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\$46.99, which typically sells for \$59 in department stores. Costco was also selling women's Lucky brand jeans for \$40 (typically \$70 or higher in department stores) and Apple iPods for \$10 less than you can buy them from Apple.

Sam's Club offered some impressive clothing labels, such as men's Ralph Lauren linen pants for \$29.86 and women's DKNY jeans for \$32.23. They were also selling women's leather jackets for less than \$55.

Retail analysts say this is precisely why such membership warehouses are doing well. It's not simply the appeal of buying household necessities in bulk, but the fact that these stores carry high-quality items at low prices. In other words, it's not merely cheap stuff. You can spend thousands on flat-screen TVs or designer jewelry and get a good value.

It's little things like finding three-packs of Estee Lauder lipsticks (usually \$22 each in department stores) for \$43.99 or Lladro porcelain figures (typically hundreds of dollars) for as little as \$67.99 (both at Costco) that makes shopping at these stores a treasure hunt. Both stores stock designer handbags, high-end watches and jewelry, Waterford crystal and all sorts of luxury items.

"Really what they represent is sort of a consumer revolution in terms of quality and pricing," says Kenneth Dalto, a management consultant and retail analyst in Farmington Hills. "By word of mouth, people are realizing the meat and clothing and other retail items are good, and it's going across class lines."

Paul Bensman, a retail consultant from Southfield, says membership warehouses are "one of the better growth areas in the retail business."

But while Bensman says you can definitely get a bargain, he also says not everything is automatically a better deal. For example, he says items such as paper towels and toilet paper are often loss-leader items -- advertised items stores lose money on to draw in customers -- and sometimes can be found cheaper at other places. Also, warehouse stores may not make sense for anyone who is short on storage space or mouths to feed.

You'll be tempted to tote home 30 giant rolls of Charmin Ultra toilet paper for \$14.49 (at Costco) or 10-pound bags of Sunkist oranges for \$5.88 (at Sam's Club) that you can't begin to consume without a small army.

Trenda of Royal Oak concurs that comparison shopping is a smart tactic to employ before heading to membership warehouses. She still shops at her local grocery store, where she prefers buying things such as boneless chicken breasts. But she does save money at Costco and Sam's Club gas pumps, which are one of many extra services these membership stores offer. "It's typically 3 to 5 cents cheaper," she says.

In addition to food, bakery items, clothing, jewelry, electronics, appliances, furniture, flowers, tools, books, movies and music, both stores offer special loan and financing programs, insurance plans and even travel deals.

"I joined Sam's Club and used their services to get their car insurance," Bensman. "I probably saved 40 percent."

Costco also offers everything from in-home decorating services (including carpet and window treatments) to special-order caskets for \$799. Dalto says he thinks the merchandise and some of the brands are bit more upscale at Costco stores -- especially the food items such as

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Donna and Frank Saverino of Royal Oak pick out bread at Costco in Madison Heights. Quantity is a concern for some shoppers. ▶ [See full image](#)

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**meats, cheeses and fish.**

One difference in merchandise is liquor. Both Costco and Sam's Club sell wine and beer, but the two Sam's Clubs I visited didn't sell hard liquor such as whiskey, tequila and gin. Costco also posts a large sign near the door stating non-members are allowed to purchase alcoholic beverages. Because Michigan's Liquor Control Commission regulates the price of hard liquor there is no price advantage at warehouse stores.

The other difference between the stores may come down to your politics. A New York Times article last summer dubbed Costco the "Anti-Wal-Mart" and explored the differences in business philosophies between the two companies.

The July 2005 story noted Costco's average pay was 42 percent higher than at Sam's Club, and health insurance policies for Costco employees are also more generous. Buyblue.org, which tracks political contributions of companies' executives, also shows a large difference between the two, with Costco mainly supporting Democrats and Sam's Club owner Wal-Mart primarily supporting Republicans.

Whichever store fits you best, just make sure you really need a gallon of mayo before you buy it, no matter how low it's priced.

*Savvy shopper You can reach Kara Morrison at (313) 222-2021 or kmorrison@detnews.com.*

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