

Cost of Thanksgiving dinner barely budes

By J.M. Hirsch, AP

Giving thanks will be a little costlier this year, but – and here’s something you can be truly thankful for – it probably won’t empty your wallet.

The price for putting Thanksgiving dinner on the table for 10 people is expected to rise slightly this year, clocking in at \$49.41. That’s 37 cents higher than in 2013. For that, you can blame dairy products, coffee and that all-important marshmallow-topped sweet potato casserole, according to the annual informal survey of consumer grocery prices performed by the American Farm Bureau Federation.

The group found that the price of dairy – as in milk for the mashed potatoes and whipped cream for the pies – collectively jumped 25 cents over last year. Miscellaneous ingredients, such as coffee, sugar and eggs, account for another 28 cents, while 3 pounds of sweet potatoes jumped 20 cents.

The good news is that a drop in fuel prices won’t just make it cheaper to drive to Grandma’s house for the big meal, it also helped keep down the cost of some ingredients. Flour-based foods, such as stuffing mix, pie shells and dinner rolls, will run about 21 cents less than last year, likely due to energy cost savings by the processors, says John Anderson, the Farm Bureau’s deputy chief economist.

The group estimates the cost of Thanksgiving dinner by averaging non-sale food prices around the country based on feeding 10 people a meal of turkey, bread stuffing, sweet potatoes, rolls with butter, peas, cranberries, carrots and celery, pumpkin pie with whipped cream, and coffee and milk. And yes, their estimates account for needing leftovers.

And here's something to consider: Though this year's cost is up, it's still 7 cents lower than in 2012.

News earlier this week that turkey production is at its lowest level in nearly three decades and wholesale prices are at an all-time high briefly spooked some folks. But most consumers won't see that reflected on their grocery bills. Retailers aren't likely to pass on to consumer much if any price hike that they are paying for the big birds, and the Farm Bureau actually expects the cost of a 16-pound turkey to drop by 11 cents this year.

Of course, there are plenty of ways to spend more this Thanksgiving. Upgrade that 16-pound conventional bird to an organic, free-range model and suddenly the Farm Bureau's \$21.65 estimate can jump to \$100 or more at specialty online retailers. Not into baking? Instead of spending about \$3 on a homemade pie, you can spend \$25 or more on high-end mail order versions.

Or maybe you don't want to cook at all. A complete and fully cooked Thanksgiving dinner for 12 people from Whole Foods Market will cost around \$170.

Then again, maybe you want to spend less. Shop smart at a bargain retailer and you could shave more than a third off the Farm Bureau's total. Using the same menu for 10 people, Wal-Mart estimates that shopping for Thanksgiving dinner at one of its stores will cost just \$32.64.

But maybe you got off the hook this year and aren't hosting Thanksgiving. If instead of cooking you'll be traveling by car, you'll see savings at the pump. Gasoline is running about 33 cents less per gallon than it was a year ago, with a national average of \$2.88, according to travel tracker AAA. And it doesn't matter where you're driving. Gas can be found for less than \$3 a gallon in every state in the continental U.S.

Don't want to drive? If you're traveling by train, you'll pay a bit more. Amtrak says its ticket prices have increased an average of 2 percent over last year. Same goes for flying. The average price of an airline ticket for travel this Thanksgiving is \$307.52, not including an average \$51 in taxes and fees, according to the Airlines Reporting Corp., which processes ticket transactions for airlines and travel agencies. That's up 1.1 percent from last year.