



HYG-5308-09

Freezing Combination Main Dishes

Making your own frozen prepared foods can be economical. You can cook enough for several meals with little extra effort when you have the time. For best results, remember that freezing maintains, but does not improve, quality. Use only fresh, high-quality food ingredients. Underripe fruits and vegetables lack flavor, and overripe ones are flat and tough, or soft and mushy after freezing. Meat or poultry that is tender before freezing will stay tender after freezing if it is properly prepared, packaged, frozen, and stored.

Cleanliness

Observe strict cleanliness in preparing food for the home freezer. Freezer temperatures of 0 degrees F or below do not kill bacteria in food; they simply stop bacteria from multiplying. After the frozen food is thawed, bacteria will grow and multiply again. Strict cleanliness keeps the number of bacteria at a minimum before foods are frozen.

Foods to Use and Foods to Avoid

You may use many of your own favorite recipes for freezing. Prepare the food in the usual way. Cook thoroughly but do not overcook. There may be further cooking when reheated.

Foods That Freeze Well

- Cooked chicken or turkey in casseroles.
- Stews and goulashes made with beef, lamb, pork, or veal. Most vegetables used in these combination dishes, such as peas, carrots, celery, or small quantities of onion also freeze well. However, potatoes may not be satisfactory.
- Baked meat loaf.
- Cooked dried beans, such as bean soup and baked beans. Because freezing softens beans somewhat, cook until barely tender for best quality. Limit storage time to two weeks if seasoned with ham or bacon.

Foods That Do Not Freeze Well

The flavor and texture of some foods become poor during freezing. Avoid using these foods.

- Cooked egg white toughens.
- Mature potatoes which tend to disintegrate, become watery, or darken. New potatoes are better.
- Fried foods tend to lose crispness and become soggy.
- Avoid freezing cured meats; salt hastens rancidity.
- Fresh salad greens, raw tomatoes, raw apples and grapes become soft, soggy, and mushy.

- Mayonnaise and sour cream separate.
- Custard and cream pies develop soggy crusts.
- Milk sauces and gravy separate and curdle when thawed.
- Cooked plain pasta or rice becomes mushy.

Cooking, Cooling, and Packaging

Proper packaging prevents loss of nutrients, moisture, changes in color and flavor, and transfer of strong flavors and odors among foods. Suitable packaging is particularly important in frost-free freezers.

Coated or laminated freezer paper, plastic wrap, and heavy-weight aluminum foil are good wrapping materials for freezing. Use wraps specifically labeled for freezing. Ceramic, metal, microwave plastic, or glass containers may be used for hot or cold foods. Cool food in the refrigerator before putting into plastic freezer boxes. Leave some head space in all rigid containers.

When freezing combination main dishes, line baking pans with freezer wrap. Allow enough extra wrap to fold over top. Use a nonmetallic wrap for acid foods such as those made with tomato sauces.

Cool hot food quickly to stop the cooking, retard growth of bacteria, and help retain the natural flavor, color, and texture of the food.

To cool food quickly, put it into serving size pans lined with heat-resistant freezer wrap. Pack food tightly to avoid air pockets. Cool in the refrigerator. Complete wrap. Fold ends over the top and seal with freezer tape. Label with name of the food, date, and “use by” date. It is also helpful to include the temperature, time, and other directions for reheating and completing the dish.

Spread the pans or packages of food in the freezer so food will freeze rapidly. Allow a 1-inch space around packages for air circulation. Follow the freezer manufacturer’s directions for placing

food in the coldest section. You can freeze 2 to 3 pounds or one 8- by 8-inch pan of food per cubic foot of freezer space at one time. Leave the food for 10 to 12 hours until it is completely frozen. Then, remove wrapped food from the pans. Check the wrappings to make sure they are airtight and secure before stacking.

Store the frozen food at 0 degrees F, or below. Combination main dishes are best used within 3 months.

Tips

Season lightly; some seasonings become stronger or bitter during frozen storage, others weaken. Add seasoning just before serving.

- Package individual servings.
- Crumb and cheese toppings should be added to frozen foods just before heating.
- In sauces and gravies, Clear Jel®, a modified starch, is recommended. When flour is used, thoroughly combine flour and fat. These may appear curdled when thawed but will usually recombine when stirred. (Cornstarch may be less successful.)
- Add unbaked pastry toppings to stews before freezing meat pies.
- Package poultry and dressing separately for freezer storage.
- Freeze soups or broths in ice cube trays, remove and store in freezer bag for use in small amounts.

Thawing and Cooking

Conventional Oven

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F or the recommended temperature of your recipe. When it is thawed, you may insert a meat thermometer into the center of the food. Bake to at least 165 degrees F. Most frozen combination dishes will take one-third to one-half more time to cook than their fresh counterparts.

Microwave

Foods to be cooked or reheated in a microwave may require thawing on defrost cycle to avoid uneven heating and overcooked portions. Remove wrapping and replace food in microwave or ovenproof baking dish. Cover with waxed paper or glass lid. A defrost period of 10–15 minutes per pound (4 servings) is a general guideline for many foods. Check the microwave manufacturer's guidelines for instructions on reheating frozen combination foods. In some cases it may be necessary to rotate foods during heating. Use a temperature probe if possible. Cook to at least 165 degrees F. If necessary, shield the edges of square containers with small pieces of aluminum foil to prevent burning of some areas before food is thoroughly warmed.

Freezing and Storage

The freezer temperature should be 0 degrees F or below. Unfavorable changes in eating quality take place more rapidly when foods are stored at temperatures above 0 degrees F. Slow growth of microorganisms may occur at temperatures above 10 degrees F causing foods to lose color, flavor, characteristic texture, and nutritive value.

Reference

Andress, E. L., and Harrison, J. A. (2002). *Preserving Food: Freezing Prepared Foods*. University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service. Retrieved July 17, 2008, from <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/publications/uga/FreezingPreparedFoods.pdf>

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