

## SmartMoney.com | The Dining Strategy: How to Eat Out for Less

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By Kelli B. Grant

Half of diners say they're spending less at restaurants this year compared with last year, and 80% are cooking more at home, according to market research firm Mintel. With tables empty and tabs smaller, restaurants are looking to fill seats by cutting prices and tweaking menus. "You can eat out now for phenomenally low prices," says Nicole Miller Regan, a senior research analyst who follows the restaurant industry at Minneapolis investment bank Piper Jaffray. Some high-end restaurants are adding low-priced a la carte options to the menu, while delivery chains are sending out more coupons for free food.

With a few savings tricks in hand, cutting your restaurant bill doesn't even require forgoing the steak in favor of a salad. Here are seven strategies:

### Pay with plastic

Lots of local eateries participate in the free Rewards Network program. Sign up your credit and debit cards and earn airline miles, college savings or points on every dollar spent at partner restaurants. (Skip the cash rewards, which carry a \$49 annual fee). Go to [RewardsNetwork.com](#). Upromise, another rewards program, also offers rebates of up to 8%, diverted to a college savings account. Book a table

To fill tables during slow times, many restaurants are working with reservation sites that give discounts to diners who reserve ahead of time. At free site [DinnerBroker](#), the discount can be as much as 30% if you're willing to eat dinner at 6 p.m. (you're more likely to pay full fare if you want to dine at 7:30 p.m. or 8:00 p.m.). Each reservation also earns 100 reward points. Once you earn 1,000, you can redeem them for a \$10 certificate good at its 1,000-plus partner restaurants. Another free option, [OpenTable](#), awards 100 to 1,000 reward points per reservation. Earn 2,000 points for a \$20 gift check to use at any of the site's more than 8,000 partner restaurants.

### Hunt for recession specials

Economy-related discounts are cropping up even at high-end restaurants, says Mitchell Davis, the vice president of the New York-based James Beard Foundation, which promotes the culinary arts. In New York, for example, *Per Se* – which used to just serve a \$275 nine-course tasting menu – now offers individual appetizer, entree and dessert selections (\$12 to \$46). Earlier this year, "Top Chef" judge Tom Colicchio held "Frugal Fridays" at his New York restaurant, *Craft*, capping menu prices at \$10. To find deals, check out [Eater](#), [GrubStreet](#) and [OpenTable](#).

### Clip coupons

Many casual dining restaurants are offering more coupons in local papers, free penny-savers and direct-mail coupon packs, "which can make eating out cheaper than buying the groceries," says Miller Regan. Alternatively, you can invest \$10 to \$30 (the price varies depending on where you live) on an [Entertainment Book](#), which offers deals at national chains and local eateries. At participating *Dominos*, for example, you can get one large pizza free with the purchase of another. Participating of course is the key word. To use the *Dunkin' Donuts* coupons in New York City, you have to travel to Staten Island. Check the restrictions carefully.

### Make friends with the chef

Plenty of restaurants have a presence on social networking sites [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), parceling out deals to diners who interact with them there. *TGI Friday's* is currently offering coupons for a free Jack Daniels burger (regularly \$5) to the first 500,000 people who sign up as fans of its advertising spokes-character *Woody* and register their email address. Sign up for restaurant email lists and

reward?programs, too. Many come with extra deals and exclusive coupons.

Mind menu extras

While restaurants are taking a hit on slim-margin items like steak, they are still making a bundle off of water, wine corkage and daily specials, cautions Davis. Ask about prices for the menu specials your server recites (often among the priciest offerings), and request tap water (bottled can cost up to \$10). Compare the cost to of bringing your own wine and having it served (a \$5 to \$50 fee to uncork the bottle) against ordering budget options on the wine list.

Buy gift certificates online

Bargain hunters can easily snag certificates for less than face value at sites like [Restaurant.com](http://Restaurant.com), where \$25 certificates cost just \$10. (Each has restrictions such as night of the week or number of diners, so read the fine print before you buy.) Collective bargaining site Groupon also regularly offers restaurant deals. Atlanta residents could recently spend \$10 to get a certificate worth \$25 at stir-fry restaurant The Real Chow Baby.