

FREEZER COOKING TIPS AND TRICKS

by Keryn Ross

Having a few completed (or nearly completed) meals in the freezer is a great bit of “emergency preparedness”. With little or no warning, you can have a healthy, inexpensive meal ready for your family or a friend.

You don’t have to have a large freezer to take advantage of some of these ideas (although obviously you may have to downsize and get creative about storage).

When freezing food, the biggest “threat” to texture and flavor is air. When preparing the food to be frozen, try to remove as much air as possible from the container. You can buy expensive “food-saver” devices, but for the beginner they aren’t necessary. Ziplock freezer bags, disposable storage containers such as Gladware, disposable aluminum baking pans, aluminum foil, and plastic wrap are all you need.

BEGINNING TRICKS

Even if you don’t prepare complete meals, there are several time saving tasks you can do in bulk to make dinnertime a little more convenient later.

Hamburger

In a large skillet, fry 5 lbs of hamburger all at once. Drain, season (if desired), and divide into one pound ziplock freezer bags. Label with name and date and freeze flat. Once completely frozen, store stacked or upright.

Chicken

Cook large bags of frozen or fresh chicken in your preferred manner. For casseroles and sauces, I like to boil the chicken until completely cooked, shred it, and divide into one pound ziplock freezer bags as the hamburger described above. You may also fry or bake the chicken, cube it, and freeze in a similar way.

Marinades

Fresh meats (steaks, roasts, chicken, pork) can be frozen with a marinade to make it more tender and flavorful. Experiment with homemade marinades (such as soy sauce), or buy the packaged kind (BBQ sauce, lemon pepper, etc) from the store.

BASIC TIPS

Block cheese

Block cheese does not freeze well, but shredded cheese does. Shred the cheese, place into small (or large, depending on your family size and need) ziplock bags, label with name and date, and freeze flat.

Fresh fruit

When freezing berries and sliced peaches/mangos, the pieces of fruit need to be frozen without touching their neighbors. Spread the berries or sliced fruit on a cookie sheet and freeze overnight. Once the fruit is frozen, it can be placed into ziplock bags, labeled, and stored stacked or upright.

Bread

Store-bought bread can be stored for more than two months in its original packaging. Homemade bread should be wrapped tightly in several layers of plastic wrap and aluminum foil, and then labeled.

Potatoes

Raw potatoes (whether whole or chopped) do not freeze well. Shredded raw potatoes, especially when covered in a sauce as in a casserole, will freeze relatively well. Just be certain to completely cover the potatoes with the sauce.

Tortillas and Pasta

Tortillas and pasta, when used in casseroles, also need to be completely covered with sauce when frozen. Otherwise they become dry and brittle (and unappetizing). When storing recipes such as chimichangas, wrap the tortilla tightly in plastic wrap or aluminum foil to avoid this problem.

Keeping Track

Label, label, label. Once a ziplock bag or heavily wrapped item is in the freezer, it can be very hard to tell what it is. Don't rely on your memory or your sense of sight! Labeling items with the name of the item, the date prepared, and the cooking instructions will save you time and energy later. (And it makes it really easy to just pull something out of your freezer and give it to your neighbor!) Most freezer bags have a place to write a label; when using aluminum foil I find that masking tape and a sharpie marker are indispensable.

If you do a lot of freezer cooking, it is useful to keep a white board or notepad next to your freezer. At the very least, write down the meals created and the date. More elaborately, you can write down the meals, the thawing times, and the additional ingredients needed for each meal. After you use a meal, cross it off so you have an accurate list of what exactly is in your freezer.

How long?

The chart below gives you a rough estimate to how long food “lasts” in the freezer. The thing to remember is that food that has been frozen longer than this isn’t spoiled or dangerous, it is just likely to taste a little off or have an odd texture.

Chicken or turkey pieces (uncooked)	9 months
Chicken or turkey pieces (cooked)	4-6 months
Lean fish	6 months
Fatty fish	2-3 months
Hamburger (uncooked)	3-4 months
Hamburger (cooked)	3 months
Roasts (uncooked)	4-12 months
Steaks (uncooked)	6-12 months
Chops (uncooked)	4-6 months
Ham (cooked)	1-2 months
Bacon	1 month
Bread and cake	3 months
Cookies, baked or dough	3 months
Meat casseroles (cooked)	3 months
Soups, stews, and sauces	2-3 months
Fruit	6-12 months
Ice cream, sorbet, smoothies	2 months

Table created from <http://www.realsimple.com/food-recipes/shopping-storing/freezing/how-long-food-last-freezer-1000000687907/?xid=yshi-rs-freezer-061710>

FIESTA CHICKEN ENCHILADA CASSEROLE

3 months in freezer / Remove to refrigerator 48 hours in advance / 350° F, 60-75 min, uncovered

2 cans (8-10 oz each) cream of chicken soup	4-6 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (boiled and cubed)
1 pint sour cream	8-10 flour tortillas (cut into bite sized pieces)
1 medium onion, chopped	3/4 lbs grated cheese
1 can (2.5 oz) chopped or sliced olives	
1 can (4 oz) diced green chilies	

Mix everything together in large bowl. Place into 9x13 aluminum pan. Sprinkle with cheese. Cover entire pan with one layer of plastic wrap, pressing down to remove air. Cover top with aluminum foil. Label with name, date, and cooking instructions.

WHITE CHICKEN CHILI

2-3 months in freezer / Remove to refrigerator 12 hours in advance, or thaw in microwave / warm on stovetop or in microwave

Toppings needed: serve on rice or with tortilla chips, cheese, diced tomatoes, and sour cream

2 garlic cloves, minced	2 pounds chicken (boiled and cubed)
1 pinch red chili pepper flakes	1 T lime juice
1 medium onion, chopped	1 to 1¼ tea ground cumin
1 T vegetable oil	1 T soy sauce
4 cups chicken broth	2 T cornstarch
2 cans (14 oz each) great northern beans, rinsed and drained	1/4 cup cold water

In a large saucepan, cook the garlic, onion, and red pepper flakes in oil until tender. Stir in the broth, beans, lime juice, soy sauce, and cumin; bring to boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Combine cornstarch and water and stir until smooth; stir into chili. Add chicken. Bring to boil; cook and stir for 2 minutes until thickened. Divide and freeze in small zip-top bags, remove all air. Label with name, date, and cooking instructions. Freeze flat until completely frozen.

BERRY SMOOTHIES

2 months in freezer / Mix in blender with 1 cup milk

Additional ingredients needed: 1 cup milk

1 pound frozen raspberries
1 pound frozen blueberries

2 pounds frozen strawberries
1 pint plain or vanilla yogurt

Using an ice cube tray or mini muffin tin, fill each spot with yogurt. Freeze for 24 hours. Place 1/4 cup frozen raspberries, 1/4 cup frozen blueberries, 1/2 cup frozen strawberries, and 3-5 cubes of frozen yogurt into ziplock freezer bags. Label with name, date, and preparation instructions.

CHIMICHANGAS

6 months in freezer / Cook frozen, wrapped in foil / 350° F, 50 min, then unwrap, bake 10 min more
Or remove to refrigerator 24 hours in advance / 350° F, 30 minutes, unwrap, bake 10 min more

Toppings optional: serve cheese, lettuce, diced tomatoes, and sour cream

1 pound cooked and shredded beef, pork,
or chicken
1 jar (16 oz) salsa
1 can (16 oz) refried beans
1 can (4 oz) diced green chilies

1/4 cup taco seasoning mix
16 (8-in) flour tortillas
16 oz cheese

In a large skillet, combine meat, salsa, beans, undrained chilies, and seasoning mix. Cook and stir over medium heat until heated through.

In another skillet heat tortillas, one at a time, over medium-low heat about 30 seconds per side. For each chimichanga, place 1/3 meat mixture atop a tortilla, near one edge. Top with cheese. Fold in sides into square. Wrap tightly in aluminum foil. Place three or four chimichangas into freezer ziplock bag, removing all air. Label with name, date, and cooking instructions.

SPAGHETTI SAUCE

4-5 months in freezer / Remove to refrigerator 24 hours in advance, or thaw in microwave / warm on stovetop or in microwave

Additional ingredients needed: spaghetti or other pasta noodles

5 cans (30 oz each) of Hunts Tomato Sauce	1/2 cup Italian seasoning, wrapped in cheesecloth
1 small can of Hunts Tomato Paste	
1.5 pounds of cooked hamburger	

In a crock pot, empty all five cans of tomato sauce and tomato paste. Add hamburger and seasoning packet. Cook on low for 10-12 hours, or high for 6-8 hours. Remove seasoning packet and discard. Divide and freeze in small zip-top bags, remove all air. Label with name, date, and cooking instructions. Freeze flat until completely frozen.

BASIC DRIP BEEF

4-6 months in freezer / Remove to refrigerator 36 hours in advance, or thaw in microwave / warm on stovetop or in microwave

Additional ingredients needed: serve on toasted, buttered deli rolls and melted cheese slices, with heated sauce to dip in
Or use for salads, stroganoffs, or taco salads.

1 whole 2.5 to 4 pound chuck roast	1/2 cup soy sauce
1/4 cup butter	1/2 teaspoon salt
1 whole onion (medium), sliced or diced	5 cups water
3 cloves garlic, peeled	

In a large skillet, sauté the onions in butter for a couple of minutes, or until starting to brown. Place onions in crock pot. Set chuck roast on top of the onions. Add all remaining ingredients. Cook on low heat for 8-10 hours, or until beef is fork-tender and falling apart. Shred meat with two forks until all large chunks are gone. Refrigerate overnight. Remove hardened fat from top of pan before dividing and freeze (with liquid) in small zip-top bags, remove all air. Label with name, date, and cooking instructions. Freeze flat until completely frozen. Then store upright or stacked.

CHICKEN CRESCENT ROLLS

3 months in freezer / Defrost in microwave, stuff in rolls as per directions below / 350° F, 18 min

Additional ingredients needed: 2 packages (8-oz) refrigerated crescent rolls, cheese

2 cups chicken, cooked and cubed or
shredded
1 T butter
1 package (8 oz) cream cheese, softened

1 ½ T Italian seasoning
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon pepper
4 T milk

Beat cream cheese and butter until smooth. Add chicken, seasoning, salt, pepper, and milk. Mix well. Divide and freeze in small zip-top bags, remove all air. Label with name, date, and cooking instructions. Freeze flat until completely frozen, then store stacked or upright.

To prepare: Separate crescent dough into rectangles (you will need to pinch together two triangles for each rectangle). Spoon thawed chicken mixture onto the upper center of each rectangle. Fold dough in half, pinch sealed all the way around. Place onto an ungreased cooking sheet, sprinkle lightly with shredded cheese. Bake until golden brown.