FULL BREAKDOWN · UPDATED AUGUST 2026

The 2-Card Starter Stack.

Every bonus, every perk, every exclusion on the two cards that cover almost everything a normal person spends money on.

Blue Cash Preferred® Card from American Express

Groceries & streaming · $0 intro annual fee first year, then $95

Chase Sapphire Preferred® Card

Dining, travel & everything abroad · $95 annual fee

CARD ONE / THE GROCERY CARD

Blue Cash Preferred® Card from American Express

ANNUAL FEE	FOREIGN TRANSACTION FEE	REWARDS
$0 first yr, then $95	2.7%	Cash back

What it earns

6%	**U.S. supermarkets** — on up to $6,000 per year in purchases, then 1% (a maxed-out year is $360 back)
6%	**Select U.S. streaming subscriptions** — no annual cap
3%	**U.S. gas stations**
3%	**Transit** — rideshare, taxis, parking, tolls, trains, buses
1%	Everything else

Perks worth actually using

- **$120 Disney Streaming Credit** — up to $10 back per month as a statement credit when you pay for a subscription (bundle or standalone) at DisneyPlus.com, Hulu.com, or Stream.ESPN.com. Enrollment required, no minimum purchase. Stack it with the 6% and a $10 subscription is close to free.
- **0% intro APR** on purchases and balance transfers for 12 months from account opening, then a variable rate.
- **Purchase protection, return protection and extended warranty** on eligible purchases — the quiet reason to run electronics through this card.
- **Car rental loss & damage coverage** — secondary only, and you must decline the rental company's waiver. Chase's version is better.
- **Redemption** — cash back arrives as Reward Dollars. Take it as a statement credit or spend it at Amazon.com checkout. Same value either way.
- **Amex Offers** — targeted merchant deals you add in the app. Free money if you check them once a month.
- **Welcome offer** — a cash-back bonus after a spend target in your first few months. The amount is personalized, so check your own offer rather than trusting a screenshot.

The fine print that costs people money

- **"U.S. supermarket" is a narrow definition.** Walmart, Target, warehouse clubs and online grocers like Amazon are excluded. So are specialty stores like standalone butchers or bakeries. Those all drop to 1%.
- **Costco won't even take this card.** Costco warehouses in the U.S. only accept Visa, so the Amex stays in your pocket entirely.
- **The 6% stops at $6,000 a year.** That's $500 a month. Everything past it earns 1%, and the cap resets on your card anniversary, not January 1.
- **2.7% foreign transaction fee.** Never use this card outside the U.S.
- **Acceptance gaps.** Plenty of small businesses and most of Europe and Asia take Visa but not Amex. This card cannot be your only card.

CARD TWO / THE EVERYTHING-ELSE CARD

Chase Sapphire Preferred® Card

ANNUAL FEE	FOREIGN TRANSACTION FEE	REWARDS
$95	None	Ultimate Rewards pts

Welcome offer

75,000 bonus points after $5,000 in purchases in your first 3 months. That's a $750 floor if you cash it out at 1¢ per point, and meaningfully more if you transfer to an airline or hotel partner. $5,000 in three months is about $1,667 a month — do not chase it with spending you wouldn't have done anyway, because interest at these APRs erases the bonus fast.

What it earns

5x	**Travel booked through Chase Travel**
3x	**Dining** — restaurants, takeout, delivery
3x	**Vacation homes** — Airbnb, Vrbo and similar
3x	**Gas and EV charging**
3x	**Select streaming and online groceries** — excludes Walmart, Target and wholesale clubs
2x	**All other travel** — flights, hotels, trains, tolls, parking booked anywhere
1x	Everything else

Perks worth actually using

- **$100 hotel credit every anniversary year** for hotel stays booked through Chase Travel. That alone covers most of the $95 fee.
- **Up to $120 back every four years** for a Global Entry, TSA PreCheck or NEXUS application fee.
- **Travel protections** — trip cancellation and interruption coverage, trip delay, baggage delay, and emergency evacuation and transportation coverage. You have to pay for the trip with the card for these to apply.
- **Primary auto rental collision damage waiver.** "Primary" is the important word: it pays before your personal auto insurance, so a scratched rental doesn't touch your own policy. Decline the rental counter's coverage.
- **No foreign transaction fee.** This is your card for every purchase outside the U.S.
- **DoorDash** — complimentary DashPass for at least 12 months when activated, plus a monthly promo on non-restaurant orders.
- **A year of Apple TV** when activated by the end of 2026.
- **1:1 point transfers** to United, Southwest, JetBlue, Air Canada, British Airways, Air France-KLM, Aer Lingus, Iberia, Singapore, Virgin Atlantic, Marriott, IHG and Wyndham. This is where points beat cash back — the whole reason to own this card.

The fine print that costs people money

- **Chase's 5/24 rule.** If you've opened five or more personal credit cards across all issuers in the last 24 months, Chase will almost certainly decline you. If you're building a stack, apply for Chase cards first.
- **Portal points aren't worth 1.25¢ anymore.** Chase replaced the old flat rate with "Points Boost." Base value in Chase Travel is 1¢ per point, rising to roughly 1.5¢ on select hotels and flights and up to about 1.75¢ on select premium-cabin fares. Only a small slice of inventory qualifies, so transfer partners are usually the better play.
- **The 10% anniversary points bonus is gone** for anyone applying after the June 2026 refresh.
- **Hyatt transfers are now 4:3** — 1,000 of your points become 750 Hyatt points. Hyatt used to be the best partner on this card; it's still good, just no longer free money.
- **One welcome bonus per Sapphire card, ever.** If you've earned the Preferred bonus before, you generally can't earn it again.

THE CHEAT SHEET

What to swipe, where

YOU'RE BUYING	USE	YOU GET
Groceries at a real supermarket	Amex	6% back, up to $6,000/yr
Disney+, Hulu, ESPN, Netflix, Spotify	Amex	6% back + up to $10/mo credit on Disney-family services
Gas	Either	Amex 3% cash vs. Chase 3x points — take the points if you transfer
Rideshare, parking, tolls, transit	Amex	3% back
Restaurants, takeout, delivery	Chase	3x points
Flights and hotels booked direct	Chase	2x points + trip protections
Travel booked through Chase Travel	Chase	5x points + $100 annual hotel credit
Airbnb / Vrbo	Chase	3x points
Rental cars	Chase	Primary damage waiver — the single most underrated perk here
Anything outside the U.S.	Chase	No foreign transaction fee (Amex charges 2.7%)
Costco	Neither works well	Costco is Visa-only, so Chase at 1x. Amex isn't accepted at all.
Walmart & Target	Either, 1%	Excluded from both grocery categories. This is the trap.

If you can only open one

Take the Sapphire Preferred. The 75,000-point welcome bonus is worth at least $750 as cash and more through transfer partners, which is roughly two years of the Amex's maxed-out grocery cap earned in three months. The $100 annual hotel credit nearly cancels the $95 fee, the travel and rental car protections have no equivalent on the Amex, and Visa is accepted everywhere Amex isn't.

There's also a sequencing reason: Chase's 5/24 rule means opening the Amex first can lock you out of the Chase card for two years. The reverse isn't true. **Chase first, Amex second.**

Open the Amex once you're actually spending $300–$500 a month at a real supermarket. Below that, the $95 fee eats the reward.

A few honest caveats. None of this works if you carry a balance — at typical APRs, one month of interest wipes out a year of 6% back. Welcome offers, statement credits and bonus categories change constantly and can vary by applicant, so treat every number here as a starting point and verify it on americanexpress.com and chase.com before you apply. Card terms accurate as of August 2026.