



STYLING: MICHAEL CARL HAIR AND MAKEUP: JILLIAN CHAITIN FOR TARTE PROP STYLING: CHELSEA MARSKIN AT IGROUPNYC.COM

Annemarie learns how to live fabulously on \$12.99 a day.

The question is, can she do
it for a whole month?

By Annemarie Conte

Photography by Tina Tyrell

Week one: Proof that you can get a free lunch

If you're like me, rent, utilities and transportation leave little cash for actual fun. But it seems crazy to waste our 20s watching TV, so I drag my butt off the couch and get creative. First I stop by the cheese counter at Whole Foods. "You'll like this provolone. It's nutty," the *fromager* offers. Nibbling on chunks of Jarlsberg and Stilton, I move to another kiosk, perfecting my multiple-sample method: Snag the first bite while the worker's distracted. Then glance over, looking surprised. Take a second sample, this time catching the staffer's eye. Exclaim, "Ooh, can I try another?" before popping thirds. If you think this is brazen, you should've seen me polish off hot chocolate and peppermint bark at Williams-Sonoma for dessert.

Two hours later, my stomach is rumbling, but as I walk past a bar, I talk myself out of using a happy-hour chafing dish as a feeding trough. There's nothing glamorous about deep-fried dinner.

I pick up a free alt-weekly to check out the listings, and discover a nearby salon's hosting a free girls' night out. My "girls" and I are so there. We clutch plastic cups of white wine and hoard strawberries while the makeup artist works her magic. Which reminds me, when I first described my experiment to coworker Katy, she suggested I double my lipstick as rouge. I love how this tip assumes I own lipstick. Not to mention that rouge went out with Miss Havisham.

Later in the week, I calculate that new jeans would cost four days (\$52). So I organize a clothing swap, giving new life to my friends' old duds with ribbons and mother-of-pearl buttons. Dry-cleaning is out of the question, so I shave the pills off my peacoat with an old razor. Then disaster strikes: My puffy coat falls on a bar floor. My friend who works at Eastern Mountain Sports is all, "Just use down wash." I offer

to edit her grad-school admissions essay if she hooks me up with the detergent. Like I said before: It's important to get creative.

Friday I head to my friend Kate's housewarming, already over-budget due to a \$22 cashmere sweater splurge at a suburban T.J. Maxx (urban closeout stores are too picked over). Thinking it would be funny to present Kate with a pawnshop find, I enter one and immediately exit after picturing some thug hawking his grandma's jewels. Instead, I measure the dry ingredients for my famous banana bread into a mason jar and attach a handmade recipe card with colorful string. Very Martha. Total cost: \$1.79. Dinner consists of peanuts and potato chips at the party. There must be a better way.

Week two: Learning the finer art of cheapskate crimes and misdemeanors

I load up on free podcasts, like WNYC's *The Brian Lehrer Show*, to fill me with current-events knowledge during my commute, and skip the newspaper. After a free college lecture on AIDS in Africa, I check out Ted Leo and Saves the Day CDs from the library for my very own "Jersey rocks" marathon. I'm hitting my stride. Browsing the foreign magazines at Barnes & Noble, I read that braising, which tenderizes even the cheapest cuts of meat, is back. Translation: Hello, Crock-Pot. With the help of coupon database thegrocerygame.com, I pony up \$40 for a week's worth of food (you'll find all my delicious recipes at janemag.com), which is what Rachael Ray spends in a day. In your face, Giggles! The next night, there's *poulet à la bière*—giving meals foreign names makes 'em fancy—simmering when I get home. Having a slow cooker is like having a housewife!

Soon I indulge in alternative medicine, after being lured into a ►

massage school's discounted acupuncture clinic to treat my chronic headaches. It's two days of my budget, but I know I can make it up now that I'm on a roll. My newly cleansed aura awakens me to a promotion at Wendy's, where if you collect 64 specially marked cups, you receive a round-trip flight on AirTran Airways. One soda a day for two months will get me there, and on day two I discover what fashion editors have known for years: Chugging 32 ounces of Diet Coke completely squelches your appetite. The caffeine makes me a mess. But a mess who's headed to Los Angeles!

There are more devious ways to get there, of course. My "friend" stakes out a seat by the trash at Wendy's during lunchtime, with a plastic bag and a backpack. She averages 32 cups an hour. Unfortunately, dumpster-diving is not an option. Fast-food chains generally keep their trash bins locked up, according to my source at Waste Management.

On Saturday I have a date with my boyfriend, Andy, and it's my turn to pay. "We could rent movies and split a falafel," he suggests. Oh Andy, aim higher—you're dealing with a cheapie queen! I pack a carpet picnic (it is winter, after all) of *j'aime ce potage* (mine-strone with garlic bread) to share with our friends Chris and Amy, who live near the Cloisters, a museum that specializes in medieval art. We choke down wine I received as a housewarming gift, like, two years ago (note: crappy wine doesn't age well), before touring the heavenly galleries. Andy hugs me and says, "What a fantastic day." Who knew this kind of love only costs \$11?

Week three: You can't spell friend\$ without the \$

It's a mark of privilege to work without getting paid, so I meet my friend Sean at the homeless shelter where he volunteers, to help him prepare dinner for 80. Carrying the mantle of women like Brooke Astor and Helena Rubenstein, I walk home with the glow of good works (and free pizza!). The next day at the office, I'm headed for the drugstore, when Esther, who's completely swamped, pops her head out of her cube. "I'll pay for whatever you're getting if you get me toilet paper," she says. More Burt's Bees Lavender Mint Toothpaste and Jean Nate perfume for me! I use this "you buy, I'll fly" method often, hitting up different coworkers so they don't think I'm taking advantage. Which I am.

Use your friends. Seriously. I'd been blind to Andy's access to discounted movie vouchers, and to my grandmother's 1950s cape (and all the other glam clothes she no longer fits into). Now I'm convincing my mom to sew me curtains that I'll hang with dowels and decorative hooks (which cost \$60 less than regular rods).

There's more. After admiring my Wendy's cup tower, our Celia mentions she'd "won" a \$500 Internet shopping spree and two-night hotel stay, if she attends a real-estate seminar. I beg to go instead.

Once there, a rep outlines a number of vacation packages I have the opportunity to purchase for \$12,000 at 17 percent interest. (Later she confides, "We used to get numbers from the phone book, but since the do-not-call list, we've had to find other ways.") A week in Wisconsin in February sounds mighty enticing, but I decline. Finally, I rush home to log on to the shopping site...which is filled with junky unbranded power tools and fringed leather jackets. Miraculously, there's a popcorn maker, a collapsible chair and a Mikasa serving plate I could use as a wedding shower present for someone I don't like, so I pay the exorbitant \$26 shipping on merchandise I seriously doubt "would retail" for \$69.93.

A friend is jonesing for a group dinner out, but there's no way I'm subsidizing eight lobster thermidors. So I send out a quick potluck e-mail invite. No one responds. Vulgar types who don't understand what *R.S.V.P.* means. I use the office color copier to run off images of me serving Jell-O shots, and deliver the "Winter Gala" invites myself. Visions of delicious, expensive entrées dance in my head.

I'm thinking canapés (because teeny = fabulous), but party planners always caution hosts to double their alcohol and halve their food estimates. So to be safe, my roommate and I put our dollars toward sangria. A gallon of wine, 2 cups each of triple sec and brandy, 1 1/3 cups OJ, 2 cans lemon concentrate, 1 cup lemon juice and some chopped oranges, apples and lemons later, we're ready to, uh, fiesta.

For a festive decor, I tape up vacation photos in an installation I call "Annemarie Explores: 2001–2005." Then I coat a heavy pot with oil, throw in popcorn, butter, a handful of sugar and several strong shakes of salt for homemade kettle corn. My roommate and I devour it with our sangria, hungrily awaiting real food. Sadly, the entrée folks don't show—should've kept the group small so people feel *responsible*—and our guests are forced to graze on *rugelach*, cakes and pies. It's a good thing I'm too drunk to remember I'd planned on living for a week off the leftovers. Mooching sucks.

Week four: Absolute, total, smashing success

Despite the party setback, I'm on track. My ticket to L.A. arrives, and the seminar people come through with a room at the Marriott Palm Springs. On Sunday I use a local gym's one-week trial to take a steam and, oh yeah, work out, too. The next day I call in sick and channel Canyon Ranch to prepare for my trip:

8 a.m.: Latin music on the clock radio adds rumba to dreams.

9 a.m.: Recline in a silk nightgown and watch back-to-back episodes of *The Golden Girls* on Lifetime. My doorbell rings and the super requests access to the basement. Loud drilling begins.

10 a.m.: Bathe in Epsom salts that I infused with a department store sample of Chanel No. 5 and wash hair with 99-cent Alberto V05 decanted into pretty bottles. Reheat bathwater for full hour.

11 a.m.: Ask roommate to bring me a warm towel from the dryer. She declines. I scurry to my bedroom to lounge around naked.

Noon: Paint nails and pop in a dust-covered yoga DVD.

2 p.m.: *Plat aux petits legumes campagnard* (rice and beans, yo).

3 p.m.: Snooze on sofa, read a trashy novel, bid workers good day.

4 p.m.: Watch *Oprah*. (The woman makes me cry—so cleansing.)

Then I dress for *Rigoletto* at the Met, to test my theory that rich people go the opera to be seen (they ditch after the first act). After 20 minutes of standing out front, my smile is frozen in place. A woman in a fur hat asks if I have a spare ticket. I explain that I'm hoping to nab a seat by intermission. "Ah, yes," she responds, "but one hopes one can see all three acts." She's so refined, I almost choke. But she's begging tickets too, so she can't be that high-class, right?

We're joined by Nathan, a wannabe opera singer who claims he would've purchased tickets if the performance weren't sold-out (good one, Nathan). He's scored orchestra-level stubs from two women who bailed after 20 minutes, so we jump into their seats (worth \$175 each). I feel so elegant, tearing up a bit at Rigoletto's loss (how tragic!), until someone boos one of the arias. What is this, a hockey game? Maybe next month I'll teach rich people manners. ♦