

How to start a Freezer Dinner Group!!

***6 people cook 2 meals a month 6x's**

(i.e. I make 6 pans of enchiladas and 6 pans of manicotti for the month!)

***Each month the assignment of meals rotates.**

2 people have chicken, 2 beef, 2 pasta/misc.

***We swap once a month.**

Each person walks away with 12 freezer meals.

* Via e-mail every month we post what meals we are doing so that if there is a concern it can be changed AND it helps us to make sure it is a well rounded month. Not too much mexican or italian etc.

*At the end of the month each family participates in a rating of the meals. (My kids love to rate the meals). It is on a 1-4 basis. 1 being the worst and 4 being the best. These scores get e-mailed privately to the group 'head honcho' (it's not as glamorous as it sounds!).

That person compiles the list and sends out an on-going list of meals that were rated a minimum of a 3 by the entire group. This means these recipes are safe to duplicate in the future. This way if you cooked a real bomb you don't have to know everyone rated it a 1. You just know it just didn't quite make the repeats list. It really works and is necessary. Trust me!!

Freezer Meal Tips

Containers and other items to have on hand

DO HAVE-

- Aluminum baking dishes (disposable). The best price is at Sam's Club. You can get 30 casserole size for around \$6. (These stack well)
- Pyrex casserole dishes at Wal Mart are about \$5. You can cook, freeze, and thaw in these.
- Glad freezer wrap
- Heavy duty aluminum foil (Sam's or Costco) Make sure it is 'heavy duty'
- Glad freezer bags. All sizes. (Hefty zipper ones leak) (These save a lot of room)
- Sharpie (label, label, label)
- Painters tape (Best way to attach your instructions)
- Menu calendar
- List of menu items for your freezer

AVOID-

- Hefty brand freezer bags and wrap. They leak and don't seal properly.
- Plastic containers (unless specifies for freezer use). They will pop open as the food expands when it freezes AND will shatter if they drop out of your freezer.
- regular plastic wrap
- lightweight aluminum foil
- containers from sour cream, ice cream etc.

Shopping Tips

- Make a menu calendar. Get your kids involved. MOST of the recipes you already like will freeze!
- Make all of your 'like' items together (i.e. tacos, enchiladas, chimi's, etc.) You will maximize your materials, your purchasing time, and preparation time.
- Buy in bulk it is cheaper. If you are making a lasagna, make 3 or 4 and freeze them. You'll save time and money.
- Make 2 lists. One for the grocery store, one for the wholesale store.
- Make your lists in order of the store so you are not going back and forth wasting time at the store
(i.e. At Fry's make your list starting with produce, breads, cheese, sliced meats, then move on to baking etc...follow the rows at the store)
- Get most of your food container items at Costco, Sams, Smart n Final. Trust me they are WAY cheaper for disposable things!

Preparation Tips

- CLEAR as much counter surface as possible. You will use every bit of it.
- Empty the trash can. You will fill it when you are cooking!!
- Plan to go out to dinner the day you cook. Trust me on this one!!
- Take the phone off the hook!!! (I have messed up plenty of meals this way!)

Cooking and Assembling Tips

-If you can crock pot it, go for it. (Mostly for shredded items to fill enchiladas, chimi's, etc.) This way you can use your stove for the other meals or sauces you are preparing.

-Always attach extra sauce OR do not include sauce in original recipe. Attach to the top. You will find that Pasta's will absorb a ton of sauce. It will almost always be dry when you thaw and reheat it if you do not have a separate bag of sauce to go on top.

-Marinades will change the texture of chicken if it is on too long. Put marinade in a second bag and marinate during the last few hours of defrosting. If left on too long it will break down the fibers of the chicken. This is not the same for beef and pork. They can be marinated and frozen.

-When freezing rice, avoid using minute rice. It becomes mushy.

-Under cook pasta slightly if it has a sauce as it will continue to soften.

-Blanch or precook veggies and drain before freezing to stop enzyme action

-Canned peas tend to get really mushy. Try to use frozen peas in recipes calling for them. (Unless you want to sit and peel them from a pod. Good luck with that!!)

-Allow hot foods to cool to room temperature before freezing.

-Freeze food quickly to 0 degrees or below.

-ALWAYS label everything. Put the name of the meal and date on every package. Attach the instructions with blue painters tape for thawing, reheating, etc. Make sure to specify 'without foil'.

My favorite websites for tips and recipes

<http://www.realfood4realpeople.com/freeze.html>

<http://organizedhome.com/content-87.html>

<http://christysclipart.com/oamc2.html>

Thawing tips

- Always thaw in the refrigerator
- Items can be cooked from freezer state but will take 2-3 times longer.
- Pull 3-4 meals out at the beginning of the week. Most meals will take longer than 24 hours to defrost. It is a pain to remember to take a meal out each night. You are perfectly safe pulling it out for the week.

Items that don't freeze well

- egg noodles
- Raw salad vegetables (lettuce, tomatoes, radishes, etc.) You can freeze salsa though. You might want to drain it a little before serving though.
- Raw or hard boiled eggs in their shell
- Raw potatoes or boiled white potatoes
- Commercial cottage cheese
- Gelatin salads or desserts
- Mayonnaise (separates)
- Cream Cheese (can be used in casseroles or sauces)
- Icing made with egg whites, boiled frostings, or cakes with creme fillings
- custard pies, creme pies, or pies with meringue
- sour cream unless used in a casserole