

What's for Dinner? Part Three

As we near the end of this series on Freezer Cooking, here are a few general tips that make the process a little easier.

- You are probably wondering what sort of storage products you need. I rely primarily on gallon sized freezer bags, quart sized Ziploc Twist & Loc containers, and disposable tin foil casserole dishes/loaf pans. There's a ton of good information in freezer cooking guides that can give you additional ideas. I've tried it all, but those are the things I always return to. I also have a Food Saver, which I LOVE and use for things that I might want to keep longer than three months. It's not essential to have though, and if you decide you want one, you can often find them practically brand new at garage sales.
- Do all your grocery shopping the day before you 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, consider investing 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.
- 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 kinds of meals if

you have a stash of beef in your freezer. I generally only freeze cooked meats that are in soups or stews, and cook things like meatloaf, meatballs, or grilled items on serving day. If I do cook meat that is not in a soup, such as shredded beef or shredded chicken for future recipes, I usually like to make sure it has plenty of liquid around it so it doesn't get dried out in the freezer – even if I have to open a can of broth to pour over it. I don't care for cooked meat that has merely been sliced and chucked in a baggie – the quality really diminishes in my experience.

- A note on specific ingredients: if you want to make a noodle casserole, only cook the pasta for HALF (or even less) the recommended cooking time. I set a timer, drain the noodles immediately, and rinse them under cold water to stop the cooking process. This keeps them from disintegrating into mush in your casserole. Make your casserole a little soupier than usual so the noodles can finish cooking in the oven. If you make a soup that has noodles in it, try freezing only the soup base, then cook and add the noodles on serving day. If you find that beans get too mushy in the freezer, try using dried beans in your dish rather than canned, and undercook them SLIGHTLY. They will be perfect once thawed. Some things you will have to experiment with – I've never had any luck freezing mashed potatoes, but make a potato soup that is terrific after being frozen. Spicy foods can get spicier in the freezer, so be aware of that if you like those flavors.

- A note of encouragement: you certainly don't have to use my recipes or even the recipes in freezer cooking cookbooks to be successful at cooking this way. I'd venture to guess that a number of the recipes you already have in your repertoire can be adapted to the freezer – and most may not need changing at all. If you are still on the fence about trying it, why not take a very small portion of the next soup or casserole you make and put it in the freezer to see how it does?

In conclusion, I firmly believe that spending a week or so making meals for your freezer is a worthwhile investment. I don't know any other way to live. When I run out of freezer meals, I blink owlishly at the idea of dinner. I find it impossible to make a small batch of anything. Leftovers to me are a boon – a meal that I don't have to cook next week! I also believe - make that I KNOW you don't have to sacrifice the quality of your food to eat this way. If you have tried freezing food in the past and have been disappointed in the result, consider trying some new recipes or methods. The food I serve my family tastes as good out of the freezer as it would if I cooked it fresh that day. If it doesn't, it doesn't make the Keep list. The recipes I make are generally Real Food – we limit processed ingredients as much as possible. No cream of soups, processed cheese, or frozen tater tots necessary.

Feel free to ask questions in the comments, or email me directly at Deb@notinadequate.com. You can also visit my personal blog, Not Inadequate at <http://notinadequate.com> for more tried and true recipes.

Happy Cooking!