

Is Online Health Food Shopping Affordable?

While fresh, organic, whole foods are the ideal, few of us have the time or dedication to make everything from scratch. Though many die-hard foodies make their own condiments, who makes their own olive oil?

Recently a quest for gluten-free balsamic vinegar led to the discovery of Vitacost, an online grocery that carries most, if not all, of the packaged pantry items we would ever need. Their costs were a complete surprise. While a few things were a bit higher, others were lower. Groceries are delivered to your door. There are no travel costs. No taxes. And what makes it truly affordable, no shipping charge for orders over \$49.00 (or \$25.00 for selected products).

Soon after discovering Vitacost, I noticed advertising for a similar company, Thrive Market. Both are vocal about competing with Whole Foods. It was time to do a serious cost and website comparison to learn a little more about these companies.

Vitacost

Vitacost started their business in 1994 as an online source for third party vitamins and supplements. In 1999, the company began carrying proprietary brands. Over the years, it expanded into personal care products, sports and fitness diet supplies, pet supplies, green cleaning supplies, and “shelf-stable” natural and organic food. Vitacost was purchased by Kroger in 2014. The company now carries more than 45,000 items.

Thrive Market

Thrive Market is new in the game, having launched in September of 2014. Thrive is growing in leaps and bounds, though their

selection is sparse compared to Vitacost and they require a \$60.00 annual membership fee. The company now reports that they have acquired more than 200,000 members. They also claim to be carbon neutral and to be a company with a conscience that gives away memberships to those who cannot afford them. The company is working hard to make healthy foods (organic and non-GMO foods) accessible to everyone.

Website Comparison

Vitacost is hands down the winner when it comes to website design and user-friendly features. While Thrive has incorporated many of the same search features, they don't have all as many categories so narrowing search parameters isn't nearly as precise.

A search in Vitacost for olive oil reveals 172 hits in food and beverages. On the side of the screen, the user can limit choices by checking one or more of the 24 specialty choices such as GMO-free, gluten-free, organic, sugar-free, kosher, vegan, BPA-free, etc. Further limitations can be made by choosing brands, price range, form (like chips or liquid), servings, flavor, ratings, featured products, or price range.

The same search on Thrive Market results in 19 hits in the food category. The search can be further narrowed by the following categories: form, manufacturers, certifications and awards (certified gluten-free, kosher, non-GMO, etc.) environmental and social (categories like family-owned business, made in the USA, women-owned business, recyclable), health and ingredients (sugar free, salt free, pesticide free, etc.), and lifestyle (their broad categories like gluten free, paleo, vegan, etc.)

Where Vitacost's site really shines is how it allows shoppers to save and organize favorite items. Shoppers can even create separate folders. For instance, you can create a folder for canned goods, one for baking items, one for cookies, one for

pasta, etc. When you return to the site you can open a folder and check off items you wish to purchase rather than searching through the site. You can also reorder from a previous order (you can even modify it) and you can set up and schedule automatic re-orders for the items you know you are going to purchase regularly.

Amazon

Although prices were competitive on some items, others were ridiculously high. However, Amazon may remain the go-to spot for large bulk items like 25lb bags of rice or cases of canned goods.

Prices are accurate as of 5/30/2016.

Item	Whole Foods	Vitacost	Thrive	Amazon
Spectrum Organic Olive Oil 25.4 fl oz	12.99	14.59	Carries Spectrum spray olive oil but no bottled Spectrum olive oil. Napa Valley Organic Olive Oil 25.4 fl oz 10.45	29.99
Nature's Way Organic Coconut Oil 32 oz	16.99 (.53 oz)	16.19	Doesn't carry this brand of coconut oil. Dr. Bronners 30 oz 14.95 (.50 0z)	16.19
Pacific Brand Organic Vegetable Broth 32 oz	3.69	3.68	2- 8 oz cartons for 2.95 32 oz would cost 5.84	4.09 for Prime members only. Other price 12.04
Muir Glen Organic crushed canned tomatoes with Basil 28 oz	2.99	3.19	Only carries Muir Glen tomato sauce and tomato paste	3.29

Muir Glen Organic Tomato Paste 6 oz	1.39	1.32	2 pack only 2.05	4.29 Better pricing for multi-packs 24-pack price equals 1.25 per can
Red Mill All Purpose Gluten Free Flour 44oz	8.99	7.79	6.95	12.77
Native Forest Organic Coconut Milk – Light 13.5 oz	2.69	2.47 Classic 2.52	Only has Classic variety 2.45	2.47

It is clear that both Vitacost and Thrive Market are viable alternatives to shopping at Whole Foods even before taxes, travel costs, and time are considered. For those who don't live near a store that carries these items, online shopping may be the only means to purchase natural and organic staples. Affordable, accessible quality foods are now within the reach of all our citizens.

Recommended Reading:

- *Detox Cheap and Easy Without Fasting – Recipes Included*
- *Total Nutrition – Make your own Homemade Multivitamin and Mineral Formula*
- *Holistic Guide to Healing the Endocrine System and Balancing Our Hormones*
- *Candida, Gut Flora, Allergies, and Disease*
- *How to Eat Healthy On a Budget*
- *Eating Right when the Budget is Tight*

Sources:

- *Vitacost – Wikipedia*
- Company information supplied by Vitacost
- *Thrive Market wants to build an online Whole Foods for people who aren't rich – Recode*
- *Can Thrive Market be a Kinder, Gentler Amazon for Organic Food? – Civil Eats*