

by Kathy Mitchell

As America entered the 21st century, trend watchers predicted what life would be like for families in the new millennium. One suggested that "a home-cooked meal will soon be as unusual as a homemade dress." While that prediction appeared for a while to be playing out especially in younger households, two factors may be getting Americans back into the kitchen. In a shaky economy, eating out at every meal may be a luxury that even busy households can't afford. At the same time, it's tougher to control fats, sugars, calories and other nutritional considerations when someone else is cooking.

Chef and food consultant **Asata Reid** says that even busy families can plan economical, nutritious meals with a minimum of effort. And the demand for her expertise is so great right now that she's given up working in restaurants to conduct classes in which she takes small groups on field trips to a grocery store, where she gives purchasing advice as the class moves through the store's aisles. The group then goes to a kitchen, where Reid demonstrates how to prepare the food.

On a recent Saturday, Reid conducted one of her Life Chef Shop & Cook sessions for a group from St. Philip AME Church on Candler Road in Atlanta, arranged through Dr. **Cathy Hope-Hogan**, who heads the church's fitness ministry. The students gathered at the church, then headed to a nearby Publix. Outside the store group members threw out meal ideas and agreed to shop for three dinners that would feature chicken, fish and turkey. Reid said she waited until this point to create a plan so that her class could see that they can quickly and efficiently plan a week's meals.

She added however, that flexibility is important as shoppers may find once they are inside the store that quality and price steer them to different choices than those they originally had in mind. As Reid led the group through the store she kept up ongoing patter filled with tips on planning food consumption. "You have to eat breakfast," she said. "You can't expect to be focused at work or school unless you've started the day with a good breakfast." At another point she advised, "Plan an afternoon snack. It's unrealistic to think that you can go from lunch to dinner without eating—that's usually six hours or more."

Reid said that she takes restaurant principles and shows people how to apply them at home. "In this class, I show people how to shop like a pro with minimal waste and optimal flavor and nutrition," she said.

Many members of the Saturday morning group were eager to learn more about selecting foods with



Consultant Asata Reid checks the menus the group selected to be sure of getting all the ingredients during the shopping portion of the class. Photos by Kathy Mitchell

Chef consultant has nutritious, economical answers to 'What's for dinner?'



Wilma Bailey examines fresh fruit in the store's produce section.



Ann Knowles makes notes as the group moves through the store.

nutrition in mind. **Wilma Bailey** said, "I'm not always sure how to read labels. I want a clear understanding of what to shop for."

Ann Knowles brought her three pre-teen daughters along to share the learning experience. She explained that her family members are lactose intolerant and have to plan meals with that in mind. Although the group had selected chicken in a light cream sauce as one of its meals, Reid explained that soy milk works very well and can be simmered until it is as thick as cream.

Reid told the group that planning ahead is the key to putting meals together quickly on days when they'll be coming home late or have to eat before going out to an evening event. "While you're cooking," she said, "prepare a meal for immediate consumption, prep a meal for quick assembly later in the week, and prepare a frozen meal to be eaten at your convenience." She added that families can support a healthful diet by stocking the pantry and freezer. As they passed the refrigerated section, she picked

up fresh pasta offerings such as tortellini and explained that it can be cooked in a prepackaged sauce for a quick meal. "Chef-Boy-R-Dee for grown people," she said with a smile.

After the shopping expedition, the group returned to St. Philip, where Reid demonstrated how to cook the food in the church's youth café. "Whether you're cooking for yourself or a family of five, she said, you can learn to make shopping a breeze, and drop the burden of answering 'what's for dinner?'