

Budget Brown Bag: Packing a week's worth of lunches for \$20

[Stacy Finz, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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School is back in session, and parents are once again contemplating the age old-old question: What to pack for lunch? With food prices soaring and the economy on the skids, it's not easy coming up with meals that are inexpensive, yet nutritious and delicious. Because kids consume 35 to 50 percent of their daily calories at school, says Juliet Sims of Prevention Institute, a nonprofit Oakland group dedicated to preserving community health, it's important to make good choices.

She says food manufacturers often seduce shoppers with package logos that promote their products as healthful, such as Kraft's "Sensible Solution" or PepsiCo's "Smart Choices Made Easy" line. Sims warns that there isn't always truth in advertising and parents should read the nutrition labels and ingredient lists before tossing items into their carts.

"Foods that have the highest profit margin tend to be the ones grocers put at eye level," Sims says. "Often those are the products you want to avoid" since they can be high in sugar, fat and calories.

Sims is a fan of shopping the perimeter of the store, where the fresh produce, meats and dairy are. She and other experts also suggest shopping seasonally. In other words, save money by buying fruit and vegetables at harvest time - apples and artichokes in fall, and kiwis and cauliflower in winter (for more information on seasonal produce, visit cuesa.org).

Ann Cooper, executive chef for Berkeley Unified School District, recommends shopping at local farmers' markets, where the produce is fresh and vendors often sell wholesome pre-made foods, such as tamales and hearty breads, which can go straight into a lunch box.

Arnell Hinkle, executive director of Berkeley's California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program, which works with organizations serving low-income youth, says lunches should include a protein like meat, cheese, nuts or tofu; a complex carbohydrate such as pasta, brown rice and potatoes; and a fruit or vegetable.

The best way to save money, say Hinkle and Sims, is to be prepared. Plan a menu before you shop and stick to those items. They also suggest preparing foods such as rice, beans, stews or even a whole turkey on the weekend, and then using it throughout the week in wraps, burritos and sandwiches.

Hinkle suggests buying fresh greens, cleaning them, mixing them with 1 teaspoon of salt, and adding chopped peppers, scallions and cilantro. The greens will keep for several days and can be used as a base for salads, wraps and in noodles. Leftovers also make great lunches and can often be repurposed into a completely different meal.

If you're trying to break away from tired old peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, consider shopping at ethnic markets for new ideas. One Food section staffer remembers her mom making her onigiri, a Japanese rice dish that she molded into fun shapes and designs. Another Food staffer who regularly packs lunches for her preteen daughter cuts a whole avocado in half, removes the pit and squeezes lime juice on the flesh. Then she puts the two halves back together, wraps it in plastic and includes it in her daughter's lunch with a small bag of chips for scooping. VoilÀ - instant guacamole.

Some of our readers, answering our call for their favorite school-lunch recipes had tips of their own. (See the links with this story on sfgate.com/food for the tested recipes.) Romy Douglass from El Cerrito packs snacks of toasted nori, sheets of seaweed used to make sushi. Cheri McCaffrey of Pacifica does a brown bag take on antipasti salad: She spreads cream cheese on pieces of salami, then throws in a couple of baggies of black olives, pickles, pepperocini, mozzarella balls and crackers.

We thought everyone's ideas were good in theory. But the true test was how much money we could save at the cash register. So we challenged Cooper, Sims and Hinkle to find ingredients to make five days' worth of healthful, kid-pleasing lunches for one student for \$20 or less.

We allowed our shoppers to count only the cost of what they used. For example, if they bought a pound of rice for \$2 but only used 2 ounces, we considered that 25 cents toward their school lunch budget.

We threw in condiments, such as, mustard, ketchup, mayonnaise, oil, vinegar, soy sauce and fish sauce for free, figuring that most people already have those in their pantries. Instead of perusing the aisles aimlessly, our experts came equipped with ideas for menus, took time to find the best deals, read labels and brought calculators.

By the time they reached the cash register, they had all the ingredients to make five well-balanced lunches that in most cases cost less than \$4 a day. They also had plenty of food leftover to go into breakfasts and dinners for the rest of the week.

See readers' top lunch recipes at sfgate.com/food.

For our experts' shopping lists, menu plans, recipes and lunch tips, see Pages F4 & F5

Kids' calorie needs

Here are the U.S. Department of Agriculture daily calorie recommendations for children 4 to 18 years old. The lower number is based on children who spend less than 30 minutes a day doing moderate physical activity in addition to their daily activities. The higher number is based on a child who does 60 minutes or more additional daily activity.

Boys

4-5 years old: 1,200-1,600

6-7: 1,400-1,800

8: 1,400-2,000

9: 1,600-2,000

10: 1,600-2,200

11: 1,800-2,200

12: 1,800-2,400

13: 2,000-2,600

14: 2,000-2,800

15: 2,200-3,000

16-18: 2,400-3,200

Girls

4 years old: 1,200-1,400

5-6: 1,200-1,600

7: 1,200-1,800

8-9: 1,400-1,800

10: 1,400-2,000

11: 1,600-2,000

12-13: 1,600-2,200

14-18: 1,800-2,400

JULIET SIMS

Juliet Sims, a dietitian and program coordinator for the Prevention Institute, an Oakland nonprofit dedicated to improving community health, hit an East Bay Lucky supermarket. She came prepared with her menu, which was based on the nutritional needs of adolescents - about 1,800 to 2,000 calories a day. She wanted plenty of whole grains, colorful produce and protein. She opted for organic whenever possible, but in order to keep to the budget she often had to forgo that choice.

Her shopping cart included the following items. In some cases, she'll use only part of the items for her week of lunches; amounts and cost were calculated only on what will actually go into the lunches.

Menu plan

Monday

Chicken sandwich: Whole wheat bread, 2 ounces sliced chicken breast, lettuce, tomato, 1 ounce Monterey Jack cheese, condiments per child's preference. Accompaniments: sliced green pepper, carrot, broccoli, 2 ounces hummus; sliced peach.

Tuesday

Veggie wrap: Burrito-size whole wheat tortilla, 3 ounces hummus, 1/2- 3/4 carrot, 1/2 green pepper, 1/4 avocado, lettuce. Accompaniments: 1/2 cup grapes.

Wednesday

Chicken burrito: Burrito-size whole wheat tortilla, 1/2 cup brown rice, 3/4 cup black beans, 2 ounces sliced chicken breast, 1/4 avocado, 1 ounce Monterey Jack cheese, 2 ounces salsa, 1/4- 1/2 chopped tomato. Accompaniment: 1 plum.

Thursday

Veggie sandwich: 2 slices whole wheat bread, lettuce, 2 slices tomato. 1/4 avocado, 1 ounce Monterey Jack cheese, 1/4 carrot. Accompaniment: 1/2 cup grapes.

Friday

Veggie burrito: Burrito-size whole wheat tortilla, 1/2 cup brown rice, 3/4 cup black beans, 1/4 avocado, 1 ounce Monterey Jack cheese, 2 ounces salsa, 1/4- 1/2 chopped tomato, 1/2 carrot and 1/4 green pepper, sliced and sauteed. Accompaniment: 1 kiwi fruit.

Shopping list

1 head green leaf lettuce, 99 cents

1 green pepper, 99 cents

2 carrots, 50 cents

1 pound broccoli, 99 cents

1 avocado, \$1.29

Two Roma tomatoes, \$1

1 orange, 32 cents

2 kiwis, 20 cents

1 red plum, 16 cents

1 peach, 38 cents

1 1/2 lbs. red seedless grapes, \$3

7 ounces hummus, \$2.69

3 whole wheat burrito-size tortillas, \$1.86 (from an 8-tortilla package)

4 slices whole grain bread, \$1.08 (from a 16-slice loaf)

3 servings black beans, 24 cents

2 servings brown rice, 38 cents

3 1/2 ounces canned salsa, 65 cents

4 servings Monterey Jack cheese, \$1.60 (out of an 8-ounce piece)

1/2 boneless, skinless chicken breast, \$1.36

Total: \$19.68

Rice Balls (Onigiri)

Serves 2

Food staffer Cindy Lee developed this recipe based on what went into her lunch box as a kid. The molds are inexpensive (\$1.50-\$3) and are available at Japanese stores including Ichiban Kan (1625 Post St., San Francisco) in Japantown. Traditionally these rice balls are filled with pickled plums, fish roe or salmon, but vary the filling to taste. Instead of placing the filling in the middle of the rice ball, this recipe mixes all the ingredients together. The nori will get soggy if wrapped around the rice ball in advance, so pack a few strips separately so your child can do it when ready to eat. Nori is available in the Asian section of well-stocked grocery stores.

- 1/2 cup uncooked short grain sushi rice
- 1/2 cup uncooked short grain brown rice
- 1/2 cup cooked salmon fillet, flaked
- -- Fresh lemon juice to taste
- 1 tablespoon reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame seeds
- -- Kosher salt to taste
- 1/4 sheet dried nori, toasted and cut lengthwise into 1/4-inch strips (see introduction above)

Instructions: Wash the brown sushi and brown rices separately. Cook separately in pots or in a rice cooker (the cooking time will be longer for brown rice) according to package instructions. Once rice is cooked, use a flat wooden spoon or rice paddle to fluff the rice. Cover and keep warm until ready to use.

In a medium bowl, combine the rices and mix well. In a small bowl, combine salmon, lemon juice and soy sauce. Add salmon mixture, along with the sesame seeds to the rice. Add salt to taste. Fill a mold with rice. Press down the rice with the top part of the mold. Invert the rice mold and press down to release the rice ball. Repeat with remaining rice. If you don't have rice molds, wet your hands with salted water to keep the rice from sticking to your hands and shape the onigiri by hand.

Garnish with vegetables like cooked peas or diced carrots. Wrap a nori strip around each rice ball and serve.

Per serving: 373 calories, 15 g protein, 67 g carbohydrate, 4 g fat (0 saturated), 17 mg cholesterol, 284 mg sodium, 4 g fiber.

Ann Cooper

Chef Ann Cooper, who is in charge of the food program at the Berkeley Unified School District, planned menus rich in fiber and protein with lots of fruits and vegetables. She decided to buy her ingredients at the Berkeley farmers' market with an elementary student in mind. First she walked the distance of the market looking for the freshest ingredients and the best buys, jotting down prices in a small notebook as she went. Then she and consultant Beth Collins found a place to sit and discuss recipes for their lunches.

This is what they bought, with prices and amounts adjusted for what they actually used in the lunches:

Menu plan

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Monday

Tamale: 1 purchased tamale with homemade salsa fresca. Accompaniments: green salad, plum.

Tuesday

Spicy Bean & Sausage Stew: ([See recipe](#)). Accompaniments: roasted zucchini (cut zucchini into rounds or half-moons, toss in olive oil, place on cookie sheet, and roast at 350° until browned), peach.

Wednesday

Egg salad sandwich. Mix 2 hard-boiled eggs with grated carrots, chopped celery and a little mayonnaise. Accompaniments: cucumber and tomato salad (toss vegetables with a bit of olive oil, vinegar, salt and pepper), strawberries.

Thursday

Brown rice and wheat berry salad: (Adapted from Brown Rice Salad in "Lunch Lessons," by Ann Cooper and Lisa M. Holmes, HarperCollins, 2006. [See recipe](#)). Accompaniments: yogurt, avocado, melon.

Friday

Basil tagliatelle salad: (Adapted from Pasta with Greens & Feta in "Lunch Lessons," by Ann Cooper and Lisa M. Holmes. For recipe, see the link with this story on sfgate.com/food). Accompaniments: roasted cauliflower (break into florets and follow roasted zucchini instructions from Tuesday), fruit salad.

Shopping list

1 tamale, \$2

1 plum, 87 cents

1 peach, 87 cents

1 pound melon, \$1

1/4 pint strawberries, 75 cents

1 pound tomatoes, \$2.50

1 small head lettuce, \$1

1/4 pound cauliflower, 45 cents

1/4 pound eggplant, 35 cents

1/4 pound cucumber, 65 cents

1/4 bunch of cilantro, 31 cents

1/2 bunch basil, 75 cents

1 onion, 50 cents

1 chile, 37 cents

1 pepper, 30 cents

1 ear corn, 50 cents

1 avocado, \$1.25

1/4 pound zucchini, 25 cents

1 carrot, 30 cents

1 stalk celery, 28 cents

2 eggs, 67 cents

2 ounces dried beans, 38 cents

2 ounces sausage, \$1.10

2 ounces bread, 41 cents

2 ounces brown rice, 16 cents

1 ounce wheat berries, 6 cents

2 ounces yogurt, 50 cents

2 ounces tagliatelle, 38 cents

1 ounce feta cheese, \$1

Total: \$19.91

Spicy Bean & Sausage Stew

Serves 8

This recipe is from Ann Cooper. The stew can be a bit spicy so adjust the chile according to your child's taste. Leftovers freeze well.

- 1 1/2 cups dried red beans
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 cup diced onion
- 1 pound Highland Farms spicy sausage
- 1 teaspoon ground ancho chile powder, or to taste
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground chipotle chile powder, or to taste
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 1/3 cup pasilla chile, diced small
- 1 cup diced eggplant
- 3/4 cup chopped fresh tomatoes
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt + more to taste
- 1/4 teaspoon fresh ground black pepper + more to taste
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro (optional)

Instructions: Place the beans in a colander and rinse under cold water, picking out any pebbles. Place beans and bay leaves in a medium pot and fill with enough water to cover the beans by several inches. Bring to a boil, turn down heat and simmer until tender, stirring occasionally, about 1 1/2 -2 hours. Remove beans from the heat and drain, reserving the cooking liquid. Set aside beans and the broth.

Place pot back on the stove and heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add onions and cook until translucent, about 3-5 minutes. Remove sausage from the casing and add to the pot. Cook until browned.

Stir in chile powders and cumin. Add in pasilla chile and eggplant and continue cooking until the eggplant begins to soften, about 4-5 minutes. If the eggplant begins to burn while cooking, add in a few tablespoons of water. Stir in tomatoes, beans and enough cooking liquid from the beans to bring the mixture to the consistency of a stew. Stir in salt and pepper.

Bring to a simmer and cook for an additional 15 minutes. Check and adjust seasoning one last time and stir in fresh cilantro, if desired.

Per serving: 238 calories, 14 g protein, 23 g carbohydrate, 10 g fat (3 g saturated), 23 mg cholesterol, 473 mg sodium, 9 g fiber.

Basil Tagliatelle Salad

Makes 4 servings

Adapted from Pasta With Greens & Feta in "Lunch Lessons," by Ann Cooper and Lisa M. Holmes (HarperCollins, 2006).

- 2/3 pound tagliatelle
- 1/2 cup diced yellow onion
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 cup chopped fresh basil
- 2 1/4 teaspoons lemon juice, or to taste
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/3 cup crumbled feta cheese
- Salt to taste

Cook tagliatelle al dente according to package directions in a large pot of boiling salted water; drain, rinse and set aside. When cool, transfer to a large bowl.

Saute the onions in the oil until lightly browned. Stir into the pasta. Add basil, lemon juice, pepper, feta and a pinch salt; combine well. Adjust seasonings to taste.

Per serving: 313 calories, 10 g protein, 44 g carbohydrate, 11 g fat (3 g saturated), 11 mg cholesterol, 291 mg sodium, 3 g fiber.

Brown Rice & Wheat Berry Salad

Makes 6 to 8 servings

Cook about 1 cup wheat berries and 1 cup brown rice in 4-1/2 cups water, covered, until done, about 50 minutes. Drain excess water. Rinse, drain, and let cool slightly.

Adapted from "Lunch Lessons," by Ann Cooper and Lisa M. Holmes." For a brown bag lunch, place 1 cup in a container.

Stir together low-sodium soy sauce, olive oil, honey, toasted sesame oil and a pinch of red pepper flakes, if desired, in amounts to taste. Stir into rice and wheat berries to taste. Add chopped celery or carrots, if desired.

Arnell Hinkle

Arnell Hinkle, executive director of Berkeley's nonprofit California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFIT), which educates after-school programs for low-income children

about health and fitness, shopped the aisles of 99 Ranch Market, an Asian grocery, in Richmond. She tailored her menu to middle and high school students, going for bolder flavors and more exotic ingredients. She focused heavily on fruit and vegetables and played with a few noodle dishes that could be served warm or cold. Prices and amounts have been adjusted for what was actually used in the lunches.

Menu plan

Monday

Asian chicken and mango salad: 1/2 cup shredded roast chicken, 1/2 cup shredded cabbage, 1/2 cup mixed baby choy sum, scallions, red pepper and snap peas. Dress with orange juice mixed with olive oil. Accompaniment: crackers.

Tuesday

Sesame noodles: 1 cup cooked egg noodles, 1/4 cup edamame, chopped red pepper, cilantro. Sauce: sesame oil, peanut butter, soy sauce and grated ginger. Accompaniments: Fruit and garlic peanuts snack (see What's New, Page F2).

Wednesday

Chicken or tofu wrap: 1/2 avocado, mashed onto whole wheat tortilla. Add 1/2 cup shredded roast chicken, cilantro, sliced cherry tomatoes, 1/4 cup shredded baby choy sum, 1/4 cup pea sprouts. Accompaniment: Pico de gallo made from diced mango, jicama, lime, chile.

Thursday

Thai-style bean threads with chicken: 1 packet bean thread noodles soaked in water 10 minutes, then drained and mixed with shredded roast chicken, 1/4 cup edamame, minced scallions, chopped basil and 1/2 chopped avocado. Accompaniment: stone fruit.

Friday

Leftover rice with milk fish: 1/2 can milk fish in tomato sauce, 2 chopped scallions, 1 cup cooked rice, 1 tablespoon chopped cilantro, soy sauce to taste. Accompaniment: fruit.

Shopping list

1 red pepper, \$1.69

1 bunch scallions, 39 cents

1 bunch cilantro, 49 cents

3/4 cup baby choy sum (small bok choy), 25 cents
1/4 cup pea sprouts, 30 cents
2 servings sugar snap peas, 88 cents
1 avocado, 89 cents
1 serving cherry tomatoes, 64 cents
1/2 cup shredded cabbage, 39 cents
1 serving fresh prune plums, 45 cents
1 small mango, 60 cents
1 white nectarine, 35 cents
1 pluot, 35 cents
1 pound Valencia oranges, 69 cents
1 bunch (3 servings) baby bananas, \$1.71
1 lemon (for dressing), 39 cents
1 lime (for dressing), 29 cents
1 serving (from 32-ounce package) Chinese egg noodles, 36 cents
1 multigrain tortilla (from 10-tortilla package), 45 cents
1 serving (from 8-serving package) bean thread noodles, 12 cents
1 serving (from 2.75-ounce bag) lentil pea chips, 40 cents
1 serving (from 10.58-ounce bag) garlic peanuts, 38 cents
1/2 (of 1 can) milk fish in tomato sauce, \$1
1/2 cup (from 1-pound bag) frozen peeled edamame, 13 cents
1/4 (of 1 whole) roast chicken, 93 cents

Total: \$14.52

Asian Salad

Serves 3-4

This salad can be used as a base for wraps or mixed with cooked noodles or soaked bean thread noodles.

- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 cup shredded napa cabbage
- 1/2 cup julienned collard greens (2-3 leaves without stems)
- 1/2 cup baby choy sum or small bok choy, coarsely chopped
- 1/2 cup shredded roast chicken
- 1/4 red bell pepper strips
- 2 scallions, minced
- 1/4 cup sugar snap peas
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- -- Juice of 1/2 orange

Instructions: In a large mixing bowl, mix the salt with cabbage, collard greens and choy sum. Let stand for 5 minutes. Add in chicken, peppers, scallions, and sugar snap peas. In a small bowl, whisk together the olive oil and orange juice. Pour over salad; toss to combine.

Per serving: 80 calories, 6 g protein, 4 g carbohydrate, 5 g fat (1 g saturated), 16 mg cholesterol, 557 mg sodium, g fiber.

Reader Recipe: Almond Butter-Banana Tortilla

Serves 1

This recipe is from Melissa Germaine in Burlingame and is her daughter's favorite healthy lunch.

- 1 to 2 tablespoons almond butter
- 1 whole wheat flour tortilla
- 1 banana
- 1 tablespoon granola or Grape Nuts cereal
- 1 to 2 teaspoons raw sliced almonds (optional)
- 1 teaspoon honey

Instructions: Spread almond butter on tortilla. Place banana on one side of the tortilla. Sprinkle with granola and almonds. Drizzle with a bit of honey. Roll tortilla so that the banana is tucked inside.

Per serving: 311 calories, 7 g protein, 58 g carbohydrate, 11 g fat (1 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 185 mg sodium, 5 g fiber.

Reader Recipe: Lunch Wrap

Serves 1

This recipe is from Sara Ferrigno, a certified nutritionist and yoga instructor in San Francisco. She suggests making the wrap the night before so that the mustard softens the tortilla and flax seeds.

- 1 teaspoon mustard
- 1 large whole grain tortilla
- 1 tablespoon whole flax seeds
- 1/2 cup chicken, fish or beef from cooking the night before
- 2 large leaves of leafy lettuce
- 3 slices tomato
- 1/4 avocado, sliced
- 1/4 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- -- Salt and pepper to taste

Instructions: Spread mustard on the tortilla. Sprinkle the flax seeds over the mustard. Layer the remaining ingredients on top and season to taste with salt and pepper. Carefully roll up and secure in plastic wrap or foil.

Per serving: 476 calories, 35 g protein, 31 g carbohydrate, 27 g fat (9 g saturated), 88 mg cholesterol, 538 mg sodium, 8 g fiber.

Reader Recipe: Chicken or Turkey Wrap

Serves 1

This recipe is from Lorna Jacoby in Foster City who made the wrap for her 10-year-old nephew's lunch. She also included in his lunchbox some baby carrots, a juice box, a mini pack of Sun Chips and for dessert, a pack of Jell-O gelatin or chocolate pudding.

- 1 teaspoon olive oil mayonnaise, such as Best Foods brand
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 multigrain wrap
- 3 to 4 slices turkey or 1/2 cup shredded chicken
- 1/4 cup chopped tomatoes
- 1 stick string cheese, pulled into strands
- 1/4 cup organic lettuce mix

Instructions: Spread the mayonnaise and mustard in the middle section of the wrap. Lay the turkey or chicken slices on top. Top with tomatoes, string cheese and lettuce. Roll up and secure in plastic wrap or foil.

Per serving: 335 calories, 32 g protein, 24 g carbohydrate, 15 g fat (5 g saturated), 78 mg cholesterol, 511 mg sodium, 3 g fiber.

Reader Recipe: Rainbow Salad

Serves 3-4

This recipe is from Amy Smith in Oakland who uses the summer's bounty to make this vibrant and delicious salad.

- 7 to 8 baby yellow-flesh potatoes
- 1/3 pound green beans and or wax beans, trimmed
- 2 ears sweet corn
- 1 large handful cherry tomatoes
- 1 orange pepper, chopped
- 1/4 head purple cabbage, chopped
- 1/2 cup basil, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon orange muscat Champagne vinegar (available at Trader Joe's)
- -- Coarse sea salt
- -- Freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1 avocado

Instructions: Put potatoes in a pot with cold water, boil until just tender. After they cool, cut into bite-size chunks.

Steam green beans until just tender. Plunge them into an ice bath to stop cooking. When cool, them into bite-size pieces.

Steam corn for 2 minutes. When cool enough to handle, remove kernels from the cob.

Mix vegetables in a large bowl. Toss with the oil, vinegar, and season to taste with salt and pepper.

Just before ready to serve, dice and add the avocado.

Per serving: 313 calories, 7 g protein, 42 g carbohydrate, 16 g fat (2 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 35 mg sodium, 9 g fiber.

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Craig Lee / The Chronicle

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