

What's For Dinner? Part One

Well, ladies - it's January once again. If you are like me, you spent the end of December making cookies, eating too much sugar, and procrastinating putting together a school schedule. Now it's time to get back in the swing of things, and return to the endless juggling of school, laundry, and cooking.

I know it's a personal shortcoming of mine, but I can't face making dinner every. single. night. An hour of cooking and hour of cleaning is just not my idea of a good time. Eating out is not a good solution, because *Hi, I'm a tightwad*, and it's not exactly 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 meat on sale, sticking it in the freezer, and 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 my family.

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 making 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.

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 get to cooking. 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.

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'll be in great shape. Many 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 (by "serving" I mean enough food to feed your whole family a meal – i.e. one pan of lasagna = one serving). 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.

Over the years, I've developed a big list of meal ideas and have collected an arsenal of cookbooks. Some things I make every time and other things I cook depending on the season. In the winter, we like 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 to 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 foods can be used in more than one way (like meatballs).

Over the next few months, I am going to be writing a series on Freezer Cooking. I will give you some of my favorite recipes, best tips, and planning suggestions. I am an avid and passionate freezer cook, and am happy to answer any questions you may have – either in the comments, or you can email me directly at deb@notinadequate.com.

If you want to get started right away, some of my favorite freezer cooking books are: [Dream Dinners](#) by Stephanie Allen and Tina; [Super Suppers](#) by Judie Byrd; and [Don't Panic, Dinner's in the Freezer](#). You can probably find one or more at your local library.