

Food

FREEZER PLEASERS

■ Make-ahead frozen meals are timesavers

By Laura Gutschke

Special to the Reporter-News

Frozen meals have come a long way since the TV dinners in a portioned aluminum tray.

They were a hit with women who wanted out of the 1950s kitchen, “but the men called the company and complained because they wanted meals like their mamas cooked. They didn’t want heat and serve,” said Lorrie Coop, county extension agent/food and consumer sciences in Knox County.

She made the observation during her “Freezer Pleasers” program recently at the 2016 Town and Country Women’s Fair, hosted in conjunction with the Texas Farm Ranch Wildlife Expo at the Taylor County Expo Center.

Coop’s presentation showed that home-made freezer meals can be just as convenient as pre-packed ones — plus healthier, tastier and cheaper.

“They pretty much put things together that you can do at home just as easily and at less cost,” Coop said before the presentation.

Preparing home-cooked meals also means controlling the sugar, salt and other ingredients. That is a plus when watching calories and sodium intake.

“I know what’s in here (freezer bag). I know the ingredients. I know what’s going into my body. And, I know my family is going to like it,” said Coop during her presentation.

Freezer cooking does not necessarily mean preparing two weeks’ worth of casseroles during a one-day marathon cooking session, Coop said.

“It can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it,” she said.

And, there can be a lot of variety.

“Not everything has to be a casserole. It



PHOTOS BY LAURA GUTSCHKE/SPECIAL TO THE REPORTER-NEWS

Lorrie Coop, county extension agent for food and consumer sciences in Knox County, prepares a freezer meal during her “Freezer Pleasures” program at the 2016 Town and Country Women’s Fair, part of the Texas Farm Ranch Wildlife Expo on Feb. 23 at the Taylor County Expo Center.

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FREEZER

from **1B**

doesn't all need to look the same when it comes out," Coop said.

When hamburger meat is on sale, buy several pounds and brown it all at once. Then divide the cooked meat into 1-pound portions ready to be served as spaghetti sauce, tacos or other dishes that called for crumbled, cooked hamburger meat.

Or, make two meatloaves and cook one that day and freeze the other uncooked one for later use.

"Then you've dirtied dishes only once for two meals," Coop said.

Cooks who use a lot of onions also could chop up a 3-pound bag at one time and

freeze them for later use.

Raw chicken or other meats can be bagged with a favorite marinade and frozen.

And, preparing freezer meals can help with portion control. Coop gave the example of preparing lasagna rolls and freezing them individually in separate bags instead of a large tray of lasagna. For dinner, she then cooks two rolls in the oven for about 45 minutes for her and her husband. That keeps her from the temptation of eating more than one serving at meal time.

Freezing individual portions also is a good strategy for single people, Coop said.

"What could be better than a home-cooked meal that you didn't have to prepare all day in the kitchen, or all evening in the kitchen?" Coop said.



Slow Cooker Chipotle Burritos were served during the 2016 Town and Country Women's Fair during the Texas Farm Ranch Wildlife Expo.

ROSEMARY DIJON CHICKEN AND POTATOES

INGREDIENTS

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| ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil | ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper |
| 3 tablespoons Dijon mustard | 3 small russet potatoes, peeled and cubed |
| 1 tablespoon fresh rosemary, chopped | 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts |
| ½ teaspoon salt | |

DIRECTIONS

- In a large bowl, whisk together olive oil, mustard, rosemary, salt and pepper to combine. Add potatoes and chicken and toss until evenly coated.
- Pour chicken mixture into a gallon Ziploc Freezer bag and seal, pressing out air. Store in the freezer.
- To cook, thaw and place contents of the bag into a slow cooker. Cook on high for 4 hours or low for 8 hours.

Recipe courtesy Ziploc.com.



Lorrie Coop, county extension agent/food and consumer sciences in Knox County

SLOW COOKER CHIPOTLE BURRITOS

INGREDIENTS

- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts (or 2 pounds boneless beef round steak, cut into 5 or 6 pieces)
- 1 16-ounce jar salsa
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 chipotle pepper in adobo sauce, chopped*
- 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 can whole kernel corn
- flour or corn tortillas
- optional toppings: pico de gallo, shredded lettuce, sour cream, shredded cheese, black olives, avocado, etc.

FREEZER DIRECTIONS

- Place chicken in a gallon freezer bag.
- Combine the salsa, chili powder, oregano and chipotle pepper. Blend for a few seconds until well mixed and pour over meat.
- Add beans and corn.
- Press out air, seal and place flat in freezer.
- When ready to use, place bag in refrigerator to thaw. After ingredients have thawed, place in slow cooker. Cover and cook on low for 6 to 8 hours. Shred meat with two forks. Serve on tortillas with toppings of your choice.

***Cook's note:** You can find chipotle peppers in a can in the Mexican section of the grocery store. Since this recipe uses only 1 chipotle pepper, freeze the remaining peppers from the can in ice cube trays (1 pepper per cube). Once frozen, store them in a zip-close bag in the freezer and use as needed in recipes.

Recipe courtesy Lorrie Coop, county extension agent/food and consumer sciences in Knox County.

WHAT TO KNOW WHEN MAKING FREEZER MEALS

FREEZABLE FOODS

"You can freeze almost anything, but that doesn't mean you should," Coop said.

Cream sauces should not be frozen because they separate. Other foods that do not freeze well are potato salad, macaroni salad and fried foods, according to the Oregon State University Extension Service.

And, while raw eggs in the shell should not be frozen, they can out of the shell. The raw eggs can be beaten slightly or separated into whites and yolks and stored up to a year in tightly sealed freezer containers, according to the American Egg Board.

Because egg yolks thicken when frozen, the board recommends adding ¼ teaspoon salt or ½ teaspoons sugar per ¼ cup egg yolks (about four large eggs). Yolks with salt can be used in savory dishes, while the sugared yolks work well in desserts.

FREEZING TIME

For the sake of quality, Coop recommends using a freezer meal within three or four months.

RAW VERSUS COOKED MEAT

Both raw and cooked meat can be frozen. However, because meat loses moisture during cooking, its quality will diminish quickly when frozen compared to raw meat, Coop said.

EQUIPMENT

"You don't have to have a lot of expensive equipment to freeze foods," Coop said.

She recommends quality freezer bags, a permanent marker and stickers for labeling the bag and listing reheating instructions, quality plastic wrap and foil for casseroles, an ice cube tray to freeze small items and glass or foil pans.

"If I'm cooking meatloaf, I go with foil pans so that I don't have to worry about messy cleanup," Coop said.

Expressing air from freezer bags is effective enough usually to keep a freezer meal safe from the ice crystals that form when air is trapped inside the bag. A freezer bag stand also is handy for keeping a bag upright while filling it with food.

Avid freezer meal cooks may want to invest in a good food chopper to make quick work of onions and other diced vegetables and a vacuum sealer if buying large quantities of meat to repackage into smaller portions, Coop said.

HOW TO FREEZE

Lay the filled, sealed freezer bags flat on a baking sheet in the freezer with air around them to speed up freezing time. When the bags are frozen solid, stack them upright like books.

"A 2-inch bag of food should freeze solid in two hours," Coop said.

Stacked bags will take longer to freeze, allowing ice crystals to form.

Casseroles can be frozen in a glass dish and then popped out and rewrapped in quality plastic wrap and foil for storage in the freezer. It then can be returned to the original glass dish for thawing and cooking.

THAWING

Frozen meals can be thawed in the microwave, the refrigerator starting the night before or cold water that is changed every 20 minutes, Coop said.

Frozen meat and other meals should not be thawed on the countertop, she said.

"Freezing does not kill bacteria. It stops it. The bacteria will continue to grow when thawed," Coop said.