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TACKLING THE RISING COST OF LIVING IN MALAYSIA THROUGH MEAL PLANNING

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Introduction

The rising cost of living is a pressing concern for many families in Malaysia. Multiple factors contribute to this issue, including the ever-volatile price of petrol. It is common for the general public to equate a rise in living costs especially with increases in petrol prices, given the direct impact on transportation and logistics. In big cities like the Klang Valley, this rise is particularly felt in the cost of food, making it imperative for families to carefully monitor their expenditure. There are various meal planning techniques available to help address this problem.

Meal planning techniques

Meal prepping involves preparing dishes in advance to be cooked throughout the week. Ingredients are bought, cleaned, cut, sliced, and diced, then placed in containers for easy access. For example, if you plan to serve ayam goreng berempah (spiced fried chicken) during the weekdays,

you clean and cut the chicken, marinate it with spices and salt, and store it in the fridge. When ready to cook during the week, defrost the marinated chicken, and it is ready to be fried.

One-pot meals are convenient and minimize cleanup, making them perfect for busy families. Common one-pot dishes like seafood tom yam and chicken stew are ideal. These dishes combine protein, vegetables and rich spices, simmered together in a single pot, creating a hearty and flavourful meal.

Batch cooking and freezer meals involve cooking large quantities of food and freezing portions for later use. This technique is particularly useful for labor-intensive Malaysian dishes such as beef rendang. By preparing these meals in bulk and freezing them, you

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can enjoy these complex dishes with minimal effort on busy days.

Meal-sharing is a communal approach where friends or family members cook different dishes and share them. This is common in Malaysian culture, especially during festive occasions. For example, during Hari Raya, families might prepare ketupat, rendang and kuih raya and then share these dishes with neighbors, fostering community spirit.

RSVP planning is useful for gatherings, parties and weddings where guests are asked to confirm attendance in advance. This ensures that enough food can be prepared without overpreparing, which is crucial given the high cost of food today. Invitees must adhere to this instruction to help the host prepare adequate food according to the number of guests. It is especially important for deciding the venue and controlling the number of attendees too.

Pot-lucking is a meal-sharing approach where each participant brings a dish to share, with the variety depending on what everyone decides to contribute. For example, during department meetings, a potluck might feature nasi goreng, kuey teow, fruits and various desserts. This approach promotes food sharing, fosters a sense of togetherness and saves department funds as well.

Bulk buying discounts can save a lot of money, but make sure to purchase only items that are highly used, such as formula milk or nonperishable items like disposable diapers. Avoid bulk buying perishable items like vegetables unless you plan to use them immediately, donate or gift them to family and friends. Be cautious of advertising strategies and do not be misled into buying unnecessary items.

Creating a shopping list before you shop is important. Bring enough cash, as using cards in this cashless era can make it harder to control spending. Stay in the designated aisles when shopping at the supermarket, tick off items as you buy them and leave immediately after. Prolonging your stay in the shopping area can increase impulse buying. Bring along a family member to remind you if you go off track with your purchases.

Family dinners and eating together should be emphasized. This time allows family members to catch up in a relaxed atmosphere and share their day's experiences. Avoid making frequent excuses about being busy. In addition, young children learn healthy eating habits by imitating family members, making family dinners an ideal opportunity to encourage them to eat less favorable foods like vegetables. In Malaysian households, family dinners often feature communal dishes or spread rather than individual plates.

A typical spread might include ikan bakar (grilled fish), curry, ulam (traditional salad) and sambal belacan (chili condiment), stir-fried vegetables or soup. The act of eating together teaches consideration and sharing, as family members take food from the communal dish to their plates.

Cooking together can be a fun and educational activity where family members or friends collaborate to prepare a meal, learning new recipes and techniques from each other. Making an elaborate dish like Pakistani chicken biryani can be a delightful experience that involves everyone from the start. The process begins with shopping for ingredients, followed by cleaning and slicing the chicken and dicing vegetables collectively. This collaborative effort not only makes the cooking process more efficient but also enhances the enjoyment of sharing a delicious meal made together. It provides an opportunity to hand down recipes and techniques while sharing stories of how the recipe learned the recipe, adding to the collective memory.

Recycling leftovers is an eco-friendly and budget-conscious technique that maximizes the use of food and minimizes waste. This approach involves creatively transforming leftover ingredients into new, delicious meals. For example, leftover chicken curry can be repurposed into savory kripap while excess rice can be turned into flavourful nasi goreng the next day. To maintain food

safety and quality, it is crucial to store leftovers properly by freezing them as soon as possible to prevent contamination and spoilage.

Proper storage of cooked food is crucial to avoid contamination and health risks. Flies can lay eggs on uncovered food, introducing bacteria and pathogens, making the food contaminated and unsafe to eat and potentially causing health threats. Therefore, always cover and store food properly to prevent these issues. In Malaysian culture, the use of a tudung saji (food cover) and gerobok lauk (food storage cupboard or cabinet) are common. However, avoid covering food that is too hot as it can lead to condensation and spoilage.

Accepting and attending kenduri (feasts) can be an economical advantage, providing both practical financial savings and indirect benefits. In Malay wedding kenduri for instance, dishes such as nasi minyak, ayam masak merah, dalca and various kuih are usually served in abundance, allowing attendees to enjoy hearty meals without spending on groceries or dining out, which can be significant savings for large families. It is common for guests to bring modest gifts or monetary offerings such as duit salam as tokens of appreciation. These gifts are generally less costly than the expenses of hosting a similar event. In turn, when it is their

time to host a kenduri, the reciprocity of this tradition can alleviate some financial pressure. However, it is essential to ensure that you are invited, as in Islam, eating at an uninvited kenduri is haram.

Food pickling or marination can extend the shelf life of produce. When you have an excess of fruits or vegetables they can be soaked in sugar, salt, vinegar or various spices. A common example of this process is with durian. Excess durian flesh and durian mengkal (under ripe durians) are placed in a container with some amount of salt to aid in preservation and fermentation. This mixture is left to ferment for several days to a week, resulting in a pungent, creamy paste with a unique and strong flavor that is both tangy and slightly sweet, known as tempoyak. Tempoyak is suitable for condiments such as sambal tempoyak (fermented durian chili condiment) or to be added in dishes like ikan patin masak lemak tempoyak (silver catfish cooked with spicy coconut milk and fermented durian)

Eating during the season offers many benefits. The produce is fresher and harvested at peak ripeness, which enhances its nutritional value and taste. It is also more cost-effective because there is a higher supply. For example, during the durian season, the fruit is more affordable and can be cheaper. This also helps to support local farmers and the local economy.

Buying local produce sold at the pasar tani (farmer's market) is more affordable as you buy directly from the farmers or agencies such as FAMA (Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority). Supporting local farmers helps sustain the local economy. Additionally, local produce has a smaller carbon footprint due to reduced transportation and packaging, making it more environmentally friendly.

Having a kitchen garden is important because it provides a sustainable source of fresh, nutritious produce right at home. It also promotes healthy

eating and offers a rewarding hobby that can reduce stress. Common plants grown in local kitchen gardens include chillies, lemongrass, curry leaves and pandan (screwpine leaves). These plants thrive in the tropical climate and are frequently used in Malaysian cuisine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, incorporating these techniques of meal planning can help reduce grocery bills and lessen the environmental impact of food production. This makes it a sustainable and economical practice for households. By adopting these techniques, families can enjoy a variety of meals, reduce their carbon footprint and save money. In turn, all these benefits contribute to a more sustainable lifestyle and can tackle the rising cost of living.