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Life Savvy Shopper

Cook. Freeze. Heat. Repeat.

Save time — and money — on your weekly meal routine with freezer meal planning

When Suzi Israel, of Popcorn, shops, she's planning for the long haul.

Israel said she does the bulk of her shopping once a month, buying everything but milk and fresh produce to last at least four weeks.

And when she cooks, she uses that same strategy. From shredded chicken to meatballs, lasagna, soup and even bananas, Israel cooks and freezes many of her meals. It's a go-to strategy that many families are turning to — especially during a busy school year — to keep a home-cooked dinner on the table.

Here are some tips on how to get your own freezer menu cooking.

Chicken

Freezer cooking generally focuses on the meats because that tends to be the most time-consuming portion of a dinner. Israel said she usually doesn't buy fresh, skinless chicken breast because it is more expensive and because chicken cooked on the bone has more flavor.

"I roast all of the chicken breast I buy when I get home," she said. "I lightly salt, pepper and rub with garlic, cloves before roasting. That way it is seasoned and ready to serve or add to a dish straight from the freezer."

Once cooked, Israel said she chops most of it into chunks to be added to soups, casseroles, tacos and other dishes — and freezes in 2-cup portions. She uses larger frozen portions by wrapping them in wax paper and then freezing.

Beef

Meatballs are a favorite freezer cooking recipe.

"I freeze meatballs on a tray and then put them in a gallon bag," said Donga Putnam, of Newport News. "You cook them first. I use a pound each of turkey and pork, two eggs, 1 cup of bread crumbs, Italian seasoning, salt and pepper. Cook for 30 to 45 minutes at 400 degrees."

Putnam said she also uses meat in the crockpot as a go-to.

"There is no need to defrost," she said. "I haven't failed me yet." And when her family makes hamburgers on the grill, Putnam said her husband makes a few extra to freeze and store individually.

"That way we can pop out one or two for a quick dinner," she said. "They just take an extra minute on the grill or in the skillet."

Suzi Israel grills most of her meat for the week on the grill Sunday afternoons. She doesn't cook the portions she plans to use all the way through so that the meat won't be overdone when it is reheated later.

Israel said she buys a few pounds of lean ground meat each month, freezes it and freezes in 1-pound packages.

Chipsaque-based blogger

Ken Burns/Outlines



Freezer resources

These blogs and websites have detailed tutorials on how to get your freezer cooking started.

- [MoneySavingFrom.com](#)
- [OceansOfTime.com](#)
- [SixSistersStuff.com](#) has a special section for freezer cooking recipes.
- [FiftyLocalBlogger.com](#) has a special section for freezer cooking recipes.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has many resources about the safety of frozen food, including guides on storage, temperature and types of foods that can be safely frozen. You can find all of the information at [www.fsis.usda.gov](#).

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MICLATCHY/TREASURE FILE PHOTO

Valerie Cadarik always makes eight to 10 batches of mini meatballs to freeze.

"I cook one that night, but the rest get divided up and put in gallon-size Ziploc freezer bags and flattened," she said. "They stack like plates this way, and they defrost super fast."

Produce

Fresh fresh fruits and vegetables can be frozen after cooking. Israel said she uses leftover vegetables later in soups or frozen mashed potatoes to make potato soup.

"They are also great in thick hearty soups as a thickener," she said.

Bananas are a good frozen resource, as well.

"When bananas are sitting too ripe on your counter, stick them in your freezer," Israel said. "No

need to log or chop them. When you are ready to make a smoothie, ice cream or banana bread, take them out, allow them to defrost just a little bit, strip off each end, and squeeze out the banana."

Crystal Paine, a blogger for [MoneySavingFrom.com](#), has written several freezer cooking series. She warns at home chefs to make sure their freezer cooking plan is realistic.

"Don't make a big batch of a recipe your family hasn't tried yet," she advised. "Do clean as you go. Otherwise you'll end up with a huge mess at the end that could take you a few hours to thoroughly clean up."

Starting off with a manageable goal is key to making the freezer strategy stick.

Charlotte Moore, blogger for [MyActiveChild.com](#), said her first experience of freezer cooking had her dropping the idea, though she would like to find a better way to make it work.

"I have done this, and oh my goodness did my back hurt," she said. "My one day of cooking 'once a month' turned into a three-day cooking nightmare. That being said, it was worth it to have that month of meals in the freezer to pull from. It was almost worth it."

Prep time

Chopping vegetables and prepping marinades in advance can save a lot of time during a freezer cooking marathon.

"I would recommend having a prep time where you just chop everything you want to work with so it is just easy to throw together and assemble," Moore said.

Regimes should focus on one meal at a time to keep the moving parts to a minimum.

How to store it

Most freezer cooking veterans use gallon Ziploc bags for storage.

"When freezing almost anything, I lay the bag flat in the freezer," Israel said. "Liquids defrost quicker this way, and bags of soups, sauces and stock can be stacked so they take up less space."

All bags should be labeled with a description and date.

Putnam can be reached at 757-247-4737 or [putnam1@dailypress.com](#).

Four tips for a better, flavorful casserole

If you're cutting back in the kitchen, a casserole can be a penny-stretching savior. Here are four things to keep in mind to create the perfect casserole, no matter the recipe.

Squeeze If you don't want to end up with a swimming pool at the bottom of your casserole, give vegetables some TLC before they hit the baking dish. Thaw frozen vegetables in a colander so they lose their extra liquid. With fresh

spinach and other greens, cook them separate and the moisture will evaporate. Also be wary of mushrooms; they're mostly water and need to be sautéed first.

Pre-cook Vegetables with a long cooking time, such as potatoes, carrots or other root vegetables, perform better if partially cooked first. Steam, boil or roast them but short of being done all the way through. Likewise, briefly sauté aromatic vegetables, such as

onions and garlic, to bring out their flavor.

All done If you cook pasta all the way before adding it to a casserole, it turns to mush. Cook pasta up to 2-3 minutes shy of the suggested cooking time. (Choose 4 minutes if you plan on freezing the casserole.) It should just be al dente before you add it to the casserole, where it will finish cooking perfectly.

Temperature The beauty of casseroles is that they freeze well. Unfortunately, some cooks just throw the casserole in the oven frozen and let it bake for longer, but this can wreak havoc, overcooking the dish ingredients. Defrost the casserole completely in the refrigerator before baking. Also, let it come up to room temperature as your oven heats.

—*Harly Moore, EatingWell Contributor*
Illustrated by *Tiffany Media Service*