IS IT TIME FOR RICE AND BEANS?

Budget Meals from Around the World

Common staples have fed Europeans on very little, and their recipes are still just as good today.

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Introduction

Cooking on a tight budget does not have to be boring. Long before the age of convenience food and takeout, families across Europe were feeding themselves well on dried beans, root vegetables, stale bread, cheap cuts of meat, and whatever grew in the garden. They did it not by following expensive recipes, but by applying a handful of timeless principles: waste nothing, use everything, and let time do the work that money cannot.

This guide collects seven of those traditions — Italy, Spain and Portugal, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia, and Great Britain. Each chapter introduces the tradition, names the dishes most worth making, and links to reliable recipes so you can get started right away.

None of these meals require special equipment or hard-to-find ingredients. Most rely on pantry staples you may already have: dried beans, lentils, potatoes, onions, garlic, and a few spices. The investment is time, not money.

Whether you are cooking for one or feeding a family, these traditions offer a lifetime of variety at a fraction of what most people spend on food.

CHAPTER 1

Italy

In Italy cucina povera (peasant cooking) has been feeding large families on beans, stale bread, cheap cuts of meat, and whatever grew in the garden for centuries.

KEY POINTS

- Cucina povera is one of the most resourceful budget-cooking traditions
- Dried beans and chickpeas do the heavy lifting and stale bread is never wasted
- Flavour comes from garlic, onion, rosemary, and tomatoes

Cucina povera literally translates as 'poor kitchen'. It sustained generations of Italians and centred around dried beans, day-old bread, cheap cuts of pork, foraged greens, and whatever vegetables were in season. Nothing was wasted: bean cooking liquid was used as broth, pasta water thickened sauces, and stale bread was revived in soups.

It is worth noting that traditional Italian bread did not contain the chemicals that keep today's commercial bread moist for days. It would dry out in a day, hence the need for recipes that could rescue hardened loaves.

Cucina povera's principles can easily be applied to modern-day budget cooking. Simple and flexible by design, it's less about following specific recipes and more about being creative with ingredients.

Italian budget dishes worth making

- **Pasta e Fagioli:** Pasta and beans in a thick, garlicky tomato broth
- **Ribollita:** Tuscan bread and bean soup made with kale, cannellini beans, and stale bread; the name means re-boiled, because it improves the next day
- **Pasta e Ceci:** Pasta with chickpeas in a rosemary-flavoured tomato broth
- **Panzanella:** Tuscan salad of stale bread soaked in tomato juice and dressed with olive oil and vinegar
- **Aglio e Olio:** Spaghetti with garlic, olive oil, and chilli flakes
- **Minestrone:** Thick vegetable and bean soup that varies by season
- **Polenta with braised greens:** Coarse cornmeal cooked until thick and creamy, served with garlicky sautéed greens

Sources for inspiration

Links are provided for reference. Visit thecabinnearby.com for the full interactive version.

- **Pasta e Fagioli —** https://asimplepalate.com/blog/authentic-pasta-e-fagioli/
- **Ribollita —** https://mangiawithmichele.com/tuscan-ribollita-soup/
- **Pasta e Ceci —** https://www.themediterraneandish.com/pasta-e-ceci/
- **Panzanella —** https://www.lacucinaitaliana.com/italian-food/how-to-cook/home-cooking-panzanella-tuscanys-classic-bread-salad
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- **Minestrone —** https://asimplepalate.com/blog/hearty-italian-minestrone-soup/
- **Polenta with braised greens —** https://freshbitesdaily.com/polenta-greens/

CHAPTER 2

Spain & Portugal

Spain and Portugal share the Iberian peninsula. Both countries are known for traditional dishes that originate from peasant cooking. Chickpeas, dried beans, salt cod, stale bread, and cheap cuts of pork have fed generations of families in one of the poorest regions of Europe.

KEY POINTS

- Soups and stews feature cheap pulses, greens, meat scraps, and salt cod
- Stale bread is never wasted
- Garlic, olive oil, and paprika deliver lots of flavour at very low cost

Spanish and Portuguese cooking shares a common foundation: cheap and filling ingredients are transformed into flavourful dishes through patience and creativity with basic staples. Chickpeas, dried white beans, salt cod, offal, and whatever greens grew in the garden were the building blocks of daily meals that could feed a family hearty, flavourful food on very little.

Like the peasant kitchens of many other countries, Spanish and Portuguese cooks didn't waste anything. Many dishes use stale bread, because before the rise of commercial baking, bread used to harden practically overnight.

Other dishes make the most of cheap cuts of meat and bones, simmered for hours until the meat falls apart in flavourful broth. Portugal is also famous for bacalhau (salt cod) which is cheap, keeps indefinitely, and goes a long way.

Spanish and Portuguese budget dishes worth making

- **Cocido Madrileño:** Slow-cooked chickpea stew with cheap cuts of pork, chorizo, and vegetables; the broth is served first as soup, the solids as a second course
- **Caldo Verde:** Portuguese soup of potato, kale, and chouriço sausage
- **Migas:** Stale bread fried in olive oil with garlic, paprika, and whatever scraps are available
- **Bacalhau com Grão:** Salt cod with chickpeas, olive oil, and hard-boiled eggs
- **Fabada Asturiana:** Bean stew with white beans, chorizo, and morcilla
- **Sopa de Ajo:** Spanish garlic soup made from stale bread, garlic, paprika, and a poached egg
- **Arroz de Feijão:** Portuguese rice and beans cooked together in a garlicky tomato broth

Sources for inspiration

Links are provided for reference. Visit thecabinnearby.com for the full interactive version.

- **Cocido Madrileño —** https://www.spaininapan.com/madrilenian-cocido-stew.html
- **Caldo Verde —** https://www.daringgourmet.com/caldo-verde/
- **Migas —** https://www.tasteatlas.com/migas/recipe
- **Bacalhau com Grão —** https://culinaryexplorer.app/r/bacalhau-com-grao
- **Fabada Asturiana —** https://www.tasteatlas.com/fabada/recipe
- **Sopa de Ajo —** https://www.thespruceeats.com/castilian-garlic-soup-recipe-3083568
- **Arroz de Feijão —** https://shovelandcrunch.com/arroz-de-feijao/

CHAPTER 3

France

In France, la cuisine paysanne (peasant or country cooking) refers to traditional rustic dishes made from simple ingredients.

KEY POINTS

- Cheap pulses, vegetables, and bones are the foundation for many classic French dishes
- Simple techniques rather than expensive ingredients provide deeply satisfying dishes
- The investment is time, not money

Traditional French country cooking features slow-cooked beans, root vegetable soups, stews, and other dishes that make a little go a long way. Cassoulet, pot-au-feu, and soupe au pistou are all built from cheap pulses, bones, and vegetables. These meals have fed rural families for centuries and remain some of the best value cooking to this day.

The French peasant kitchen was built on the key principles of wasting nothing and extracting maximum flavour from everything. Bones and cheap cuts went into the pot first, where they simmered for hours to produce a rich broth that became the base for everything else. Dried beans and lentils provided protein at almost no cost. Stale bread thickened soups and formed the base of gratins.

French country cooking proves that it's not the ingredients that make dishes deeply satisfying — it's what you do with them. A cheap cut of meat slowly braised in wine and herbs tastes better than an expensive cut cooked quickly. A pot of lentils finished with a little mustard and vinegar is tastier than many dishes that cost ten times as much. The investment is time, not money.

If you want to search for more French budget cooking online, try these terms:

French budget dishes worth making

- **Soupe au Pistou:** Provençal vegetable and bean soup finished with a spoonful of basil and garlic pistou
- **Lentilles à la Lyonnaise:** Dried green lentils dressed with mustard vinaigrette and topped with a poached egg
- **Cassoulet:** Slow-cooked white bean and meat stew from the Languedoc, often using sausage and pork belly
- **Soupe à l'Oignon:** Caramelised onion broth topped with stale bread and melted cheese
- **Pot-au-Feu:** A one-pot boiled dinner of cheap beef cuts and root vegetables; the broth is served first, the meat and vegetables second
- **Gratin Dauphinois:** Thinly sliced potatoes baked in milk and garlic until tender and golden
- **Ratatouille:** Slow-cooked Provençal vegetable stew of zucchini, eggplant, tomato, and peppers

Sources for inspiration

Links are provided for reference. Visit thecabinnearby.com for the full interactive version.

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- **Cassoulet —** https://ethnicspoon.com/cassoulet/
- **Soupe à l'Oignon —** https://thishungrykitten.com/2013/05/04/soupe-a-loignon-thats-french-for-delicious/
- **Pot-au-Feu —** https://www.foodandwine.com/recipes/pot-au-feu
- **Gratin Dauphinois —** https://www.pardonyourfrench.com/classic-french-gratin-dauphinois/
- **Ratatouille —** https://lacuisinedegeraldine.fr/en/ratatouille/

CHAPTER 4

Belgium & the Netherlands

Belgium and the Netherlands have a long tradition of comfort meals based on cheap and filling ingredients that are common in northern European cooking.

KEY POINTS

- The Low Countries offer comfort food suited to a cold and wet climate
- Potatoes, dried peas and beans, root vegetables, and cheap cuts of meat carry the load
- Long slow cooking transforms simple ingredients into complex dishes

Belgium and the Netherlands, sometimes referred to as the Low Countries, are not known for haute cuisine, but they excel at cold-weather dishes that are designed to be filling, warming, and made from whatever is in the larder.

Some of their favourite meals are various stamppots (mashed pots) — a term that refers to comfort food made by mashing boiled potatoes together with one or more vegetables. Soups are also favourites, especially those based on split peas or beans.

Budget cooks in Belgium and the Netherlands use the same methods as cooks everywhere when dealing with cheaper cuts of meat: they slow-cook them. While French cooks like to use wine as a cooking liquid, those in the Low Countries often prefer beer.

Affordable dishes worth making

- **Stamppot Boerenkool:** Mashed potatoes and kale with smoked sausage
- **Erwtensoep:** Dutch split pea soup with pork and root vegetables, thick and warming
- **Stoofvlees:** Belgian beef and onion stew braised in dark beer
- **Hutspot:** Dutch mash of potatoes, carrots, and onions
- **Waterzooi:** Belgian broth-based stew traditionally made with chicken or fish, vegetables, and cream; the budget version uses chicken thighs and skips the cream
- **Zuurkoolstamppot:** Mashed potatoes with sauerkraut and bacon

Sources for inspiration

Links are provided for reference. Visit thecabinnearby.com for the full interactive version.

- **Stamppot Boerenkool —** https://ethnicfoodsrus.com/around-the-world-recipes/dutch-cuisine/boerenkool-stamppot-traditional-dutch-recipe/
- **Erwtensoep —** https://www.recipesformen.com/erwtensoep-dutch-split-pea-soup/
- **Stoofvlees —** https://www.byandreajanssen.com/flemish-stew-with-beer-and-french-fries/
- **Hutspot —** https://mission-food.com/hutspot-dutch-mashed-potatoes-onions-carrots/
- **Waterzooi —** https://www.thespruceeats.com/waterzooi-recipe-1135017
- **Zuurkoolstamppot —** https://www.byandreajanssen.com/traditional-dutch-zuurkoolstamppot/

CHAPTER 5

Germany

German cooking has a reputation for being heavy and meat-focused, but in reality it goes way beyond that. Lentil soups, potato dishes, bread dumplings, and slow-cooked braises extract maximum flavour from low-cost ingredients.

KEY POINTS

- German cooking goes well beyond schnitzel and sausages
- Eintopf is the definition of budget cooking
- Potatoes are among the most used and affordable staples across Germany

Abroad, German food is often reduced to just sausages, schnitzel, and maybe a spätzle noodle dish. In reality there are many other traditional dishes worth knowing about, especially the low-cost ones not usually found on restaurant menus.

Eintopf has fed German families for centuries. It literally means 'one pot' and describes a whole category of cheap and filling soups, stews, and braises made from lentils, dried beans, potatoes, root vegetables, barley, and whatever meat scraps are available.

Potatoes feature heavily in German cooking, whether boiled, fried, mashed, baked, turned into soup, or combined with sauerkraut for a dish that costs almost nothing and keeps for days. Sauerkraut itself is one of the best budget ingredients: cheap, shelf-stable, full of flavour, and nutritionally dense.

German budget dishes worth making

- **Linsensuppe:** Brown lentil soup with root vegetables and a splash of vinegar
- **Semmelknödel:** Bread dumplings made from stale rolls, milk, and egg
- **Kartoffelsuppe:** Potato soup with leek and carrot
- **Eintopf:** A catch-all one-pot stew of whatever vegetables, pulses, and meat scraps are available
- **Sauerkraut mit Kartoffeln:** Sauerkraut braised with potatoes and smoked pork
- **Erbsensuppe:** German split pea soup with smoked pork and root vegetables
- **Himmel und Erde:** Heaven and Earth: Mashed potatoes and apples with black pudding or bacon

Sources for inspiration

Links are provided for reference. Visit thecabinnearby.com for the full interactive version.

- **Linsensuppe —** https://www.quick-german-recipes.com/lentil-soup-linsensuppe.html
- **Semmelknödel —** https://www.daringgourmet.com/semmel-knoedel-german-bread-dumplings/
- **Kartoffelsuppe —** https://www.thekitchenmaus.com/kartoffelsuppe/
- **Eintopf —** https://germangirlinamerica.com/german-soups-stews-and-eintopfe/
- **Sauerkraut mit Kartoffeln —** https://comfortfoodinfusion.com/sauerkraut-and-potatoes/
- **Erbsensuppe —** https://ourgabledhome.com/authentic-german-split-pea-soup-erbsensuppe/
- **Himmel und Erde —** https://www.quick-german-recipes.com/himmel-und-erde.html

CHAPTER 6

Scandinavia

Scandinavians experience long winters and short growing seasons. Today international trade and modern conveniences offset the harsh realities of the past. Nevertheless, the traditional recipes of this region still sustain households at a fairly low cost.

KEY POINTS

- Traditional cooking styles are similar across Denmark, Sweden, and Norway
- Recipes revolve around salted, cured, smoked, pickled, and fermented ingredients
- Pea-soup Thursday is still a tradition today in many Scandinavian households

In the past, Nordic cooks had to be very resourceful with fairly meagre staples. Grains like rye, oats, and barley provided up to 80% of calories in winter. Preserved fish was a low-cost source of protein, and root vegetables and legumes rounded out the meals.

While southern European cooks enjoyed long, warm growing seasons, households in Denmark had to preserve and stretch whatever was available. Fish was salted, smoked, or fermented; vegetables were pickled; meat was cured. Those were the building blocks of the traditional Scandinavian meal.

Rye was the grain of choice in Scandinavia. It can withstand freezing temperatures, grow through snow cover, and survive frosts that easily kill wheat. Unlike wheat it also thrives in poor soil conditions. Because rye bread has a dense structure and high fibre content, loaves stay moist and store safely. A slice or two with a scrape of butter and a piece of pickled herring is a complete, nutritious meal.

Ærtesuppe is a Thursday tradition across Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Dried yellow peas simmered with pork and root vegetables produce a thick, warming soup that costs little to make. The custom dates back to the Middle Ages when a rich, filling soup prepared families for the mandatory Friday Christian fast.

The New Nordic cuisine became fashionable in the 2000s and draws heavily on the older traditions. It's about foraging, preservation, fermentation, and the creative use of humble ingredients — principles that are inherently budget-oriented: use what you have, waste nothing, make simple things taste good.

Scandinavian dishes worth trying

- **Ærtesuppe:** Yellow pea soup with pork and root vegetables
- **Smørrebrød:** Danish open-faced rye bread sandwiches with any available toppings, such as pickled herring, egg, or leftover meat
- **Havregrøt:** Oat porridge, eaten for breakfast and as a cheap, filling meal at any time of day
- **Pea and Barley Soup:** Thick soup of dried peas and pearl barley with root vegetables
- **Janssons Frestelse:** Swedish gratin of potatoes, onions, and pickled sprats baked in cream
- **Rødkål:** Danish braised red cabbage with apples and vinegar
- **Fiskegrateng:** Norwegian fish gratin made with cheap white fish, potatoes, and a simple béchamel

Sources for inspiration

Links are provided for reference. Visit thecabinnearby.com for the full interactive version.

- **Ærtesuppe —** https://allrestaurants.eu/en/recipes/italian/danish-pea-soup-aertesuppe-en-1765576850
- **Smørrebrød —** https://true-north-kitchen.com/10-delicious-danish-smorrebrod-recipes/
- **Havregrøt —** https://www.livinganordiclife.com/havregrøt/
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- **Janssons Frestelse —** https://scandinaviancookbook.com/janssons-frestelse-swedish-potato-casserole/
- **Rødkål —** https://www.nordicfoodliving.com/rodkal/
- **Fiskegrateng —** https://www.livinganordiclife.com/post/fiskegrateng-fish-gratin-a-nostalgic-taste-of-norway

CHAPTER 7

Great Britain

British working-class cooking brings us a wide range of excellent meals that can be prepared on a small budget. They are built from the cheapest possible ingredients, and some of them are among the most satisfying low-cost meals.

KEY POINTS

- Many British recipes originated from stark poverty
- The meals are resourceful, filling, and built around a handful of cheap ingredients
- Well-known British dishes are not glamorous, but satisfying and of extraordinarily good value

The industrial cities of England, the mining valleys of Wales, and the crofting communities of Scotland and Ireland survived on pease pudding, bubble and squeak, Welsh rarebit, Scotch broth, beans on toast, and colcannon. All are built from the cheapest possible ingredients.

Potatoes did a lot of heavy lifting. Combined with small amounts of bacon drippings or butter, they supplied the vital nutrients that kept working families alive under severe economic constraints. As a main source of Vitamin C, they kept scurvy at bay. With meat in short supply, grains and pulses were the main protein sources.

British dishes worth trying

- **Beans on Toast:** Ready in minutes, this is one of the most nutritionally complete hot meals. Baked beans on a slice of wholegrain toast provide protein and fibre for very little money.
- **Bubble and Squeak:** A satisfying no-waste meal made from leftover boiled potatoes and cabbage, pan-fried until crisp on the outside and soft within
- **Scotch Broth:** A thick soup of pearl barley, split peas, root vegetables, and cheap lamb
- **Welsh Rarebit:** A mustardy cheese sauce grilled over toast that transforms stale bread and cheap cheese into something genuinely delicious
- **Pease Pudding:** A thick purée of split yellow peas cooked with ham
- **Cullen Skink:** Smoked haddock and potato soup, made from two of the cheapest ingredients in the Scottish kitchen
- **Stovies:** A Scottish one-pot dish of potatoes slow-cooked with onions and leftover meat drippings
- **Colcannon:** Potatoes, kale, and green onions mashed with butter into a creamy potato cloud

Sources for inspiration

Links are provided for reference. Visit thecabinnearby.com for the full interactive version.

- **Beans on Toast —** https://www.pathculture.com/food-recipes/classic-beans-on-toast-delicious-british-staple/?sem_campaign=PMAXPCTOTALSITE_Canada&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=23301662295&gclid=Cj0KCQjw5P7UBhDaARIsAOSlS1MN3dNIHGfi2S6jQ_R3adHzKIAqmS0GCJhLiUTwQlHbVoWSpLalNckaAp43EALw_wcB
- **Bubble and Squeak —** https://www.tamingtwins.com/bubble-and-squeak/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22663726464&gclid=Cj0KCQjw5P7UBhDaARIsAOSlS1N9mk8uOP724MVjbQjz_FvmogR6qgHxQj5bES0Rp903QccuN_F1hVYaAhTWEALw_wcB
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- **Cullen Skink —** https://www.thespruceeats.com/traditional-scottish-cullen-skink-recipe-435379
- **Stovies —** https://scottishscran.com/how-to-make-stovies-recipe/
- **Colcannon —** https://culinaryginger.com/irish-colcannon/

Keep Going

These seven traditions are just a starting point. The same principles — use cheap staples, waste nothing, let time do the work — show up in budget cooking traditions all over the world. Once you start looking, you find them everywhere.

If you found this guide useful, there is more on the website: meal ideas, practical tips, and resources for cooking well on a tight budget.

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