

Richmond Times-Dispatch

'Good and Cheap' - Stretching dollars and eating better, for \$4 a day

Posted: Tuesday, September 1, 2015 10:30 pm

By HOLLY PRESTIDGE | Richmond Times-Dispatch

Ann Clayton and Dorothy Tenney peck affectionately at each other like sisters rather than longtime neighbors. Every other sentence ends with “sugar” and “baby,” and like close sisters should be, nothing is off-limits.



DANIEL SANGJIB MIN/RTD

Dorothy Tenney and her neighbor friend, Ann Clayton, cook beef stroganoff with a recipe from a cookbook, “Good and Cheap” at Tenney’s home in Richmond on Thursday, August 27, 2015.

They’re free spirits who believe in “keeping it real” and talk plainly about the circumstances that led them both to their humble realities in a South Richmond public housing community.

Life is not easy, but as they share glimpses into their world they rebound quickly with smiles and a joke,

usually at each other's expense. Because, as they'll tell you, they are wealthy beyond words where it counts: They have each other, a roof over their heads, and the presence of the good Lord following them everywhere they go.

And, most of the time, sufficient meals to feed themselves and their families.

Despite both growing up on farms and knowing the value and satisfaction of pulling potatoes from the ground and drinking fresh milk, their limited means and lack of transportation these days mean they often rely on what they can purchase at a small convenience store within walking distance of their Hillside Court neighborhood. Mostly, it's processed foods high in sodium and fat. When they can get fruits and vegetables, they're expensive.

They make the best of it.

"I gotta do what I gotta do, baby," Clayton said with a smile last week as she and Tenney worked side by side in Tenney's small kitchen to prepare beef stroganoff, a meal they would share later that day and likely keep for a leftover meal or two if they can stretch it. Clayton chopped mushrooms and fresh garlic as Tenney browned some meat and boiled egg noodles.

"You get what your money can afford to buy, especially when you're feeding your family," Clayton said, then quickly added, as if reminding herself, " But I've been blessed."

People like Clayton and Tenney are the catalyst behind "Good and Cheap: Eat Well on \$4/Day," a cookbook by Leanne Brown, an Edmonton, Alberta, native, that offers tips, recipes and tools for eating well-balanced meals without spending a fortune.

Brown will be in Richmond Thursday at Fountain Bookstore to sign copies of "Good and Cheap," but also to spread the word about her passion for solving what she calls a "crisis" around the lack of affordable food, particularly in urban and rural areas.

For every book that Brown sells, another is donated to an individual or family who needs it.

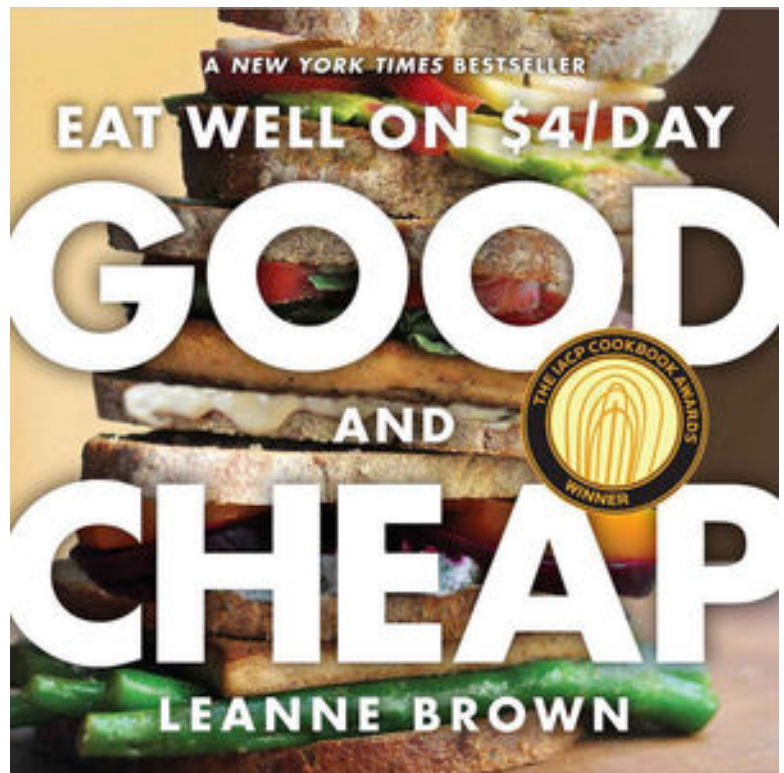
By phone from New York last week, where she now lives, Brown said she spent time working in city politics in her hometown in Alberta but was particularly interested in food policy. That led her to seek a master's degree in food studies at New York University; as part of her thesis, she created a free PDF version of the book on her website. The PDF was geared toward folks living on food stamps, which, as she pointed out, typically amounts to roughly \$4 per day, per person.

"Four dollars per day is no joke," she said. "It sucks, but this is the reality for many people."

Her PDF took off instantly. However, she realized there were lots of people — the elderly on fixed incomes, college students, bread-winners who suddenly find themselves without jobs — who could benefit from learning how to eat well on a budget. Brown said she also recognized that not everyone has access to a computer.

One Kickstarter campaign later, the cookbook was born.

"It's just not talked about enough," Brown said, referring to the issues of food deserts and hunger. "There are so many people



"Good and Cheap"

Leanne Brown presents "Good and Cheap: Eat Well on \$4/Day"

When: Thursday at 6:30 p.m.

Where: Fountain Bookstore, 1312 E. Cary St.

Details: www.fountainbookstore.com

who are struggling to get by and I just kept thinking about it and being bothered by it.”

Today’s food movements are exciting, she said, such as farm-to-table practices with an emphasis on fresh, local ingredients. But it’s “all very middle class,” she said, “and that leaves out a huge number of people.”

Beyond recipes, “Good and Cheap” offers tips for shopping smart as well as cooking without fancy gadgets and equipment. And, she emphasizes that spending a lot of money on food doesn’t necessarily add up to healthful eating.

“Kitchen skill, not budget, is the key to great food,” she writes. Teaching people how to cook within their means — using quality ingredients — is just as important as the food itself. It’s for that reason that her cookbook has found its way to more than 700 nonprofit organizations around the country, including several in central Virginia.

“I wanted to keep the idea of making it free for those who can’t afford it,” Brown said.

One of the programs that uses the cookbook is the “Prescription Produce Plan,” a food-assistance program through Goochland County-based Shalom Farms and Fit4Kids’ Greater Richmond Coalition for Healthy Children. Under the program, selected families were provided with fresh fruits and vegetables weekly for three months earlier this year. They also were taught about healthful cooking and eating habits, as well as provided checkups for blood pressure and body mass index. Right along with their fresh fruits and veggies was a copy of “Good and Cheap.”

Tenney and Clayton were both participants in the program last year. Because of their enthusiasm and knowledge in the kitchen, they were asked to return this summer as volunteers or “food ambassadors.”

Both women say they use their cookbooks as part of a journey

that's led them to finding new, more healthful ways to eat. Tenney lost 17 pounds and despite her sweet tooth — she makes a mean lemon pound cake — learned tips for managing her newly diagnosed diabetes.

"It cut out a lot of my sweets," she said with a grin. Her other weakness — fried chicken wings — has been cut dramatically. Clayton said the book and the program opened her eyes to new ways of cooking, which is always helpful when you're feeding any number of 24 grand- and great-grandchildren on any given day, as well as neighbors and friends and whoever else needs it. She's learned that the secret to getting those picky souls to eat good-for-them vegetables is often as easy as adding a sprinkling of cheese or the right spices.

"The kids love it," she said of vegetables like roasted squash and zucchini, especially when she prepares them with peppers and onions and potatoes. "They don't know unless they try it." In addition to nonprofits, Brown said she's received interest from all across the country from food pantries, churches, schools, farmers market managers, health clinics and libraries, from inner cities to the smallest rural towns.

"I want to invite more people to the table," she said. "Everyone, regardless of income, wants to eat well."