

Creating a Budget for Your Feast

Before approval for an event is given, the event steward needs to provide the sponsoring SCA group with a budget for that event. Cooks need to provide their steward with a budget for the feast food that is included in the overall event budget. The money a steward or cook spends on an event belongs to the SCA group sponsoring that event, and they have a responsibility to plan and control expenditure in a professional manner.

Most budgets for most events are relatively simple: income is usually only from ticket sales, and the most common expenses are hall or site hire, and maybe cleaning products, lighting / heating, or decorations. A feast budget is much more complex, given that the number of items paid for, from a packet of cinnamon to a side of beef, is many times the number of items paid for, say, in a tourney. In addition, prices for food items vary (often on a weekly as well as seasonal basis) and you may not be able to purchase exactly the quantity or brand of item you expect to. Consequently, the whole process becomes confusing, difficult and daunting.

This is the method I use to keep myself organised, and I hope you will find some useful ideas herein.

What is this budget thing anyway?

Budget: a complete itemised schedule of all expected income and expenditure related to the activity (event); based on actual costs and income, and / or sound reasoning for conjectured items. Conjectured costs might be: how many people might attend or the likely cost of seasonal produce. You are expected to meet the budget with as small as deviation (over or under) as possible. If you have done the budget with care, then there are usually no problems, or surprises. Compare with:

Guess-timate: “Oh, yeah, I’d thought I’d spend about \$500 on some food.” Try that one on your bank manager...

The feast budget:

Most of these steps have to be done at some point, so much the better if you can get them out of the way a couple of months before the event – much less stress in the week or so before the event (and believe me, there are few things more stressful than cooking a feast!).

1. First, make up your menu. At this stage I often have not have settled all the dishes, and include a couple of alternatives that I might do, depending on cost, or availability of produce.
2. Calculate out your ingredients and quantities. Go through each recipe, and calculate how much of each ingredient you need for the expected number of guests. Write on the recipes (photocopy them if they come from a book) the final quantities of each ingredient you will need; you'll be doing several times the recipe quantity probably, depending on the numbers expected, and you don't want to try and figure quantities under the stress of cooking. It's really useful if you keep the menu, copies of all the recipes and other related information in one folder that never leaves your side.
3. Make up your feast budget worksheet (see tables and instructions below).
This is a shopping list / budget / ingredient worksheet / shopping and price guide / brainstorming session and all round really useful piece of information all-in-one.

Feast Budget Worksheet by Recipe					
Recipe	Ingredient	Quantity	Notes	Cost per unit	Total Cost
Chicken stew	chicken pieces	4kg	\$9 or \$4.99 kg special BF	\$4.99/kg	\$ 19.96
	onions	500 g		\$2/kg	\$ 1.00
	crustacean	one teaspoon	use own supply	n/a	\$ -
	cheese	5	use own supply	n/a	\$ -
	bacon	1kg	\$15 or \$8 kg on special at PaS	\$8/kg	\$ 8.00
Spinach Pie	pastry	4 packets		\$1.50 / packet	\$ 4.50
	spinach	2kg	From own garden	n/a	\$0.00
	cheese	500g	get old cheddar from cheese mongers	\$10	\$5.00
	ricotta	1kg	buy the bouton d'or range	\$2.250 g	\$8.00
	nutmeg	one teaspoon	use own supply	n/a	\$0.00
etc:		etc:	etc:	etc:	etc:
Ingredients by recipe		Budget by ingredients		Cooking and serving Plan	

Figure 1: snapshot of the feast budget worksheet

4. Present your budget figures and a copy of the worksheet to your steward and discuss. The finalised figures need to be presented to the council meeting (well ahead of the event). *Remember: no budget, no advance / float, and no reimbursement.*

How to fill out your feast budget worksheet:

1. List the ingredients. Go through each recipe one by one, and for each recipe, add each ingredient (and the quantity, no matter how small) to the list, grouping all quantities for the same ingredient in different recipes together on the chart. For each *new* ingredient, start a new line.

Feast Budget Worksheet by Recipe					
Recipe	Ingredient	Quantity	Notes	Cost per unit	Total Cost
Chicken stew	chicken pieces	4kg	\$9 or \$4.99 kg special BF	\$4.99/kg	\$ 19.96
	onions	500 g		\$2/kg	\$ 1.00
	cinnamon	one teaspoon	use own supply	n/a	\$ -
	cloves	5	use own supply	n/a	\$ -
	bacon	1kg	\$15 or \$8 kg on special at PnS	\$8/kg	\$ 8.00
Spinach Pie	pastry	4 packets		\$1.50 / packet	\$ 4.50
	spinach	2kg	From own garden	n/a	\$0.00
	cheese	500g	get old cheddar from cheesemongers	\$10	\$5.00
	riccotta	1kg	buy the bouton d'or range	\$2/250 g	\$8.00
	nutmeg	one teaspoon	use own supply	n/a	\$0.00
etc		etc	etc	etc	etc
<div> <div>Ingredients by recipe</div> <div>Budget by ingredients</div> <div>Cooking and serving Plan</div> <div>+</div> </div>					

Figure 2: Snapshot of the ingredients listed per recipe

2. Next add up the quantities required. You'll need to make sure all the quantities are in the same units (translate cups to grams for instance, or figure the quantity in terms of the purchasing units (2 500g packets, or two 250 g pottles for instance)). A spreadsheet can do this automatically for you.

Feast Budget Worksheet by Ingredient							
by Meisterin Christian Baier							
Ingredient	Quantities per dish			Total	Notes	Cost per unit	Total Cost
Chicken	4kg (stew)			4 kg	\$4.99 kg special BF	\$4.99/kg (\$9)	\$ 19.96
Apricots (dried)	500g (stew)	100g (lamb)	200g (rice)	800g	Turkish apricots	\$9.99 / kg	\$ 7.99
Lamb legs	2.5kg (rst lamb)			2 legs	one leg = 2 kg, buy 2	\$17 / leg	\$ 34.00
Cinnamon	1 T (stew)	2 T (lamb)	2 T (rice pud)	9 T	Feast box	-	-
	1 T (lokum)	3 T (wine)					
Spinach OR	2 kg (pies)			2 kg	From own garden	-	\$ -
Mushrooms	2 kg (pies)			2 kg	If cheap (\$5kg)	\$8 / kg	spend up to \$10
Flour	3 kg (pastry)	500g ("fudge")	1.5 kg (pide)	(5kg)	1.5kg feast box		
				buy 3.5 kg	buy 3.5 kg	\$1.70 / kg	\$ 5.95
Parsley	800g (salad)	50g (stew)		(850g)	From garden		
				buy 500g	buy 500g	\$3 / 250g pk	\$ 6.00
Red wine	1c (stew)	3c (pears)	0.5c (lamb)	2.625 l	buy 3l cask	\$15.95 / csk	\$ 15.95
Ingredients by recipe		Budget by ingredients		Cooking and serving Plan		+	

Figure 3: Snapshot of the total quantities of ingredients

3. Go shopping! The next time you do your normal grocery shopping, take the list along. I prefer to take it to my regular supermarket – it's where I do most of the shopping for feasts, barring specials, meat, produce and specialist items. As you wander about buying your 2-minute-noodles and mallowpuffs, check out the prices of various ingredients. Look for the normal price, not specials - this will provide a baseline for your budget. (By calculating on this basis, and taking advantage of any special deals when you buy, you'll save money!) Make notes on any brands or products that are preferable.

Produce markets and butchers are often cheaper than supermarkets, and you should shop around for one with good quality merchandise and good prices. You may be able to access wholesalers; this can save a great deal of money. Creating a relationship with suppliers can assist in getting deals, or less usual items like whole animals or exotic spices. Specialist stores can provide high cost, unusual items like game, spices, and so on.

4. Calculate the costs. When you get home, input / calculate the cost of each item per unit, and the total cost (again, a spreadsheet will help). (Grocery prices are usually reasonably stable, so you can usually do this a couple of months ahead of time without incurring too many errors. However watch the cost of seasonal produce such as fruits and vegetables – ask your supermarket or produce market for a chart with produce availability throughout the year – very useful).
5. Finalise the menu. At this point you reassess your menu. Is the cost too much or too little? Are there dishes you need to change or drop because of cost, or availability of produce etc? You should now finalise your menu and budget. It's a good idea to keep a couple of dishes in reserve that you might like to do if you find the ingredients cheap(er) on the day, or if you have money left over, or if ticket sales are sufficiently higher than expected. Now discuss this with your steward, and come to a mutual agreement on menus, and costs. When this is approved at a council meeting you can then get a cheque for the food money from your exchequer (do not use cash from ticket sales!).

How to use your feast budget worksheet:

1. Specials. Before shopping day, check out the supermarket junk mail that comes out every weekend. There is always some meat (lamb, beef or pork usually) on special somewhere, and the same with things like cheese, mushrooms, wine etc. Check out wholesalers, small butchers, market gardens. Compare prices to your budget. You may be able to include a dish that was otherwise too expensive, or you might be able to buy more for the same cost (this is a good option for meat dishes for example). If you can store or freeze the item successfully, you can start doing this several months out from the event (but make sure you have approval for the expenditure first).
2. Go shopping! You should find you will generally be paying the expected amount, but hopefully there will be specials. Buy specials only where you can either save money, or get more for the same money. Don't buy extra ingredients not on your list until you are absolutely sure you have money left over. If you come out under budget, when you have brought absolutely everything you need, then either save the money for the group, or buy more food (still staying inside the total amount budgeted!). You might want to purchase more of the meat or cheese or other expensive / luxury ingredients on your list, or you might want to add further dishes or bread, cheese, fruit, or something special to the menu (pickles, preserves, turkish delight). *Don't forget your receipts!!*
3. Don't throw that list away yet!! Use it for packing for the feast – run down each item and you can't go wrong (have I brought this? Check the feast box for that, run out to the garden for that).
4. Use it at the feast. You don't want to go through half a dozen recipes to check out how much each one needs of the huge bag of dried apricots. Instead, check down the worksheet, and you can see how much you can take out for the dish you are working on. Great also for the kitchen hands – no thinking (or annoying the cook) required!
5. And after the feast file it away. Always useful for price and shopping comparisons (where did I get that galangale?), and for not having to figure out quantities, prices and shopping instructions for the next feast (beware inflation).

Notes:

Calculating the number of guests – is not the easiest thing on earth. Advance ticket sales are preferable. Past experience of similar events may give an idea of expected numbers. Work this out in conjunction with your steward. Be wary of over calculating your costs based on inflated numbers expected. Note that if the numbers coming are very different from what you expected, and you will have to revise the budget (and the quantities of food) up or down; check this with the exchequer before you start to spend.

Meat costs – if you serve twice as much rice, it won't get eaten. Serve four times as much meat and it will. Go figure. I tend to err on the side of generosity with items such as meat, and might change the meat recipe to take advantage of what ever meat is on special that week.

Feast box – your group may maintain a feast box that contains dry and bottled goods including herbs and spices left over previous feasts. Always check this, and use these first before spending money on items you already have. That said, most dry goods don't last forever, even stored in air-tight containers. Check the flavour and freshness of goods.

Your cupboard and garden – while you are under no obligation to supply your own ingredients to the feast, I rarely bother to purchase ingredients where I need only small quantity (for example, a couple of teaspoons of a spice), and usually use my own supply. The same goes for anything I might have lots of (spinach, parsley, eggs, etc).