produce," "quality of meats," and "overall quality"—including Andronico's, Berkeley Bowl, Draeger's, Lunardi's, and Piazza's Fine Foods—were substantially higher than prices at Lucky and Safeway.
- Some chains—in particular Berkeley Bowl and United Markets—that rated high for fresh produce quality and had relatively high prices for CHECKBOOK's entire market basket had relatively low prices for fresh produce. If you buy a lot of fresh produce and one of these small chain stores is convenient, consider it as a way to do well for both quality and price.
- Whole Foods Market had the highest prices in CHECKBOOK's survey; Whole Foods had prices about 33 percent higher than the Lucky/Safeway average for the limited number of comparable items CHECKBOOK could find at each chain. On the other hand, Whole Foods consistently receives high scores for quality of fresh produce and meat, which account for many of the items CHECKBOOK could compare between Whole Foods and the other chains.

An Alternative to the Supermarket—Trader Joe's

- Trader Joe's received higher overall ratings than Lucky and Safeway, yet Trader Joe's charges lower prices. Trader Joe's prices were about 14 percent lower than the Lucky/Safeway average.
- Trader Joe's carries a much more limited selection of products than traditional supermarkets—only 37 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, warehouse stores offer low-cost alternatives to supermarkets. CHECKBOOK surveyed Costco, Sam's Club, and Smart & Final.
- For the items that could be compared, based on unit prices (price per pound, for example), the surveyed warehouse stores offered dramatic savings. The surveyed Costco store, for example, beat the Safeway store it was compared to by a whopping 35 percent. And compared to that Safeway store, the savings were about 33 percent at Sam's Club and 21 percent at Smart & Final.
- 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 a Safeway store, a shopper could expect to save about 19 percent compared to shopping at 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 Lucky and Safeway, 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 Bay Area Consumers' CHECKBOOK magazine and at www.checkbook.org. CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.

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