

Great tools to assist you in serving healthy and fresh meals to your family

Written by Marcia Humphrey
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In case you haven't noticed, we are smack dab in the middle of devastating economic conditions. No sector of business is unaffected. Almost all companies are downsizing (some by tens of thousands), closing locations, or going completely out of business. Many Americans are holding their breath each work day, hoping they will survive the latest round of pink slips. Times are extremely uncertain and scary for so many Americans.

Surprisingly, there are a few companies that are still holding their own. One of the companies, a restaurant chain, on that very short list of thriving businesses has me baffled. Can you guess which one is seeing stronger sales and increased stock prices, not to mention providing bonuses to employees? I'll give you a hint. Alright, I'll just tell you, since you appear to be in no mood for games. It's McDonald's. Does that surprise you as much as it did me?? What I'm told by two experts (my good friends, one a current employee, and one a former employee,) is that during times of recession, people are working more to keep their already shaky positions, and since the kids still have to eat, it is the fastest, cheapest solution for families with even less time than before.

But hold up and wait a minute! If you are among those helping to drive up McDonald's quarterly profits, please allow me to offer a word of caution. Unless you are grubbing on the grilled wraps and the salads, your body and the bodies of your family, may just be telling you that it deserves a break today- from McDonalds. In fact, your body may be asking you to explore new ways of providing quick, nutritious, and low-cost meals.

I won't pretend that opting for a fast food drive through lane isn't a fast and easy meal solution. Truthfully, there is nothing wrong with a good burger and fries from time to time. The issue is when it becomes too frequent your health could be at risk. Here are three great tools to assist you in serving healthy and fresh meals to your family.

Rice Cooker (programmable preferred)

Rice is one staple that you will always find in our refrigerator. We switch between brown (more nutritious) and fragrant jasmine rice (For protein, I also love to pair rice with different types of beans.) My children eat rice for breakfast as well as dinner. It's the perfect start to so many great dishes-turkey casseroles, chicken or bean burritos, broccoli casseroles, etc. Our rice

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cooker, although not programmable, is great because it also has a steaming basket that I use to prepare healthy steamed veggies and fish. You can pick up a programmable rice cooker for about \$50, and a nonprogrammable one starting at around \$15. The main benefit of the programmable unit, the rice is ready when you tell it to be.

Slow Cookers and Crock pots

When you come home from a hard day's work, wouldn't it be great to smell the aroma of a yummy stew or chicken dinner. Well, with a slow cooker, put in your ingredients- along with the chicken, beef, or pork-before you leave for work, and when you come home it's all ready. If you are like me, you've had a slow cooker tucked in the back of your cupboard for a long time. Well I recently started using mine again, making chili that's slow-cooked to perfection as well as mouth-watering homemade pasta sauce (Of course it only takes about ten minutes to cook the noodles that go along with the sauce). You can find all kinds of recipes at www.slowandsimple.com.

Insulated Containers

Today's insulated containers keep food cold (or warm) for hours, come in all kinds of cool colors, and are budget-friendly. At Target, I spotted some that started at about \$7 and went up to \$20. This gives you a great option for packing a warm, tasty lunch for work or school. When you realize how much money you save by bringing food from home, you'll be less tempted to approach the Golden Arches.

Contrary to popular opinion, healthy meals do not have to involve slaving over the stove for hours. During busy weekdays, opt for a few meals that require little to no cooking-think salads with a variety of ingredients, tuna or chicken salad sandwiches, and various easy-to-make soups (www.quickeatsplus.com). Resist the urge to hit that drive- thru more than once per week. Feed yourself and your family quick nutritious meals with the help of the tools mentioned and you are sure to Enjoy the results!

Marcia Humphrey is an interior decorator and home stager who specializes in achieving high style at a low cost. A native of Michigan, she and her husband, Lonnie, have three children.