

What's for Dinner?

Here's the thing. I can't face making dinner every. single. night. An hour of cooking and hour of cleaning every night is just not my idea of a good time. Eating out is not a good solution, because Hi, I'm a tightwad and plus it's just not very healthy. So every three months, I spend a week or two in a cooking frenzy and make a bunch of meals for the freezer.

From a financial standpoint, I have discovered that living this way has saved me a lot of money. I got sick of buying stuff on sale, putting it in the freezer, and then throwing it away 6 months later because it morphed into an unidentifiable gray lump. Now I never put anything in the freezer unless it's cooked, or prepped for cooking. Grabbing dinner out of the freezer saves time, money, and gives me more time with ~~the remote~~ the kids.

My typical goal is to stock the freezer with 60 meals. That will give me dinner five nights a week, for three months. Even when I don't even think about dinner until 4 o'clock in the afternoon (it's not just me, is it?), I can still provide my family with a healthy, home-cooked meal.

I am not talking about cooking a 20 pound turkey and assembling a bunch of dry, flavorless tv dinners. I am only interested in freezing meals that taste as good out of the freezer as they do when they are made fresh. It's a lot of work, after all. I'm not trying to waste a bunch of time and money on something no one wants to eat. Some things, like soup, stew, chili, and spaghetti sauce freeze extremely well, and you can just thaw them and eat. I also prepare meals that can be cooked easily on serving day. I occasionally branch out and stock up on organic whole-grain muffins for breakfasts and single serve lunches for my husband. The freezer is probably *the most* indispensable tool in my meal planning arsenal.

The Plan Before The Plan

It's a good idea to start fairly small. A great first goal would be twenty or thirty meals. There are several decisions that need to be made before you can dive right into cooking.

First, think about your lifestyle and what you want to achieve by stocking your freezer. Do you want a bunch of thaw-and-eat meals that you can throw on the table after soccer practice? Dinners you put in the crock pot in the morning and they're ready when you get home from work?

Next, decide how many meals a week you want to be able to grab from your freezer – three days a week? Five days a week? Figure out how often you can rotate your recipes. Will your family eat spaghetti once a week or once a month? The questions of how often you want to eat from the freezer and how often you rotate specific meals have to be answered simultaneously. A decent variety of food is important, or your family will stage a mutiny. On the other hand, the whole point of freezer cooking is to be more efficient in the kitchen and make several meals at once.

Also consider how you want to go about doing this. One easy way to begin is by simply tripling your recipes every night when you cook dinner. Serve one and put the other two into the freezer. Instead of one meatloaf, make three (two go into the freezer uncooked). Instead of making enough spaghetti sauce for one meal, make a huge vat and freeze the leftovers when dinner is over. If you did this three nights a week, in one month you would have 24 meals in the freezer. You could continue to do that a couple times a week and stay ahead of the game indefinitely. Another method (and this is what I do), is marathon cooking. I cook and cook for days, until it's done. Finally, you can partner up with other people. Instead of you making 5 servings of six different meal options by yourself; three people each cook 15 servings of two different options. Then you swap. (By "servings" I don't mean individual portions, I mean enough food to feed your whole family one meal – i.e. one pan of lasagna = one serving)

Figure out What to Cook

Deciding what to cook is obviously very subjective. Only you know your family and your lifestyle. Start by making a list of main dishes that you already eat and your family likes. If you come up with 10 options, you will be in great shape. A lot of the recipes in your current repertoire probably freeze well, and you can dive right in, cooking larger quantities of food you already know.

For the sake of this discussion, let's say you want to eat from the freezer five days a week for a month. That means you need to get 20 servings in the freezer. The first thing to do is look at your meal idea list and identify any food your family is willing to eat once a week. If your family eats tacos every Friday and Lasagna every Sunday, you already know you need to assemble 4 lasagnas and brown a bunch of hamburger. Eight meals down, twelve to go. But now you realize that they are not willing to eat anything else that often. No problem, just calculate the remaining twelve meals on a once-every-ten-days basis. That means coming up with four other meal options, and making each one three times.

Over the years, I have developed a pretty big list of meal ideas and have collected an arsenal of cookbooks. I have some things that I make every time and other things that I make depending on the season. In the winter, I tend to make a lot of soups and stews and things that are a nice and hot on a cold day. In the summer, I prep meats for grilling, or things that can go in the crock pot and cook without heating up the house. I try to balance recipes that are more work to assemble with recipes I can throw together with very little effort. I also try to provide a decent variety of food without having to buy ten thousand ingredients. I love finding those ideas that I can use in more than one way (like meatballs). I will usually scour my cookbooks during the planning phase and try out one or two new recipes. If you are trying out a new recipe, I would recommend eating it once before you invest a lot of time and money making 8 servings and then discovering your family hates it.

My own freezer happens to be bare right now, and I am planning for my next Big Cook. In the next few articles, I will take you through my own freezer-stocking process – from planning to shopping and then to the actual cooking. I hope you find this information helpful and inspiring. If anyone wants to know anything specific, I am open to suggestions and questions.

What's for Dinner Part Two

To continue this series on Freezer Cooking, I am going to walk you through my personal method of stocking my freezer with three months worth of dinners. When I say I am stocking my freezer with 60 dinners, I mean 60 main dishes. On serving day, I will add salads, veggies, pasta, or whatever to round out the meal. As I said in the previous article, my freezer is presently bare, and I am just beginning the process of planning for my next cooking session. When I was younger and had zero kids and more energy, I could do three months of cooking in a weekend. Now, I have two kids that I am homeschooling, a husband that works full time from home, and definitely less energy than I did ten years ago. So the Big Cook generally takes a couple of weeks of planning and cooking.

I have an excel spreadsheet to help me out. I'm one of those people that needs to see things on paper in order to think clearly. I also have a huge list of meals that I can look at for inspiration. I have chosen to do a twelve week meal plan this time, because that will take me to October, when I will shift gears and start thinking about cold weather dishes. At that time, I may only do a 10 week meal plan because Thanksgiving and Christmas will be on the horizon and we will be eating leftovers instead of freezer meals. A good goal for a beginner would be enough meals for a month – 20 or 30, depending on how often you wanted dinner from the freezer.

The key to freezer cooking (aside from finding good recipes), is to make sure you have enough variety. I plan on eating from the freezer five nights a week for three months. I need to decide how often I can repeat my menu. If I go with twice a month for each item, then I need to have ten different options, making each one six times. If I can eat the same thing week in and week out, then I could get by with five different options, making each one twelve times. I think ten options is too many and five is too few, so I am going to shoot for a happy medium of eight different meal options. I will then plan to make each item somewhere between six and twelve times each, until I get to sixty.

I know you might be thinking, "my gosh, is she really going to feed her family only eight different meals for three entire months?" No, because I have two days a week to eat pizza or get takeout or make whatever else we might want. My meal plan really only has us repeating each meal two or three times a month; and since I have previously fallen into the spaghetti-three-times-a-week rut, this will be plenty of variety.

Now, onto deciding what to cook. I sometimes browse the internet for ideas and I always review my cookbooks and look for things we haven't tried yet, but want to. [Dream Dinners](#), [Super Suppers](#), and [Don't Panic](#) are all great cookbooks. I just ordered Cook's Illustrated book, [The Best Make Ahead Recipe](#) and am looking forward to reading it.

We like to grill a lot in the summer, and I know that we will eat grilled chicken at least three times a month. That's also a super easy thing to do, so I'll be able to get 9 meals worth of pre-marinated chicken in the freezer in about 30 minutes [portion chicken into quart freezer baggies. pour store-bought marinade over. stick in the freezer and you're done. it marinates as it thaws and stays very juicy].

I will do the same for steak – buy family sized packages (getting an extra \$0.50 per pound discount), divide them into appropriately sized portions, and wrap in freezer paper.

Obviously, you don't have to do this. It's certainly not that much more trouble to buy chicken or steak every week at the grocery store. But I like to be able to wait for a good sale, buy every ingredient I need (like Lawry's Marinade), and be done with it for a few months. I know I will still be able to feed my family a good dinner even if I don't make it to the store that week; I get better discounts for buying in bulk; and I only have to disinfect my kitchen once from the chicken (ok, maybe that's just a benefit to me – I have a bit of Raw Chicken Paranoia). Plus, I never have to throw food away because our schedule got crazy that week and it went bad. And my husband can go rummage out in the freezer to decide what he'd like instead of hassling me about cooking.

Between the chicken and the steak, I'll have about 18 dinners already to go. Make a little salad on the side or pick up some fresh corn at the farmer's market and we'll have some easy summertime meals. I will also be making a ton of meatballs. I have not made them in a year because they are kind of a pain in the butt. However, they are delicious. Meatballs are something that I can put in the crock pot at noon and they will be done for dinner. Swedish Meatballs, Barbeque Meatballs, Spaghetti and Meatballs...leftovers can go in sandwiches or on pizza, and my kids like them (I probably don't have to tell you what a bonus that is). I will definitely be planning on making enough meatballs to eat a batch per week, and at 20 meatballs per batch, I am looking at around 250 meatballs. Speaking of meals that require ground meat, I will make 6 meatloaves. Delicious and easy – especially if I freeze them in a disposable tin foil loaf pan. Between the meatballs and the meatloaf, I have added another 18 meals to my list. I'm halfway there and I haven't even had to think that hard yet.

Now I need to plan some thaw-and-serve meals - soups and stews that don't require anything except heating up and eating. Even in the summer, we love soup because it's just so easy to get on the table. This summer has been busy, so I want to make sure I get some quick meals in the freezer. There is one recipe in particular that I have been perfecting, and my husband loves it. So a batch (or two) of my Chicken Tortilla Soup is on the list. If I have the energy, maybe I'll make some Beef Burgundy. I got some little steaks on sale a while back, and even though I don't like the flavor for grilling, they will be perfect for that long-cooking stew. I love Ham and 15 Bean Soup, and the last one is thawing right this minute, so I'll do a quick batch of that. If I can get 6 quarts of each soup, I'll be up to 54 meals already! I'll go through my cookbooks and find a new recipe to try, or maybe do a few lasagnas, and I'm there.

Next time I'll talk about the hard part – the actual cooking.

Freezer Cooking: Part 3

Okay, now we'll put all the planning from Part 1 and Part 2 to work and get started cooking.

General Tips

- Probably one of the things you are wondering about is what sort of storage products you will need in order to stock your freezer. I rely primarily on gallon sized freezer bags, quart sized [Ziploc Twist & Loc](#) containers, and disposable tin foil casserole dishes/loaf pans. There is a lot of good information in freezer cooking guides that can give you other ideas. I have tried it all, but those are the things I always return to. I do have a FoodSaver, which I LOVE and I use it for things that I might want to keep longer than three months. It's not essential to have though, and you can find them at garage sales.
- Do all your grocery shopping the day before you want to start cooking. That way, you can get up bright and early and dive right in. Shop only for the meals you know you can make in the next day or two. Don't get carried away and buy enough for everything, unless you are positive you can get to it before it goes bad *and* that you have the room to store it. When making your list, be as specific as possible – i.e. 14 onions or 10 cans of tomatoes. You don't want to get caught short. You may have to shop several times during a weeklong cooking session.
- Clean out your refrigerator to make room for your supplies, and your freezer to make room for all your new meals. When storing large amounts of meat in your refrigerator, put it on a sheet pan to catch any drips. Clean the kitchen thoroughly and try to start with an empty dishwasher if at all possible. In my house, we have agreed that during the Big Cooking Session, my husband will clean the kitchen every night so I can start each day fresh. Also, I do not cook dinner during that time. Too busy cooking. I don't make this food so they can eat it...
- Schedule your cooking time. You can do all your ground meat meals on one day, all your chicken meals on another, and all your soups on yet another, and so on. I do that to a certain extent, but my primary focus is usually on staggering cooking times and cooking surfaces so I can be as efficient as possible. For example, I might start a crock-pot soup first thing in the morning so it can work all day, then I'd start a beef stew that cooks in the oven for four hours. After that I'd start in on something more labor intensive, like meatballs. Be aware that putting a lot of hot food into your freezer at once will put a strain on it, so you might want to stagger the times of day that items are ready to go into the freezer.
- When working with hamburger and raw chicken, invest in some disposable food service gloves. It's helpful to be able to strip them off and answer the phone or deal with the kids.

My little Excel planning spreadsheet looks like this right now:

12 Week Meal Plan for July 1 - November 1		
The 1 Week Cycle: 5 Days Freezer Meals, 2 Days Other		
12 Weeks x 5 Meals per Week = 60 Meals		
Make approximately 8 each of 8 options		
Item - Dinners	Goal Amount	Total Made
Marinated Chicken to Grill	9	
Steak to Grill	9	
Meatballs	12	
Meatloaf	6	
Chicken Tortilla Soup	6	
Beef Burgundy	6	
Ham and Bean Soup	6	
New Recipe?	6	
total	60	0

And now, my actual cooking diary, complete with mistakes and distractions:

Day One – June 28

Cleaned Kitchen, Made List, Grocery Shopped. Hamburger \$1.99 a pound! Buy 20 pounds. Get funny looks from other shoppers. Text hubby from the store to make room in the fridge. After unloading groceries, rinse and set black beans to soak. At 8 pm, I remember I need chicken for the Chicken Tortilla Soup, and send hubby out to get some. This works out fine - he had to go get something for dinner anyway, because we have NO FOOD in this house.

Day Two – June 29

Cleaned kitchen AGAIN. Gah. Mental game plan - first get Chicken Tortilla soup going in the crock pot, then make stuffing for meatloaves so it can cool (regret forgetting to do this last night), get started on meatballs.

In the afternoon, the game plan gets adjusted, since I forgot that I had signed up to go to a bread making class in the afternoon. Have to push meatballs to tomorrow. Still, I manage to get 10 quarts of Chicken Tortilla Soup in the freezer by nightfall. Total cost for Chicken Tortilla Soup = \$40. That comes out to \$4 per quart, which for us is three individual servings. \$1.35 per serving is not bad.



Day Three – June 30

There are 20 pounds of hamburger in the refrigerator waiting for me. On the agenda – meatballs and meatloaves. Ended up with 7 meatloaves at a total cost of \$26.41, which will yield at least 4 individual servings each. That works out to \$0.94 per serving. Total time spent making meatloaves: Two hours, including cleanup. Took a lunch break, then got started mixing up the meatballs.

Ran out of steam after getting the meatball mixture together, probably from yelling saying “go PLAY” to my kids all day. Wrapped the mixture tightly with two layers of plastic wrap and a layer of tin foil and parked it in the fridge. Cleaned the kitchen for the third time that day.

Had a \$75 gift certificate to Omaha Steaks AND hit a sale! After the Fed-Ex guy delivered them, I threw those babies in the freezer and called it good. Otherwise, I would have bought family packs and wrapped each steak individually.

Day Four – July 1

Got up and went right to work making meatballs. Total cost for a bajillion meatballs = \$27.00.

Miscalculated slightly on my meatball yield per pound of hamburger (I corrected the recipe), and ended up with FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY meatballs. Packaged them 20 meatballs per bag with the Foodsaver, and ended up with 22 bags of meatballs. Cost per bag = \$1.22. I will end up adding pasta and sauce or barbeque sauce and buns on serving day, but still – that is an amazing price for what will be around 5 individual servings (for my family) in each bag. Note: I buy the giant bottle of barbeque sauce at Sam’s or Costco, pour it into tiny disposable Ziploc containers and freeze that, too.

So far I have spent less than a hundred dollars, and have made 39 meals for my family (not counting the steak). I won’t be ready to see another pound of hamburger for a while, though....

I am going to take a small break to celebrate the holiday and get our bread reserves back up. I’ll regroup, and start back up next week. Now my excel spreadsheet looks like this:

12 Week Meal Plan for July 1 - November 1		
The 1 Week Cycle: 5 Days Freezer Meals, 2 Days Other		
12 Weeks x 5 Meals per Week = 60 Meals		
Make approximately 8 each of 8 options		
Item - Dinners	Goal Amount	Total Made
Marinated Chicken to Grill	9	
Steak to Grill	9	12
Meatballs	12	22
Meatloaf	6	7
Chicken Tortilla Soup	6	10
Beef Burgundy	6	
Ham and Bean Soup	6	
New Recipe?	6	
total	60	51

Not bad for four days of hard work.

Freezer Cooking: Part 4

After taking a break for the long Independence Day weekend, I regrouped and got ready to finish loading my freezer. Prior to the weekend, I had made Chicken Tortilla Soup, Meatloaves, and Meatballs.

Day 5 – July 8

Get the news that my husband is going out of town for work next week. Am very annoyed by this and decide I'd better make some kid-friendly foods to make it easier on Temporarily Single Mom. I need to get some muffins in the freezer anyway. I have been putting this off for a while, but the kids hate cereal and hopefully with my new mixer, it will be easier. Make 13 dozen muffins. Store the muffins in gallon freezer bags, thaw as needed either overnight on the counter or for 20 seconds in the microwave.

Day 6 – July 10

Grocery shop for a couple more meals – Marinated Chicken and Ham and Bean Soup. Get the chicken portioned into quart freezer baggies, covered in store-bought marinade, and stashed in the freezer in a matter of minutes (it marinates as it thaws and stays very juicy as it cooks on the grill).

Unfortunately, I did not accomplish very much at all over the next few weeks. My husband was out of town for a week, and I was just trying to keep everyone alive and fed. Freezer Cooking took a hiatus until the end of the month.

Day 7 – July 23

I need to get my cooking mojo back after such an extended break. Luckily, the supplies I bought before for the Ham and Bean soup are still in the pantry and fridge waiting for me; so this morning I set my beans to soak, and make a grocery list for my other soups. One recipe that I have really wanted to try is [Irish Beef and Stout Stew](#). I'll make a small-ish batch to see how everyone likes it and how well it freezes. If it goes over well, I will add it to my rotation.

After grocery shopping, I come home and get the Irish Stew going. It needs to cook for 3 hours, so after I get it in the oven, I start the Ham and Bean soup. I lost a lot of cooking time today with shopping, so I don't even get the bean soup going until 6 pm. That's ok – it'll simmer along this evening, and I'll put it away before bed. I have another idea for a knock-off version of Beef Burgundy. The reason I don't make that more often is because it calls for cooking a bunch of bacon and then browning the meat in batches in the grease. I don't particularly care for browning large batches of meat – it's messy and gets grease everywhere. It can also be very time consuming when cooking large quantities. The meat I am planning on using is a [Mediterranean skewer](#) that has a very strong flavor of rosemary, and I don't like it. But I got it on sale and it's perfectly good meat, so I am determined to not let it go to waste. Since it's already on skewers, I have the idea to grill the meat and then continue cooking the stew in the oven as usual. I get my husband to grill it, and stick it in the fridge for tomorrow.

We have the Irish Beef stew for dinner, which was proclaimed DELICIOUS by my tasters, so I will type this recipe up (I made a few alterations) and add it to my rotation.

By the end of the evening, we have packaged up 8 quarts of Irish Beef Stew and 10 quarts of Ham and Bean Soup. I go to bed feeling very productive.

Day 8 – July 24

Today I just have one other stew planned to add to my freezer, and then I will have done everything on my list! I am so excited! We are starting back to school next week and it will be a relief to focus on homeschooling and not have to worry too much about dinner. I fry up the bacon for the Beef Burgundy, assemble all the ingredients, including the grilled meat from yesterday, and chuck everything in the oven for a few hours. It will be done in time for us to have it for dinner.

So, even though this cooking session ended up taking an entire month, I only actually spent about 8 days cooking. I am very pleased with what I have accomplished, even though it took longer than I planned. My meals will last for the rest of the summer and into the fall. I can sit back and relax, knowing that even if I don't remember dinner until 4:30 in the afternoon, we can still eat a home-cooked meal. My Freezer Meal Inventory now looks like this (even after eating some of it this month):

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12 Weeks x 5 Meals per Week = 60 Meals		
Make approximately 8 each of 8 options		
Item - Dinners	Goal Amount	Total Made
Marinated Chicken to Grill	9	6
Steak to Grill	9	9
Meatballs	12	22
Meatloaf	6	6
Chicken Tortilla Soup	6	10
Beef Burgundy	6	9
Ham and Bean Soup	6	10
Irish Beef and Stout Stew	6	8
total	60	80

That's 80 dinners! I think I have a fairly good variety of meals – some to grill, some to bake, and plenty to thaw-and-eat. I am also pleased because a lot of the meat came from stuff I already had in the freezer, so it did not cost a lot of extra money.

Oh – a note on freezing meat. You do not want to thaw and re-freeze raw meat. It will change the quality. However, it is perfectly fine to thaw, cook, and then freeze meat. Frankly, I don't notice a change in the quality at all. So you can still cook these meals if you have a stash of beef in your freezer.

I hope everyone has enjoyed this series – I enjoyed writing it. Keep checking [Not Inadequate](#) for more recipes, I still have several to type up and get into .pdf format. Once again, feel free to contact me if you need any advice, or if you just want to brag about your freezer cooking exploits!

Happy Cooking!