

What's for Dinner? Part Two

To continue this series on Freezer Cooking, I am going to walk you through stocking your freezer with three months worth of dinners.

I know that sounds like a lot of work - and it is. But it will be worth it when dinner no longer involves hours in the kitchen and you are free to visit with your husband, read aloud to your kids, or even go out once in a while with your girlfriends, knowing your family has a warm home-cooked meal to enjoy.

Hopefully you'll be able to adapt these ideas to suit your own recipes and lifestyle. Feel free to start smaller – say 20 meals. Also, when I refer to 60 dinners, I mean 60 main dishes. On serving day, you'll add salads, veggies, pasta, and so on to round out the meal.

I keep a detailed list to help me out. I need to see things on paper in order to think clearly. I also have a list of meals I can look at for inspiration. The key to freezer cooking (aside from finding good recipes), is to make sure you have enough variety. I generally plan on eating from the freezer five nights a week for three months (5 days a week x 12 weeks = 60 dinners), so first I need to decide how often I can repeat my menu. If I repeat each meal twice a month, then I need to have ten different meal options, and would make 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 usually 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?” Not really, because I have two days a week to make frittata, get takeout or cook whatever else we might crave. 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.

The Plan

We like to grill year-round and I know I can assemble a ton of ready-to-grill meals in a matter of minutes. I can easily picture us grilling once or twice a week – chicken, steak, hamburgers... These meals are super easy to get in the freezer and it's satisfying to start the cooking session off with a bang, socking away a large number of meals before it's even lunchtime on day one.

My favorite way to prepare chicken for the grill is to portion it into quart-sized freezer bags, pour store-bought marinade over it, and chuck it in the freezer. It marinates as it thaws and stays nice and juicy. If you prefer to make your own marinade, you can use that. If I hit a sale on steak, I'll buy family sized packages (getting an extra \$0.50 per pound discount), divide them into appropriately sized portions, and wrap in freezer paper.

Hamburgers can be shaped, frozen on oiled cookie sheets, and stacked in freezer bags. You don't even have to thaw them – just grill on low. For a gourmet burger, add in a dash of marinade and a little shredded cheese.

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 wait for a good sale, buy every ingredient I need, 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 Raw Chicken Paranoia). Plus, I never have to throw food away because our schedule got crazy and it went bad. AND my husband can go rummage out in the freezer to decide what he'd like for dinner instead of hassling me about cooking.

If I prepare enough of these packets to ensure we can grill once a week, I'll have 12 meals in the freezer for minimum effort. Add a little salad on the side or pick up some fresh corn at the farmer's market and we'll have some easy dinners.

You can make ground beef go a long way too – meatballs are something I make every time I stock the freezer. I freeze them uncooked on an oiled cookie sheet and then package them 25 at a time into freezer bags (or if I make a giant batch, I'll use the Food Saver and they'll keep forever). I can put them in the crock pot at noon and they'll 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). Meatballs are always on my meal plan, and we eat them at least once a week in one form or another. Speaking of meals that require ground meat, you could whip up 3 or 4 meatloaves. Delicious and easy – especially if you freeze them (uncooked) in a disposable tin foil loaf pan. Or maybe make a giant batch of taco meat and portion it into freezer bags once it cools? Or cook up a couple of pounds of breakfast sausage, chop some veggies and plan to make frittatas once in a while? We're halfway to sixty and haven't even had to think that hard yet.

Next, plan some thaw-and-serve meals - soups and stews don't require anything except heating up and eating. Even in the summer, we eat soup because it's just so easy to get on the table. Chicken tortilla soup, beef stew, ham & bean soup, chili... I love soup. You can make soup out of anything, it freezes very well, and you can pull it out of the freezer and sit down to dinner within 15 minutes. If I cook a variety of soup, stew, chili, and end up with 18 quarts (we eat about a quart of soup in a sitting – you may need two quarts or more to make a meal), I'll be pretty close to my goal. We always have pizza on Friday nights, so I'll make a big batch of pizza dough, portion it and throw it in the freezer. To top off my meal plan, I might make a couple of lasagnas or chicken noodle casseroles, pre-chop bacon for Spaghetti Carbonara, or try something new from one of my cookbooks.

At this point you might be thinking “that’s great and all, but when are we going to get a real recipe?” Here you go – my standard recipe for both meatballs and meatloaf. It only has three ingredients. Three! Cooking doesn’t get much simpler than that.

Meat Loaf

1½ pounds ground beef
2 cups cooked and cooled stuffing, chopped
1 large egg, beaten
salt and black pepper

Heat oven to 400° F.

In a large bowl, combine the stuffing, egg, ¾ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper.

Add the ground beef and stir to combine with other ingredients, being careful not to over-mix or knead. Transfer mixture to a loaf pan.

Bake uncovered for 35-45 minutes, or until internal temperature is 160°. Let rest ten minutes before slicing.

For tender, juicy meat loaf, choose ground chuck with 20 percent fat. Do not overcook.

Freezing Instructions

Prepare mixture and transfer it to loaf pan. Wrap tightly with plastic wrap, then tin foil. Store (uncooked) in the freezer for up to three months. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator and bake as above.

If more than one meatloaf is desired, this recipe can easily be doubled. I do not recommend trying to make more than a double batch at a time, because it is too difficult to get it thoroughly mixed. I usually make three double batches in a row and get six disposable-loaf-pan-sized meatloaves. One box of Stove Top will provide enough stuffing for two meatloaves. I also recently discovered how much easier it is to mix this in a KitchenAid mixer than by hand.

If you prefer to make meatballs, form them into the desired size and freeze (uncooked) in a single layer on an oiled cookie sheet. Once they are frozen, package them into gallon sized freezer bags.

Alternatively, you can make the mixture, freeze it in gallon freezer bags, and decide on serving day what you want to make. I’ve even put a chunk of this mixture in the crockpot, and covered it with Ragu. I cooked it on low all day, stirred it several times, and ended up with a delicious meat sauce for spaghetti.

Happy Cooking!