Why do Freezer Cooking?

I have been doing freezer cooking for the majority of our marriage. At first I enjoyed having a freezer full of food to pull from while I was working. I hated the thought of coming home and actually cooking dinner. I rarely did. Usually I would pull something out of the freezer the night before to thaw in the fridge and have Ryan pop it in the oven when he got home. It was usually ready when I got home from work about an hour later.

Now that I’m home with three little kids, it comes down to time. Some days it’s just too hard to take the time to make dinner. On those days I pull something out of the freezer. When I do cook, I often cook a triple batch and freeze all the leftovers.

Freezer cooking can be done on a small scale or large scale depending on your space and your family’s needs. If you have very little freezer space, make a double batch of lasagna one evening and freeze the second pan. You don’t have to have 30 days of meals in your freezer. The main idea around freezer cooking is to have something on hand on crazy days when cooking isn’t possible. It’s better than mac & cheese and cheaper than eating out when those busy days happen.

With the help of family members, I had a freezer full of prepared food when our twins were born. It helped so much during the first few months.

Freezer Cooking Cookbooks & Websites

- Dinner is Ready by Deanna Buxton
- Lunch is Ready by Deanna Buxton
- The Freezer Cooking Manual by Nanci Slagle (www.30daygourmet.com)
- Dream Dinners by Stephanie Allen and Tina Kuna
- Don’t Panic, Dinner’s in the Freezer by Susie Martinez, Vanda Howell, and Bonnie Garcia
- Don’t Panic, More Dinner’s in the Freezer by Susie Martinez, Vanda Howell, and Bonnie Garcia
- 365daysofcrockpot.blogspot.com
How to Freezer Cook

There are many different ways to approach freezer cooking. I have done it several different ways over the years. I have filled my freezer slowly over time making triple batches of our evening dinner and freezing the extras. I have done it based on the meat I am using such as assembling several dishes that call for cooked chicken. I have also done the crazy all-day event and stocked my freezer all at once. This is certainly the hardest, but was the best option for me when I worked full-time. You are exhausted by the end of the day, and it is a lot of work to do all the shopping and cooking for that many recipes.

After doing this for years and considering the limited time I have available to devote to a freezer cooking session, I might choose two or three recipes based on how easy they would be to work on at the same time rather than considering ingredients. For a normal session I might choose tamale soup, chimichangas, and lasagna. I always try to make one crockpot meal because it’s so easy. This is what my cooking session would look like:

- Saturday morning I review my recipes, decide on my quantities, and make my shopping list. After doing the shopping, I leave everything for my cooking session on the counter that doesn’t need to be refrigerated. There is no reason to put it away, only to pull it out again.
- Saturday afternoon I grate all the cheese I will need in the food processor. I also chop the veggies such as onions for my recipes.
- Sunday morning I put everything in the crockpot for Cafe Rio Chicken. The chicken is done when we get home from church. For lunch we have salads with the shredded chicken on top. I put the rest in the fridge to use Monday when I assemble the chimichangas.
- Monday morning I make sure my dishwasher and garbage are empty and start cooking. I put everything in the crockpot for tamale soup. It cooks all day so I don’t need to worry about it for hours.
- I make the sauce for the lasagna. While it simmers I start the chimichangas. After my sauce has simmered for about 30-45 minutes, I take it off the stove to allow it to cool. To do this quickly, take several water bottles and thoroughly clean the outside. Fill 3/4 full and freeze. Place the water bottles in the sauce. They will quickly cool it, just make sure your lids are on tight. Wash your bottles and refreeze for next time. While the sauce is cooling I finish the chimichangas.
- Once the chimichangas are wrapped and in the freezer, I go back to my lasagna. Generally I make mine in 8x8 pans because it takes us forever to eat a 9x13. I just break the noodles to fit my pan when I assemble it. Place your pans in the freezer.
- When my tamale soup is ready, I use the same strategy to cool it as the lasagna sauce. Ladle it into quart or gallon Ziploc bags and freeze flat. After this particular day of cooking I will have about 100 chimichangas wrapped in bundles of 6 each, 6 8x8 pans of lasagna, and about 8 quart bags of tamale soup. It makes a busy day, but the recipes I chose allow me quite a bit of flexibility as well to take care of kids.

Tips

- I generally don’t precook noodles—like in lasagna. I just put them in and pour a little extra water over it after I have assembled it. They soak up a lot of moisture as they are cooling, freezing and then cooking. It saves you a dirty pan and a whole step in the process.
- I freeze everything possible in Ziploc bags. They take way less room in the freezer. Just freeze them flat and they stack or can be easily stood up.
- Many of my recipes call for precooked chicken. I buy a large amount of chicken at Sam’s Club and then cook it all in the crock pot. Just drizzle some olive oil or put a little butter with the chicken while it cooks. Otherwise it tends to be a bit dry. Also, choose boneless, skinless chicken thighs when you can. They have a higher fat content, and don’t dry out like chicken breasts.
Ziploc Bags:
Ziplocs work well for most foods I freeze. The best part about them is that they freeze flat and stack easily. They store well in your freezer and take up a minimal amount of space. I use Ziplocs for just about everything including soups, marinades, most pastas (except formed pasta like lasagna), etc.
- Only fill about half full.
- Place bag into a glass or larger container and fold top zipper around the edges of the container to make it easier to fill.
- Squeeze out as much air as possible.
- Lay on a shelf to freeze flat and then stack. The bag shouldn’t be more than about ¾ inch thick when frozen.
- Don’t go cheap on plastic bags. Buy the heavy freezer bags. I definitely prefer Ziplocs over the store brand quality.

Muffin Tins:
Muffin tins work perfect for single servings of sandwich fillings such as Sloppy Joes or BBQ pork. Simply fill almost full and put in the freezer to freeze until firm. Once frozen pop the servings out and place in a Ziploc bag. You can easily pull out the number of portions you need and thaw in the microwave. I prefer using the silicone muffin pans for this because it makes it so simple to pop out the portions.

Crock-pot dinners:
This is a new idea I came across a while ago, but haven’t tried yet. Freeze all your ingredients for a favorite crock-pot dinner. Thaw in the fridge for about a day and place in your crock-pot to cook. I would first place the meal in a crock-pot liner then into a Ziploc for freezing.

8x8 and 9x13 pans:
Pans present the biggest challenge for freezing because they take so much space and are more likely to allow freezer burn. I freeze my meals in Gladware ovensafe plastic pans. After assembling, I place a layer of foil over the dish then top with the pan lid. I haven’t seen them in stores in quite a while. The other easy option is purchasing disposable aluminium pans for freezing certain recipes. You can also freeze in a glass or metal pan. A final option is to freeze your dish in the pan and then remove once frozen. Line your pan with foil, assemble as normal and place in the freezer. Once frozen simply lift out and wrap well with foil. When thawing, unwrap while frozen and place back in the pan to thaw and cook. This technique will use the least amount of freezer space and will not require you to purchase multiple extra pans.

Foil:
Foil works well for certain foods such as chimichangas that already have form, and I am bundling together. I use heavy foil and purchased a large box from the restaurant supply section of Sam’s Club. I generally wrap most foods in at least two layers of foil.

Labeling:
Don’t forget to label and date your food in the freezer. Also make sure you include any specific cooking information if needed. I write this information on the Ziploc bag or with a black marker on the foil covering my meal. Dating is very important. Most things freeze well for about three months. Every cookbook I have read has a different idea on the amount of time a meal can sit in the freezer and retain it’s quality, but I try to stick with three months.

Tips
- When freezing something like sloppy joe meat or shredded BBQ pork, freeze it in muffin tins and pop them out when frozen. Store in a large Ziploc. These are generally good individual size portions.
- When filling Ziplocs put them inside another container like a tall glass and wrap the sides of the bag around the glass while filling. It’s much less messy. Also, don’t usually fill your bags more than about ½ full.
- Start with your dishwasher and garbage can empty and clean as you go.
Recipes

Asian Chicken Barbecue
2 lbs boneless, skinless chicken thighs
1/2 cup soy sauce
1/3 cup packed brown sugar
2 TB sesame oil
3 cloves garlic, minced

Place thighs into the bottom of a slow cooker. Lay as flat as possible. Combine the rest of the ingredients in a small bowl. Pour sauce over the chicken. Cover and cook on Low for 2 hours. Turn chicken over and cook 2 hours longer. Serve.

Fried Rice
2 cups uncooked brown rice
4 eggs
3 TB olive oil
2 cups diced ham
1-2 cups frozen peas
1/2 cups sliced green onions
soy sauce to taste (approx 2-4 TB)


Fajita Chicken
8 chicken breasts
2 (15 oz) cans black beans, rinsed and drained
1 pkg frozen corn
2 pkgs fajita seasoning
1 cup salsa
1/4 tsp cumin
1/4 cup chopped cilantro

Combine all ingredients in the crock-pot. Cook for 8-10 hours on low. Shred chicken. Stir well to combine. Allow to cool and freeze in pint or quart freezer bags. Serve on tortillas with cheese, sour cream, and olives.

BBQ Chicken
8-12 chicken breasts
2 bottles of your favorite BBQ sauce

Place chicken in crock pot drizzle with 1/2 one bottle of sauce. Cook on high about 3-4 hours until cooked through. Remove meet and discard sauce from the crockpot. Shred chicken and stir in fresh BBQ sauce until chicken is well coated. Freeze in quart bags. Thaw and use this mixture on rolls, sour dough bread, in salads or on BBQ Chicken Pizza.

Taco Soup
1 lb hamburger
1 onion, diced
2 cans (15 oz) kidney beans (drained & rinsed)
1 (15 oz) can diced tomatoes
1 pkg taco seasoning
1 (15 oz) can corn, drained
1 (15 oz) can tomato sauce


Thaw and reheat in the microwave or on the stove. Serve with chips, cheese, olives, etc.

Tips

• When freezing everything spread it out in your freezer as much as possible. You want it to freeze quickly.
• Most recipes freeze just fine. Just experiment.
• Put your recipes in page protectors and use a magnet to attach them to the stove hood or somewhere easy for you to see quickly so you aren’t always digging to find your recipe.