

Cooking, Groceries, and Eating Well: A Practical Food Guide for AELO Swiss Academy Students

You arrive in Switzerland with a room, a timetable, and a head full of course material. Somewhere around the second or third evening, a much humbler question arrives too: what is for dinner? At AELO Swiss Academy, like anywhere else, this question turns out to matter more than you expect. Eating out in Switzerland adds up fast, and a student who eats every meal in a restaurant can burn through a month's fun money in a week. A student who learns the basics of shopping and cooking keeps both their budget and their energy intact.

The good news is that you do not need to become a chef. You need a handful of reliable meals, a sensible way to shop, and a few habits that keep a shared kitchen from turning into a battlefield. This guide walks through all three, based on what actually works for students living here, not what looks good in a recipe app.

Shopping where the Swiss actually shop

Your first trip to a Swiss supermarket is a small rite of passage. Many students describe the same moment: two bags of ordinary food, a receipt for CHF 55 or 60, and a quiet moment of sticker shock at the till. It passes. Once you know the landscape, prices stop feeling random and start feeling manageable.

Two names dominate everyday shopping: Migros and Coop. They are full-range supermarkets, they are everywhere, and they compete with each other, which keeps everyday staples reasonably honest. Around them sit cheaper specialists. Denner is the go-to for drinks and basic goods, and the German discounters Aldi Suisse and Lidl Suisse regularly undercut the big two on staples like pasta, oats, tinned tomatoes, and dairy. In smaller villages you will find Volg, a convenient little shop that costs a bit more but saves you a trip.

| Shop | Best for | Price feel |

| --- | --- | --- |

| Migros | Full shop, own brands, freshness | Mid to high |

| Coop | Full shop, bakery, own brands | Mid to high |

| Denner | Drinks, snacks, basic staples | Low to mid |

| Aldi Suisse / Lidl Suisse | Cheap staples, weekly deals | Lowest |

| Volg | Village convenience, quick top-ups | Mid |

The single most useful trick is learning the budget lines. Migros sells its budget range under the name M-Budget, and Coop's equivalent is called Prix Garantie. These sit on the same shelves as the regular brands, often in plainer packaging, and cost a fraction of the price. The pasta, oats, tinned tomatoes, yoghurt, and even the chocolate are genuinely good. Nobody at the dinner table can taste the difference in a tomato sauce, but your receipt will show it.

Timing matters too. Supermarkets mark down items close to their best-before date, usually with bright discount stickers, and these often appear in the late afternoon or early evening. If your classes finish around five, a short detour through the reduced section before checkout can shave a third off a food bill. The store apps from Migros and Coop also carry coupons and personal offers, which take two minutes to activate and quietly reduce the

total. Bring your own shopping bag, since plastic and paper bags cost extra, and bring a shopping list, because Swiss supermarkets are laid out with real skill and will happily sell you things you never planned to buy.

One Swiss quirk catches almost every newcomer: most supermarkets close on Sundays, and in many places on Sunday evenings as well. Smaller shops at train stations keep limited hours, but you cannot count on a relaxed Sunday grocery run. Plan your big shop for Friday or Saturday, and keep a flexible meal in reserve, like pasta or eggs, for the day the shelves are shut.

What groceries actually cost

Budgets vary enormously with habit, but a useful planning range for one person cooking most meals at home is roughly CHF 300 to 500 per month. The lower end assumes you lean on discounters, budget lines, and seasonal vegetables. The higher end appears when meat shows up daily and you buy whatever looks nice instead of what is on offer. Neither is wrong; it just helps to know which levers move the number.

Some anchor prices help you sanity-check the whole exercise. Milk usually sits around CHF 1.60 to 2 per litre. A loaf of decent bread runs CHF 3 to 5. Eggs cost roughly CHF 6 to 7 for a box of ten, which sounds steep until you remember that two eggs, some potatoes, and an onion make a proper dinner for about CHF 2.50. Apples and carrots are usually the cheapest fruit and vegetables on the shelf. Cheese is a genuine cost item at CHF 15 to 30 per kilo, so treat it as a flavour ingredient rather than the main event.

Meat is where budgets go to die. Chicken breast can easily cost CHF 25 to 35 per kilo, sometimes more in the big supermarkets, and freshly made convenience meals cost many times what the raw ingredients would. The pattern that works for most students is simple: make vegetables, grains, and eggs the everyday backbone, use meat a few times a week in smaller amounts, and let cheese and good bread play the role that meat plays elsewhere. If you eat this way, the monthly figure above [flight training](#) is very reachable.

It also helps to decide your shopping rhythm once and then stop negotiating with yourself. Most students settle into one main shop a week, plus a small mid-week top-up for fresh things. Shop after a meal, not https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ before it, because a hungry brain buys twice as much as a fed one. And keep the receipt from your first few trips. After three weeks you will know exactly what your normal week costs, and any week that spikes will tell you plainly where the money went.

A kitchen that fits in one cupboard

Many student rooms and shared flats in Switzerland come with some kitchen equipment already, so check the drawers before you buy anything. If you are starting from zero, resist the temptation to buy a gadget for every mood. Cooking for yourself runs on about six items: one good chef's knife, one cutting board, one medium pot with a lid, one frying pan, a sieve, and two or three boxes with lids for storing food. A box grater earns its place if you plan to make rösti, which you should, because it is cheap, Swiss, and deeply satisfying.

The pantry matters even more than the equipment, because a stocked pantry is the difference between cooking dinner in fifteen minutes and ordering a CHF 25 delivery at nine at night. Five groups cover almost everything:

1. Grains and starches: pasta, rice, and oats, bought in the largest bags you can store.
2. Tins: chopped tomatoes, chickpeas, lentils, and sweetcorn, the backbone of fast meals.
3. Aromatics: onions, garlic, and potatoes, which keep for weeks in a cool dark corner.
4. Protein: eggs, plus yoghurt or skyr, which double as breakfast and as sauce.

5. Flavour: cooking oil, vinegar, soy sauce, dried herbs, chilli flakes, and one good spice mix.

With those five groups on the shelf, you are never more than one fresh vegetable away from dinner. Add whatever is cheap that week, usually carrots, cabbage, or courgettes, and the machine keeps running. The pantry does not need to be fancy. It needs to be boringly reliable, the kind of shelf that never lets you down at eight in the evening.



Cooking when you are tired

Here is the honest part: the hardest cooking you will do is not the complicated kind. It is the Tuesday when you get home at seven, your brain is full of vocabulary or case studies, and the fridge stares back at you. The fix is not willpower. It is deciding, once, that you cook in a slightly different way from your parents.

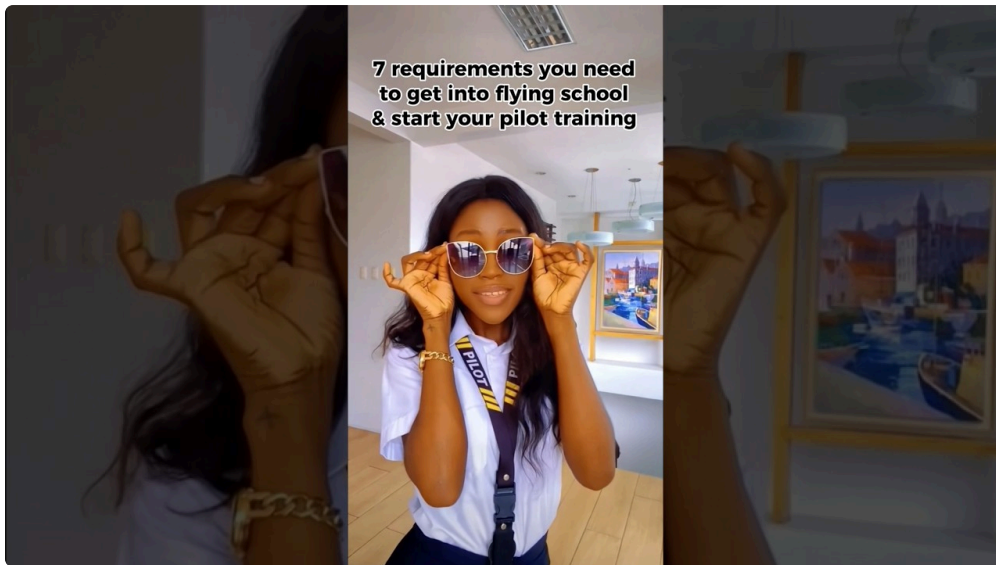
The core idea is batch logic. Once a week, often on a Sunday afternoon, spend 90 minutes doing a few things at once: a big pot of rice or another grain, a tray of roasted vegetables, and some boiled eggs or a simply cooked protein. Store them in boxes. Now every weekday evening is assembly rather than cooking. Rice plus roasted vegetables plus chickpeas, warmed in a pan with soy sauce and a spoon of yoghurt on top, is a genuine meal in under ten minutes. Nobody applauds, but you eat well and the evening stays yours.

From that base, three formulas carry most students through a term. The first is the pasta night: garlic and chilli sizzled in oil, a tin of chopped tomatoes, ten minutes of simmering, and whatever cheese is open. It costs about CHF 2 per portion and it never fails. The second is the soup: one onion, two carrots, a couple of potatoes, a stock cube, water, and twenty minutes of patience, blended or left chunky. It makes four portions, freezes fine, and turns leftovers into something new. The third is rösti: grate two or three potatoes, squeeze out the water with your hands, fry the shreds flat in a generous amount of oil until crisp, and put two fried eggs on top. It is the Swiss answer to every late-night craving, and potatoes cost almost nothing.

Save the showpieces for company. A fondue or a raclette looks expensive on paper, and cheese is not cheap, but split across five or six people it lands around CHF 8 to 10 each, which is less than any restaurant meal and considerably more fun. One pot of melted cheese, a bag of potatoes, and a long evening of talking is arguably the most Swiss thing you can do, and it fits a student budget when you share it.

Eating the Swiss way without the tourist price tag

Part of studying in Switzerland is eating Switzerland, and the country rewards you for it if you know where to look. Start at breakfast, because the most famous Swiss food invention is basically free: müesli. Dr Bircher-Benner developed it in Zurich over a century ago as a health food, and the original spirit, oats soaked overnight in milk or yoghurt with grated apple and nuts, costs perhaps CHF 1 a bowl when you make it yourself. Soak a jar before bed, and breakfast is solved before you wake up.



Bread is the other quiet pleasure. On Sundays, bakeries sell Zopf, the braided, buttery loaf that traditionally anchors a Swiss Sunday breakfast, and a loaf shared with flatmates with butter and jam is one of the nicest cheap meals in the country. Bakeries also discount at closing time, and the Too Good To Go app lets you rescue surplus pastries and meals from bakeries and restaurants for a few francs. Twice a week, one of those surprise bags becomes lunch for two people.

Markets reward a little planning. Most towns run a weekly market with excellent produce, and prices for seasonal items are often comparable to supermarkets while the quality is better. Follow the seasons and the cheap shelf takes care of itself: asparagus in spring, stone fruit and berries through summer, pumpkins and root vegetables in autumn, and cabbages all winter. Out-of-season berries flown in from far away are where fruit budgets quietly collapse.

Even chocolate, the obvious temptation, can be handled sensibly. Own-brand bars from Migros and Coop cost a fraction of the famous names and are honestly good, and the branded bars go on promotion regularly enough that patience pays. The real trap is not the price of one bar. It is the daily bar. Keep fruit visible on the counter and chocolate in a cupboard, and the arithmetic of the week changes on its own. Tap water, meanwhile, is excellent and free, so carry a bottle and let the drinks aisle keep its money.

Flatmates, labels, and the politics of a shared fridge

Sooner or later you will share a kitchen, and the kitchen will test the friendships around it. This is normal. What separates pleasant flats from tense ones is rarely how much anyone cooks; it is whether a few small agreements exist before the first disagreement. In most shared flats I have seen, five rules prevent ninety percent of the trouble:

1. Label your food with your name and the date, especially anything opened.
2. Wash your pan before you eat, not after, or it will still be there tomorrow.
3. Wipe the counter and the hob every time, because crumbs in Switzerland attract attention fast.
4. Ask before borrowing oil or spices, and replace what you finish.

5. Warn the flat before a big-smelling event, and open a window while raclette or fried fish happens.

Beyond the rules, shared cooking is one of the great underrated bargains of student life. A group of four who cook together twice a week spends less per person than any of them would cooking alone, wastes less food, and eats better, because someone always brings the good spice mix from home. A rotating dinner, where each person cooks one night a month, turns the kitchen from a chore into the social centre of the flat. Some of the strongest friendships formed during a year of study seem to start with the sentence: I made too much, does anyone want some?

Fuel for the study week

Food is not only a budget question; it is a performance question. Long study sessions run on steadier fuel than people expect. A breakfast of oats with a banana keeps you full through a morning of classes in a way that a pastry from the station shop, at three times the price, simply does not. Eggs in any form are the fastest high-quality protein available to a student, and a boiled egg eaten on the walk to class is a legitimate strategy that nobody needs to know about.

Coffee deserves one honest paragraph. Swiss café coffee is lovely and costs CHF 4 to 5 a cup, which becomes CHF 80 or 100 a month if it becomes a habit. A simple coffee maker or even instant coffee at home costs pennies per cup, and the café visit becomes a treat rather than a dependency. If you study late, eat something real before you reach for snacks, because the vending machine at eleven at night is a tax on poor planning. A bowl of yoghurt with oats, or bread with cheese, does the same job for a quarter of the price.

When you just do not want to cook

Some nights, cooking is off the table, and Switzerland has cheaper answers than you might fear. The larger Migros and Coop stores run self-service restaurants with hot plates that often land between CHF 12 and 18, a fair price for a proper meal with vegetables. A kebab is usually CHF 11 to 14 and reliably fills you up. Bakery sandwiches run CHF 7 to 10 and pair well with a park bench in summer. If your AELO Swiss Academy programme gives you access to a canteen or a student kitchen, use both, since the canteen is often the best price-per-nutrition deal in your week and the kitchen is where the real savings live.

Sitting down in an actual restaurant is a different category. Main dishes typically start around CHF 25 and climb from there, and tap water is charged for, so a modest dinner out with a drink lands closer to CHF 40 to 50. It is worth doing, occasionally, and worth doing well. The trick is to treat restaurant meals as planned events rather than fallbacks, and to keep the fallback cheap. Lunch menus, the Tagesmenu or menu du jour posted outside many restaurants, offer the same kitchen at a friendlier price if you