

FROM THE KITCHEN OF NANA ROSA

Abuela's 25 Money-Saving Kitchen Secrets

The secrets nobody ever wrote down — how the old kitchens fed more people, wasted nothing, and made cheap food taste rich.

NANA ROSA

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Cocínalo una vez. Escríbelo. Pásalo.

Before We Begin

Mija, I'm going to tell you something the coupon apps will never admit: the women who fed big families on small money did not do it with tricks. They did it with *knowledge* — a hundred little pieces of kitchen sense, passed hand to hand, that nobody ever thought to write down because everybody's mother already knew them.

Well. Everybody's mother does not know them anymore. So here are twenty-five of the best, each one with the *why* behind it — because a secret you understand is a secret you keep forever. Some are about stretching. Some are about wasting nothing. Some are about shopping like a woman who counted every dollar twice. And some are pure kitchen science that turns cheap ingredients into rich food.

None of them require a gadget, a membership, or a miracle. Just attention — the oldest ingredient there is.

— **Nana Rosa**

A SMALL HONEST NOTE

Where I talk about cost, I speak in rough, honest terms — "about a third the price," "a few dollars" — because your store and my store don't charge the same, and I won't pretend to know your receipt. The savings are real; the exact pennies are yours to count. That's what the little notebook in Secret 25 is for.

SECRET 1

One Bag of Beans Is Three Suppers

A pound of dried pinto beans costs a fraction of what the same servings cost in cans — often around a third the price per plate — and it cooks into supper number one (frijoles de la olla), supper number two (refritos in a hot skillet), and the start of supper number three (bean soup with whatever the week left behind). Cook the whole bag every time, on purpose.

THE WHY · *Dried beans are cheap because you're not paying to ship water and metal. The cooking costs you a simmer; the savings compound three suppers deep.*

SECRET 2

Potatoes Double the Meat

One pound of ground beef feeds three people. One pound of ground beef plus three diced potatoes feeds six — that's picadillo, and it's the oldest stretching move in the Mexican-American kitchen. The potatoes simmer in the seasoned beef fat until every cube tastes like meat.

THE WHY · *Potato starch soaks up fat and seasoning like a sponge, so flavor spreads across double the volume. Nobody at the table can find the line where the meat ends.*

SECRET 3

Cook the Rice IN the Flavor, Not Next To It

Plain rice on the side needs meat to make a meal. But rice toasted golden in a little oil, then simmered in blended tomato, onion, and broth — sopa de arroz — is nearly a meal by itself. Same cup of rice, twice the supper.

THE WHY · *Toasting browns the grain's surface for nutty depth, and the rice drinks the seasoned broth as it cooks — so the flavor is inside every grain instead of sitting beside it.*

SECRET 4

The Tortilla Never Dies — It Changes Jobs

Fresh tortillas are for tacos. Day-old are for quesadillas and enchiladas, where a little dryness helps. Stale ones get cut and crisped into chilaquiles, migas, or tostadas — dishes so good that people now order them in restaurants without knowing they were invented to rescue old tortillas. In abuela's kitchen, throwing away a tortilla was simply not done.

THE WHY · *A drier tortilla absorbs less oil and crisps faster — stale is actually the RIGHT ingredient for chilaquiles, not a compromise.*

SECRET 5

One Chicken, Three Appearances

A whole chicken costs less per pound than its parts sold separately. Night one: the roast or the boiled bird. Night two: the picked meat returns in tacos, enchiladas, or over rice. Night three: the carcass simmers into a pot of caldo that starts a soup. Buy the bird, not the pieces, and make it earn its keep three times.

THE WHY · *You're paying once for meat, flavor, AND the gelatin-rich bones that grocery stores sell back to you later as "bone broth."*

SECRET 6

Caldo Is a Net, Not a Recipe

The great pots of caldo — de pollo, de res — were never built from a shopping list. They were built from what the week left behind: the tired carrots, the half onion, yesterday's rice, the last of the meat. Keep a "caldo bag" in the freezer for clean vegetable ends, and once a week, let the pot catch everything.

THE WHY · *Soup extracts flavor from things too far gone to serve alone — heat and time turn scraps into broth that tastes deliberately made.*

PART TWO · WASTE NOTHING

SECRET 7

Never Pour the Bean Broth Down the Sink

That cloudy liquid in the bean pot is not water — it's seasoned, starchy, savory broth you already paid for and simmered for two hours. It's the liquid for your refritos, the base of tomorrow's soup, and the splash that loosens a dry pot of rice. Guard it like it cost money. It did.

THE WHY · Hours of simmering pull starch, minerals, and flavor out of the beans and into that liquid. Draining it throws away half of what you cooked.

SECRET 8

Keep a Fat Jar (Manteca Thinking)

Bacon drippings, chorizo fat, the good oil left from frying — strained into a clean jar and kept in the refrigerator, that's free flavor for the whole week. A spoonful starts the beans, glosses the calabacitas, fries the eggs. Label it, keep it cold, and use it within a few weeks.

THE WHY · Rendered fat carries the flavor of what it cooked — it's seasoning you already bought. Refrigerating it keeps it fresh and safe; the strainer keeps out the bits that spoil first.

SECRET 9

The Stems Are Where the Flavor Hides

Cilantro stems carry as much flavor as the leaves — sometimes more — and they blend to nothing in a salsa or a caldo base. Chop them fine into the pot instead of the trash. The leaves are for looking pretty on top; the stems are for the cooking.

THE WHY · The stem is the plant's highway — the same aromatic oils flow through it. Blended or simmered, the texture disappears and only the flavor stays.

SECRET 10

The Soft Tomatoes Are the Best Tomatoes

The wrinkled, too-soft tomatoes in the reduced bin are useless for slicing — and perfect for everything else. Roast them on a dry comal or under the broiler until blistered, and they blend into a salsa or a sopa base with deeper flavor than the pretty ones ever had. Buy the sad ones on purpose.

THE WHY • *A soft tomato is a ripe tomato — more sugar, more flavor. Roasting concentrates it and adds char. Salsa was invented by people who refused to waste a tomato.*

SECRET 11

Hard Bread Was Never Garbage — It Was Dessert

A rock-hard bolillo is halfway to capirotada, the bread pudding built from stale bread, syrup, cinnamon, raisins, and cheese. Hard bread also cubes into croutons for caldo and grinds into crumbs for binding croquetas and picadillo patties. The old kitchens bought bread once and used it twice.

THE WHY • *Stale bread is dry bread — and dry bread absorbs custard, syrup, and broth far better than fresh. Half the world's great "peasant" desserts began as rescue missions.*

SECRET 12

Buy Chiles Whole and Dried, Not Ground and Bottled

A bag of whole dried chiles — ancho, guajillo, árbol — costs a few dollars, keeps for a year in a sealed jar, and makes salsas, adobos, and pots of chile with flavor no dusty bottle of powder can touch. Toast them thirty seconds on a hot comal, soak, and blend. That's the whole trick.

THE WHY • *Ground spices lose their aromatic oils within months. A whole dried chile keeps its oils sealed inside until YOUR kitchen wakes them up — you're buying flavor that hasn't leaked away on a shelf.*

SECRET 13

Good Frying Oil Works More Than One Shift

The oil from frying tacos de papa is not trash — strained through a fine sieve into a clean jar, kept cool and dark, it will fry for you two or three more times. Keep it for the same kind of food, and retire it the day it turns dark, smells off, or smokes at a lower heat than it used to.

THE WHY · *Straining removes the burnt bits that break oil down fastest. Oil is one of the priciest staples in the kitchen — one extra shift per bottle is real money over a year.*

PART THREE · SHOP LIKE ABUELA

SECRET 14

The Carnicería Beats the "International Aisle"

The same dried chiles, spices, masa, and queso fresco that cost boutique prices in a supermarket's "international" section cost a fraction at the Mexican market — where they're not international, they're just groceries. Buy your spices there by the bag, not by the tiny glass jar.

THE WHY · *You're paying for turnover, not just product. A shop that sells a hundred bags of guajillos a week prices them like the staple they are — and fresher stock means stronger flavor per spoonful too.*

SECRET 15

Masa Harina Is the Cheapest Bread in America

One modest bag of masa harina makes several dozen fresh corn tortillas for pennies apiece — hot off the comal, better than anything in a plastic sleeve. And the same bag thickens a caldo, binds a patty, and stirs into champurrado on a cold night. One ingredient, five jobs.

THE WHY · *Masa is corn treated the old way — nixtamalized — which is also what makes its nutrients easier for the body to use. The most traditional ingredient on the shelf is also the hardest-working dollar on it.*

SECRET 16

Buy What's Cheap This Week, Then Pick the Recipe

Abuela never walked in with a recipe demanding ingredients at any price. She walked the produce section FIRST, found what was abundant and cheap — squash in summer, cabbage in winter — and cooked from there. Calabacitas exists because squash was what the week offered. Let the store write your menu.

THE WHY · *Cheap and in-season are the same thing — abundance sets the price. You're eating produce at its best flavor AND its best price, which is never a coincidence.*

SECRET 17

Bone-In Is a Discount, Not a Chore

Bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs routinely cost far less per pound than boneless breasts — and they're harder to ruin, richer in flavor, and they hand you free bones for the caldo pot. The ten minutes of knife work you're "saving" with boneless is among the most expensive labor you'll ever buy.

THE WHY • *Butchering costs money, so deboned meat sells convenience at a premium. Bones and skin also baste the meat as it cooks — the cheaper cut is the more forgiving one.*

SECRET 18

The Bouillon Jar Is Not a Secret Shame

That jar of caldo de pollo powder sat on every abuela's shelf for a reason: it's the cheapest flavor multiplier in the store. Use it with a knowing hand — it is mostly salt, so add it EARLY for depth and then taste before adding any more salt at the end. No shame. Just skill.

THE WHY • *Bouillon is concentrated seasoning — salt, dried aromatics, and savory glutamates. Treated as your salt source instead of an extra, it deepens a pot without doubling the sodium.*

SECRET 19

Dried First, Canned Second, Fresh-Out-of-Season Last

For the pantry backbone — beans, chiles, corn for masa — the old order of value still holds: dried is cheapest per serving and keeps the longest, canned buys you speed for a little more, and "fresh" flown in out of season costs the most for the least flavor. Spend accordingly.

THE WHY • *Water and shipping are what you pay for. Dried foods ship light and keep for a year; you add the water at home for free.*

PART FOUR · TECHNIQUE IS MONEY

SECRET 20

Toast First — It's a Flavor Refund

Rice before the broth. Fideo before the tomato. Dried chiles before the soak. Cumin seeds before the grind. Thirty seconds to a few minutes on dry heat, and every one of them pays you back with a deeper, nuttier, richer pot. Toasting is the only free ingredient in the kitchen.

THE WHY · Dry heat triggers browning — the Maillard reaction — creating dozens of new flavor compounds that boiling alone never makes. It's restaurant depth for zero cents.

SECRET 21

Cheap Cuts Get Rich When You Slow Down

The inexpensive cuts — chuck, shank, oxtail when it's on offer, pork shoulder — are tough only when rushed. Given a low simmer and time, their connective tissue melts into the silky richness that makes a birria or a caldo de res taste expensive. The discount is for patience, and patience is free.

THE WHY · Long, gentle heat converts collagen into gelatin — the exact thing that gives luxury food its body. The cheap cut has MORE of it than the pricey one.

SECRET 22

Salt Vegetables Early, Broths Late

Salt the squash and onions when they hit the pan — the salt pulls out their water, and that water becomes your sauce. But go easy on a pot that will simmer for hours; taste and finish the seasoning at the end, after the pot has reduced.

THE WHY · Salt draws moisture from vegetables (that's your free sauce), but a reducing broth concentrates everything in it — including salt. Season vegetables at the start, pots at the finish.

SECRET 23

A Ten-Cent Lime Makes Cheap Food Taste Rich

The difference between a flat bowl of beans and one that tastes alive is often a squeeze of lime at the table. Acid at the end — lime, a splash of vinegar, a spoon of salsa — brightens everything it touches. It is the cheapest upgrade in all of cooking, and the old kitchens never served a caldo without it.

THE WHY · *Acid sharpens the tongue's perception of every other flavor — salt, fat, and savory all read stronger. You're not adding flavor; you're turning up what's already there.*

SECRET 24

Cook Once, Eat Twice — On Purpose

Leftovers are what happens by accident. PLANNED-overs are what abuela did: double the beans because refritos are Tuesday, double the rice because it's going into soup, boil two extra potatoes because tacos de papa fry crispest from yesterday's mash. Decide the second supper while cooking the first.

THE WHY · *The oven and the burner cost the same whether the pot is half full or full. Doubling costs pennies in ingredients and zero extra fuel or time — the second supper is nearly free.*

SECRET 25

Abuela Knew the Prices Cold — That Was the Real Secret

Underneath every trick in this book was one habit: she KNEW what everything cost, at her store, this week. Keep a little notebook — la libreta — with the price of the twenty things you buy most. Within a month you'll know a real sale from a sign that says sale, and that knowledge outsaves every coupon ever printed.

THE WHY · *Stores count on you not remembering. A price memory turns every "deal" into a math problem you can actually check — and math was always abuela's sharpest knife.*

The Twenty-Sixth Secret

Here it is, the one that holds up all the others: none of this was ever really about money.

The women who ran these kitchens weren't pinching pennies for sport. Every stretched pot and saved spoonful of fat was a way of saying *you will be taken care of in this house* — quietly, daily, without a speech. The savings bought shoes and schoolbooks and a little breathing room. The cooking is what the love looked like.

So use these secrets, and then do the part that matters most: teach one of them to somebody younger. Say it out loud while you cook, the way it was said to you — or the way it should have been. That's how a kitchen's knowledge survives. Not in books like this one. In hands.

Every week I tell the stories of the suppers and the secrets we almost lost, over at [youtube.com/@NanaRosaKitchen](https://www.youtube.com/@NanaRosaKitchen). Come sit with me — and keep an eye out, because the big collection of full recipes from this kitchen is on its way.

— Nana Rosa

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Cook it once. Write it down. Pass it on.