

Food audit

By [Debra Bendis](#)

December 16, 2010



What's for dinner? According to Lisa Miller, our food choices have become "the definitive marker" of our social status. In her [Newsweek cover story](#), three families from Brooklyn are pictured at their dinner tables. The first family, two adults and two children, are eating meatballs, buckwheat pasta and organic romaine lettuce. Mom selects locally grown and organic items and says that she spends "hours each day thinking about, shopping for, and preparing" food. She believes that she is contributing to the cause of greater health and the survival of the planet. This family spends approximately 20 percent of its income, or \$1,000 per month, on food.

A second family of two kids and a single mom is shown with a dinner of pasta with pesto and chicken breast. They spend \$100 a week on food; the mom's income is a \$13-an-hour catering job. Fresh fruits and vegetables are too expensive, the mom says, and they're not fresh in the groceries where she shops. She worries about not having enough to eat.

The third family, an adult son and his mom, are eating turkey Salisbury steak with cheese, potatoes and green beans. Occasionally they feed a niece or nephew who comes by. They are on fixed incomes, and they spend \$75 a week on food. The author adds that the son makes a pot of beans and rice for the food pantry every week.

Fifty million Americans--17 percent--are "food insecure," meaning that they sometimes run out of money to buy food, or run out of food before they can get more money. The last three years have brought a 58 percent increase in the number of Americans who are on food stamps.

What are the rest of us, the other 83 percent, having for dinner? Does it matter if some of us are infatuated with how and what we eat? Is it okay to be perfectionists and insist on the highest standards and variety when we shop? If we want to be sensitive to issues of food injustice, how do we check ourselves on our habits and possible excesses, and what do we use as measuring sticks?

Perhaps the percentage of income spent on food is one such measuring stick. The average American spends 13 percent, including restaurants and takeout. Is this reasonable? (Should we be paying more to be more realistic about the cost of supporting ethical farmers, or less so that we can support a local food pantry?) And what about time? Is there a limit to the time we should spend on dreaming, shopping, preparing and eating food? After all, the ritual of sharing well-prepared food around a table is rich and biblical. Maybe the test is whether we can do this but also eat simply, even frugally, at other times, and yes, with guests.

Maybe a ratio of *us* to *others* would help. For every dollar and/or hour we spend on food, do we spend at least that amount of money and time in helping others gain access to food, and to more healthful food?