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The naked truth about bare cupboards (You might not have to phone delivery)

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Amy Balestier serves up a rice-and-bean dish, something sh...

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By SUSAN JURGELSKI Staff Writer

So the cupboard's bare with barely a carrot to spare. Don't despair.

Avoid the dial-a-meal option by opening your fridge and pantry — and your mind — to fresh possibilities.

"The worst thing is picking up your phone and ordering a pizza," said Chef Rob Poulton, program director of culinary arts/restaurant management for The Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts, a division of YTI Career Institute-Lancaster. "It's like, 'I surrender.' "

Prepare to combine and redefine.

"Look at what you have available and build your combinations," said Nancy Wiker, family and consumer sciences educator with Penn State Cooperative Extension.

Make substitutions when the ingredients you want aren't available. For instance, Wiker said she recently wanted to make ravioli but discovered she didn't have any spaghetti sauce and instead used a can of pizza sauce and added a small can of diced tomatoes.

Keeping a supply of staples or essential, basic ingredients on hand are a must-do.

A few must-haves to help with concocting more when you have less are rice, pasta, olive oil, flour, sugar, baking powder, vinegar, spices and herbs, basic canned goods such as tuna, spaghetti sauce and fruits, chicken and beef stock, potatoes, milk (canned or dried, as well as liquid) and plain yogurt, Wiker said.

Versatile pasta is a household staple for Poulton, who also counts on having eggs and good cheese.

Knowing that you're always going to have a few things in the house is like a little insurance policy for last-minute dinners, and there's always room to improvise.

If you need help putting together a staples list, you can consult numerous websites and books on the subject. The blog, www.thestonesoup.com, offers tips about making something out of (almost) nothing and information on minimalist cooking. Cafemom.com has an online group devoted solely to bare-cupboard cooking and cheap and easy ways to prepare family meals.

A freezer is a treasure chest even if the pickings in the pantry and refrigerator are lean. Stock your freezer with a variety of meats and frozen vegetables, and include a loaf of bread and plenty of containers of leftovers (date and rotate), Wiker said.

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