

# Make-Ahead Meals

It's time for dinner and your family is staring hungrily at you from the dinner table. What to do? Simply pull portions of make-ahead casseroles or side dishes from the freezer and reheat them. Freezing is one of the easiest, most convenient, and least time-consuming methods of putting a meal on the table in a hurry. There are many wonderful casserole and one-dish meals that are simple to prepare, offer variety and great flavor, and stand up well to freezing and reheating.

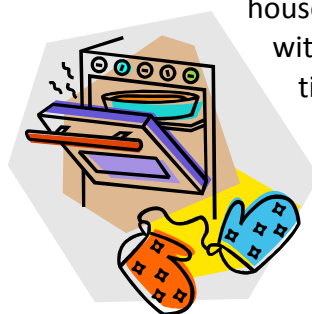
## How Freezing Affects Foods

Freezing (0 F or below) preserves food for extended periods, because it prevents the growth of microorganisms (bacteria, yeasts, and molds) that cause both food spoilage and foodborne illness. The freezing process itself doesn't destroy bacteria. After thawing however, microbes that may be present can become active, multiplying under the right conditions to levels that can lead to foodborne illness. Handle thawed foods like any perishable product. Thorough cooking will kill most microorganisms.

Ideally, foods should be quick-frozen within two hours and stored at 0 F or lower. Slow freezing creates large, disruptive ice crystals. During thawing, these crystals damage cell walls and dissolve emulsions such as mayonnaise or cream, which will separate and appear curdled. Rapid freezing prevents undesirable ice crystals from forming throughout the product. Most make-ahead meals should be used within three months for optimum reheating results.

## Kitchen Management

- ❶ Organize the kitchen by arranging equipment and utensils according to where they can be used most efficiently. Storing utensils in the same place after use will save time you might have to use searching.
- ❷ Use equipment to save time. A microwave, food processor, mixer, blender, workable can opener, sharp knives, and cutting boards can assist in quick preparation of meals. These ultimate time-savers are only good if you know how to use them. Purchase equipment that can be used for more than one job, such as from freezer-to-oven-to-table bakeware. Avoid buying hard-to-clean items or those which break, rust, or stain easily.
- ❸ Save time during clean-up by washing equipment as soon as you finish using it. Wiping up spills, letting dishes air dry, and paring fruits and vegetables on paper for easy disposal are examples of time-saving procedures.
- ❹ Let the family help. Establishing routines may encourage all family members to help.
- ❺ Use shortcuts. Chop extra onion and green pepper for later use and store in the freezer. Cook once and serve twice. Dovetail work by making dinner while washing a load of laundry or finishing other household chores. Always begin with foods that take the longest time to prepare.



## Successful Make-Ahead Hints

We all want to prepare nutritious meals that appeal to our families and fit within the family budget, but tasty meals have to be planned. The web site MyPyramid.gov is a good place to start when planning nutritious meals. Consider weekly menus along with a shopping list to save extra trips to the grocery. Make double batches of bread, cookies, vegetables, casseroles, soup, stews, and entrees. Then freeze one batch for later. When combining make-ahead frozen dishes, follow these helpful hints for best results, remembering to start with good quality ingredients:

### ***To prepare foods for freezing:***

- ✿ Freeze most casseroles before baking, especially when all the ingredients are already cooked. Exceptions are dishes that contain uncooked rice, raw vegetables, or uncooked meat that has been frozen and thawed.
- ✿ Some foods don't freeze well, such as hard-cooked eggs, raw vegetables, mayonnaise, or sour cream.
- ✿ Undercook starchy ingredients such as potatoes, beans, rice, and noodles, or they will become mushy.
- ✿ Freeze casserole toppings separately to prevent sogginess.
- ✿ Do not freeze baked pastry. Add the unbaked pastry during reheating.
- ✿ Seasoning intensity can change during freezing, so season lightly. Adjust the flavor during reheating. Cloves, pepper, garlic, and celery become stronger upon freezing, while onion, salt, and chili powder weaken.
- ✿ Freeze casseroles in containers that are just right for a family meal or individual servings.

### ***To freeze:***

- ✿ Cool hot casseroles rapidly. Set a shallow pan of hot food in ice water and cool to room temperature quickly. Wrap, label, and freeze. Shallow baking pans speed freezing and thawing of casseroles.
- ✿ To package food for the freezer, use heavy-duty foil, moisture- and vapor-proof paper, plastic freezer wraps, or freezer containers. Microwave-safe or aluminum ovenproof containers are also available. Pack the containers nearly full to prevent ice crystals from forming, but allow some space at the top of the container for expansion. Label the contents of the dish, the date frozen and the weight or number of servings. Include cooking instructions or where to locate the recipe.
- ✿ To free up baking pans, line the pan with heavy-duty aluminum foil. Leave enough overhang around the pan to cover the casserole and seal foil. Add ingredients and bake if desired. Cool, cover, and seal airtight. When frozen, remove the foil from the pan, and place the foil package in the freezer. To reheat, simply peel foil from food, place it back in the original baking pan, and bake as directed.

### ***To serve:***

- Use frozen casseroles within three months for best quality.
- The size of the casserole will affect baking time. Use shallow, small dishes instead of deeper, larger dishes to reduce baking time.
- To reheat casseroles without thawing, bake uncovered at 400 F till heated through for 1 to 2 hours. Fully cooked casseroles should not be thawed, but baked at 400 F for the maximum time suggested in the recipe.
- To thaw casseroles before reheating, allow the casserole to stand in the refrigerator overnight. Then cook as directed in the recipe, adding 15 to 30 minutes to the cooking time.

## Make-Ahead Freezing Storage & Service

<i>Foods</i>	<i>Before Freezing</i>	<i>Storage Time</i>	<i>Before Serving</i>
<b>Muffins</b>	Bake, cool, wrap, label, and freeze.	1 month	Reheat at 300°F for 20 minutes.
<b>Yeast Breads</b>	Bake, cool, wrap, label, and freeze.	1 to 2 months	Thaw wrapped at room temperature.
<b>Cakes:</b> Angel Food Chiffon Sponge	Bake, cool, and remove from pan. If a tube pan is used, fill the hole in center with crumpled waxed paper. Place cardboard wrapped in aluminum foil on bottom and top of cake. Wrap, label, and freeze.	4 to 6 months	Thaw at room temperature, wrapped or unwrapped for about 1 hour.
<b>Cookies</b>	Cookies high in fat and low in moisture are the most satisfactory. Bake, cool, wrap, label, and freeze.	2-3 months	Thaw at room temperature. Crisp in 350° F oven.
<b>Baked Pies:</b> Chiffon	Cool and pour filling into baked crumb or pastry crust. Wrap, label, and freeze.	2 weeks	Thaw in refrigerator overnight or 8 to 10 hours.
<b>Baked Pies:</b> Pumpkin or Sweet Potato	Bake, cool, wrap, label, and freeze.	2 months	Warm in 300° F oven for 30 to 45 minutes or allow to thaw in refrigerator about 6 hours.
<b>Cooked Meats</b>	After roasting, cover sliced meats with gravy or sauce to help retain moisture. Use a double thickness of waxed paper between slices. Wrap, label, and freeze.	1 month	Thaw large roasts in refrigerator overnight or 10 to 12 hours. Allow sliced meats to thaw in refrigerator about 6 hours.
<b>Cooked Poultry</b>	Wrap, label, and freeze. Dressing in an uncooked turkey is <b>not</b> recommended.	1 month	Thaw in refrigerator overnight.
<b>Casseroles</b>	Bake, cool, wrap, label, and freeze; or assemble, wrap, label, and freeze.	1 month	Remove fully cooked casserole from freezer and bake at 400°F for maximum time given in the recipe. Thaw uncooked casserole and cook as directed in the recipe, adding 15 to 30 minutes.
<b>Soup</b>	Cook, cool, pour into containers, label, and freeze.	2 months	Reheat soup to 160°F before serving.
<b>Salads:</b> Gelatin Meat Poultry Seafood	Freeze combination salads with cream or cottage cheese, whipped cream, salad dressing, or gelatin. Use ¼ less liquid than in usual recipe for gelatin salads.	3 weeks	Thaw pint-size packages in refrigerator about 4 to 6 hours.
<b>Sandwiches:</b> Cheese Peanut butter Meat Poultry Seafood Egg yolks	Pack fillings for sandwiches into freezer containers and freeze separately; or make into sandwiches and freeze. Leave out fresh vegetables and condiments. Seal, label, and freeze.	2 to 4 weeks	Will remain at proper temperature in lunch box for about 3 to 4 hours.

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# Make Ahead Meals Master Recipes

## Master Recipe for Roast Chicken with Garlic

Yield: 13 cups chicken meat and 1 cup garlic puree

2 whole chickens (about 6 pounds each)	2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon black pepper	8 large heads garlic
1 tablespoon olive oil	

Rinse chickens. Season both the inside and outside of the chicken with salt and pepper. Place breast side down on racks in two roasting pans. Toss garlic heads in oil and place in roasting pans. Roast the chicken and garlic in a 400 F oven for 1 hour and 10 minutes or until a thermometer reaches 165 F. Cool. Separate garlic into cloves and squeeze pulp out of each clove into small bowl. Mash with a fork. Remove meat from chicken and dice. Discard skin and bones. Cover and refrigerate for up to three days.

*The Roast Chicken with Garlic Master Recipe can be used to make the following four chicken recipes.*

### Grandma's Chicken Potpie

Yield: 8 servings

3 tablespoons butter	1 cup reduced-sodium chicken broth
¼ cup onion, minced	1 cup low-fat milk
3 tablespoons flour	1½ cups carrots, sliced
1 teaspoon dried sage	3 cups Roast Chicken Master Mix
½ teaspoon dried thyme	1 (10-ounce) package mushrooms, quartered
½ teaspoon salt	1 cup frozen peas
½ teaspoon black pepper	1 (7½-ounces) package corn-bread mix

Line a 2-quart casserole with foil, leaving enough overhang to cover food and seal foil. Melt butter in skillet over medium heat. Add onions and cook 4 minutes. Stir in flour and seasonings. Increase heat and add chicken broth and milk. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Add carrots and cook 5 minutes. Add master mix, mushrooms, and peas and cook 5 minutes. Pour into prepared dish. Cool, seal, label, and freeze. Once potpie is frozen, remove from pan and return to freezer. To prepare for dinner, peel foil from potpie and place back into baking pan. Allow to thaw in refrigerator 24 hours. Prepare corn bread according to package directions. Pour over top of casserole. Bake at 350 F uncovered for 50 minutes.

*Nutritional Analysis: 287 calories, 15 g protein, 30 g carbohydrate, 12 g fat, 46 mg cholesterol, 1,045 mg sodium*

### Tex-Mex Chicken Enchiladas

Yield: 8 servings

1 (15-ounce) can black beans, rinsed and drained	3 cups Roast Chicken Master Mix
2 tablespoons fresh cilantro or parsley, chopped	2 cups Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
1 (10½-ounce) jar salsa	8 large flour tortillas

Line a 9x13-inch baking pan with foil, leaving enough overhang to cover food and seal foil. In mixing bowl, combine black beans, master mix, cilantro, 1 cup cheese, and ½ jar of salsa. Fill each tortilla with ½ cup of chicken mixture. Roll and place seam side down in baking pan. Sprinkle remaining cheese over enchiladas. Reserve rest of salsa for garnishing. Seal, label, and freeze. Once enchiladas are frozen, remove from pan and return to freezer or wrap individually. To prepare for dinner, peel foil from enchiladas and return to baking pan. Thaw for 24 hours in the refrigerator. Cover pan loosely with foil and bake at 350 F for 20 minutes. Remove foil and bake 15 more minutes more. Spoon remaining salsa over top of enchiladas.

*Nutritional Analysis: 334 calories, 22 g protein, 25 g carbohydrate, 16 g fat, 57 mg cholesterol, 1,023 mg sodium*

### Chicken Divan

Yield: 8 servings

1 (16 ounce) package broccoli florets  
¼ cup butter  
1 cup reduced-sodium chicken broth  
1 cup cheddar cheese, shredded  
¼ teaspoon salt  
3 cups Roast Chicken Master Mix

1 (8- ounce) package cauliflower florets  
¼ cup all-purpose flour  
1 cup low-fat milk  
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce  
½ teaspoon black pepper  
½ cup plain dry bread crumbs

Line a 9x13-inch baking pan or 2-quart casserole with foil, leaving enough overhang to cover food, and seal foil. Butter foil. In a large saucepan, steam broccoli and cauliflower 4 minutes, until just tender. Arrange in bottom of baking pan. Melt butter in medium saucepan over medium heat. Add flour and cook 2 minutes, until light brown, stirring constantly. Stir in broth and milk, and cook about 5 minutes or until sauce thickens, stirring frequently. Remove from heat and stir in ¼ cup of cheese. Add Worcestershire sauce, salt, and pepper. Pour ½ of sauce over broccoli and cauliflower. Sprinkle master mix over sauce. Top with remaining sauce, then remaining cheese and bread crumbs. Cool, seal, label, and freeze. Once divan is frozen, remove from pan and return to freezer. To prepare for dinner, peel foil from divan and place back into baking pan. Allow to thaw in refrigerator 24 hours. Bake uncovered at 350 F for 30 minutes, uncovered, or until heated through.

*Nutritional Analysis: 283 calories, 18 g protein, 14 g carbohydrate, 17 g fat, 65 mg cholesterol, 526 mg sodium*

### Tuscan Chicken and White Bean Stew

Yield: 8 servings

½ cup Roasted Garlic Puree  
2 (13.75-ounces) cans reduced-sodium chicken broth  
1 cup carrots, thinly sliced  
½ cup water  
4 cups Roast Chicken Master Mix

4 (15-ounces) cans Great Northern beans, drained and rinsed  
¼ pounds bacon, diced  
1 cup onions, finely chopped  
1 tablespoon fresh rosemary, chopped OR 2 teaspoon dried  
¼ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon black pepper

Puree garlic with 2 cups of the beans and 1 cup of the chicken broth. Set aside. In 5-quart pot, cook bacon 4 minutes over medium heat, stirring often. Add carrots and onions and cook 2 minutes. Add water and rosemary. Simmer uncovered 3 minutes. Stir in pureed bean mixture, remaining broth and beans, master mix, salt, and pepper. Simmer uncovered 5 minutes. Cool, seal, label, and freeze in a container in the size of your choice. To prepare for dinner, allow to thaw for 24 hours in the refrigerator. Heat to 165 F before serving.

*Nutritional Analysis: 464 calories, 32 g protein, 48 g carbohydrate, 17 g fat, 53 mg cholesterol, 498 mg sodium*

### Marinara Meat Sauce Master Recipe

Yield: 22 cups

1 tablespoon olive oil  
4 cloves garlic, minced  
6 (28-ounce size) cans tomatoes, with juice  
½ cup basil, chopped OR 3 tablespoons dried  
1 tablespoon sugar

2 large onions, chopped  
2 pounds lean ground beef  
1 (6-ounce) can tomato paste  
3 bay leaves  
1½ teaspoon salt  
1½ teaspoon black pepper

In an 8-quart saucepan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add onions and cook for 8 minutes. Add garlic and cook for an additional minute, stirring often. Add beef and cook until brown, stirring often. Add remaining ingredients and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring often.

*The Marinara Meat Sauce Master Recipe can be used to make the following four recipe:*

### Classic Lasagna

Yield: 8 servings

1 (15-ounce) container cottage cheese	2 large eggs
½ cup Parmesan cheese, grated	¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped OR 2 Tablespoons dried
2 teaspoons dried oregano	6 cups Master Marinara Meat Sauce
1 pound uncooked lasagna noodles (about 15 noodles)	1½ cups mozzarella cheese, shredded

In a medium bowl, combine first 5 ingredients. Line a 9x13-inch baking pan with foil, leaving enough overhang to cover food and seal foil. Spread 1 cup of the Master Sauce in the bottom of pan. Cover with 5 dry lasagna noodles, ⅓ of the remaining Master Sauce, and 1 cup of the cottage cheese mixture. Layer with 5 more noodles, ⅓ of the remaining Master Sauce, and remaining cottage cheese mixture. Top with final 5 noodles and remaining Master Sauce. Sprinkle with mozzarella cheese. Seal, label, and freeze. Once lasagna is frozen, remove from pan and return to freezer. To prepare for dinner, peel foil from lasagna and place back into baking pan. Bake unthawed lasagna, loosely covered with foil, at 350 F for 45 minutes or until hot and bubbly. Allow to set 10 minutes before cutting.

*Nutritional Analysis: 301 calories, 21 g protein, 33 g carbohydrate, 9 g fat, 27 mg cholesterol, 496 mg sodium*

### Baked Ziti with Four Cheeses

Yield: 8 servings

1 pound ziti or penne pasta	6 cups Master Marinara Meat Sauce
4 cups four-cheese blend, shredded	

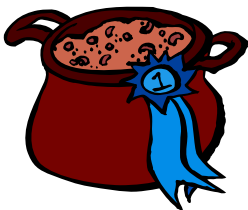
Line a 9x13-inch baking pan with foil, leaving enough overhang to cover food and seal foil. Cook ziti 5 minutes until tender but not quite done and drain. In large bowl, combine ziti, Master Sauce, and ⅓ of the cheese. Place in the baking pan. Top with remaining cheese. Cool, seal, label, and freeze. Once ziti is frozen, remove from pan and return to freezer. To prepare for dinner, peel foil from ziti and place back into baking pan. Thaw 24 hours in the refrigerator. Cover loosely with foil and bake at 350 F for 15 minutes. Remove foil and bake 30 minutes longer or until hot and bubbly.

*Nutritional Analysis: 461 calories, 28 g protein, 47 g carbohydrate, 18 g fat, 51 mg cholesterol, 844 mg sodium*

### Zesty Chili

Yield: 8 servings

1 tablespoon butter	1 green bell pepper, seeded and diced
1 large onion, diced	1 jalapeno pepper, seeded and minced
¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro	2 teaspoon chili powder
1 teaspoon ground cumin	5 cups Master Marinara Meat Sauce
2 (15-ounce) cans red kidney beans, rinsed and drained	



In an 8-quart pan, melt butter over medium heat. Add green pepper and onion and cook 5 minutes. Add jalapeno pepper, cilantro, chili powder, and cumin and cook 2 minutes, stirring. Remove from heat. Stir in Master Marinara Meat Sauce and beans. Cool, seal, label, and freeze in size container of your choice. To serve for dinner, thaw for 24 hours in the refrigerator. Reheat to 165 F and serve.

*Nutritional Analysis: 234 calories, 15 g protein, 34 g carbohydrate, 5 g fat, 13 mg cholesterol, 341mg sodium*

## Family-Style Pizza

Yield: 8 servings

2 (10-ounce) packages refrigerator pizza dough

2 cups Master Marinara Meat Sauce

### FOR THE KIDS:

½ cup shredded mozzarella cheese

### WITH THE WORKS:

½ cup shredded mozzarella cheese

18 slices Canadian bacon or ham

1 green bell pepper, seeded and thinly sliced

¼ cup marinated artichoke hearts

Line 2 baking sheets with foil, leaving enough overhang to cover food and seal foil. On a clean surface, unroll both packages of pizza dough. Form dough into 2 pizza crusts and place on baking sheets. Spread each crust with 1 cup Master Marinara Meat Sauce. Top each with ½ cup mozzarella cheese. Top 1 pizza with remaining toppings. Seal, label, and freeze. Once pizzas are frozen, remove from pan and return to freezer. To prepare for dinner, peel foil from pizza, and place on greased baking sheet. Bake frozen at 450 F for 15 to 25 minutes, or until crusts are browned and cheese melts.

*Nutritional Analysis: 332 calories, 25 g protein, 35 carbohydrates, 10 g fat, 42 mg cholesterol, 1,381 mg sodium*

### For more great recipes

McGregor, C. (2002). *Cook Ahead Cookbook*. Lubbock: Bristol Publishing Enterprises.

Susie Martinez, V. H. (2005). *Don't Panic, Dinner's in the Freezer*. Grand Rapids: Revell Publishing.

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