



Waste Not, Want Not – Savings in the Kitchen

There's little doubt that we live in a throw-away age. Having said that, there is still no reason for so much waste in the kitchen. With a little forward planning, the food we buy can last longer. Add to this a cost-conscious shopping strategy and the savings will be considerable.

Buying food in bulk, particularly when "specials" are on offer, is a good way to save money in the long term. It pays to find out those days when the stores mark down their goods, so that you can take advantage. Always ensure, however, that you can use what you've bought before it goes off. There's little sense buying four heads of broccoli because they are half price, only to end up having to throw three away. In many respects, the freezer is your best friend here. As soon as you get home, split up the bulk-buys into convenient portions, then prep, bag and freeze. There are plenty of cheap books and magazines around covering methods of preparation with advice on how long different frozen foodstuffs will keep. Vegetables usually have to be blanched (scalded in boiling water), but there are those with a high water content which simply have to be washed, cut and bagged. Onions are one of these – before storing, put the bags in an air-tight container, otherwise the smell will invade the freezer. Capsicums and chillies just need washing, seeding, then quartering before freezing. You won't be able to use them in salads, but they are ideal for cooked dishes. Tomatoes can be simmered until the skins split. Remove these, along with the top where the stalk was attached. The remaining fruit can then be packed whole, diced, or crushed.

As with anything you put in the freezer, make sure you remove as much air as possible from the bag before sealing. If using an air-tight container, line it with a bag first, extract the air and tie before closing the lid. Label bags and containers stating contents and date of freezing. Writing with a felt pen directly onto bags doesn't work too well because it tends to rub off after a short while, and indelible marker is often hard to remove from plastic without damage. Stick on strips of masking tape, then write on this. It is easier to see and as long as the tape is removed from containers as soon as they are taken from the freezer, there will be no glue residue.

Obviously, use-by dates need checking, but also be careful of buying items, especially meat, that may already have been frozen, then thawed for sale. These items should be cooked as soon as possible for serving immediately, or re-freezing after cooking. Blocks of vacuum-packed cheese often have a long fridge life, and this can be extended by freezing. Once thawed, however, it can be crumbly and difficult to slice. If you find the cheese straight from the store is like this, chances are it too has been frozen.

When you're on a tight budget, larger joints of meat can seem too expensive, but they can be surprisingly versatile and are often cheaper in the long run. A local independent butcher will very possibly give you a far better deal on this than the supermarket. Price per kilo can be considerably less than the pre-packed cuts such as steaks and stir-fry strips. It can be divided up into small joints, steaks, medallions or whatever you fancy in sizes that suit you and your family. The odds and ends can be diced, or minced if you have a meat grinder. And all of it can be bagged, tagged and frozen. If preferred, joints can be roasted prior to slicing and packing into meal-size portions for freezing. Whenever possible, always defrost meats slowly in the fridge and use as soon as thawed.

Try cooking up larger quantities of meat in one go. A kilo or more of cooked mince can provide the basis for a number of meals. From about 350g of beef mince, I can make 4 individual serves of shepherd's pie with enough left-over mince for a spaghetti Bolognese, or a Nacho sauce - that's 3 separate meals for the two of us!

Chicken can also be expensive if you want breast fillets; but when only using small pieces of meat in a curry or stir-fry, bulk-buying thighs and drumsticks can save heaps. Just beware of the packs of "chicken pieces" which are bound to contain wings - not much meat on them. As these cuts tend to be fatty and sometimes tough, they are best cooked separately first. Simply place the lot in a suitable pan, cover with water and simmer on the stove until cooked through. The liquid can then be poured off along with the fat then, ideally, flushed once more with boiling water. Once the meat has cooled, skin and bones can be removed easily. Whatever you don't need for the stew or curry can now be frozen.

Preparation and cooking of meals takes time and all too often we have to fall back on take-away, or oven-ready, quick-cook dishes. These don't come cheap, and they aren't always the healthy option. But home-cooked meats and even meals can be frozen for use at a later date. You can make yourself a stock of pre-cooked meals with very little extra effort, and save on your power bills into the bargain! Although there are only two of us at home, I generally cook double the amount of the main ingredient (pie, meat-loaf, schnitzel, etc.) and freeze half. So, next time you are making a meal, especially one everyone enjoys, prepare and cook a double batch. Then, simply package and freeze half for thawing and re-heating later. This method works for pies, slices, curries, roasted and cooked meats. It is especially good with most sauces, including Bolognese-types. Although cheese-flavoured sauces may be a little grainy when de-frosted, slow heating with milk or cream added will compensate.

After gatherings such as dinner parties and barbecues when not all of the food is eaten, take the time to pack left-overs in suitable bags and plastic containers, label, date, then consign to the freezer. Larger quantities can be split into meal-size lots. These are handy for those occasions when lengthy preparation and cooking is likely to be inconvenient. Allowing sufficient time for de-frosting, just take out a few sausages, hamburgers, fried onions, whatever, then re-heat them and serve with salad, or some left-over vegetables and gravy – even that can be frozen. Ensure the re-heating is done properly – luke-warm is no good and might result in food poisoning.

Cooked vegetables can be frozen, but unless they are prepared specifically with that in mind – see the suggestions above about freezing vegetables - they tend to be mushy when re-heated, so I prefer to use fresh where possible. Some frozen vegetables such as potato, swede, parsnip and pumpkin don't always re-heat well, so avoid freezing stews, etc which contain them. You can, however, cook up any vegies, then add pre-cooked meat, flavouring, sufficient water and thickening for a really tasty stew that can be on the table, from start to finish, in half an hour. And if the meat was simmered for a while when first cooked, after the second heating it will be tender rather than chewy - diced meat for stews and curries, etc. can be pan-cooked on low in stock for about thirty minutes, then drained and bagged in meal-size portions. You can even freeze the simmer stock for later use as a base for sauce.

Rice is a good, cheap accompaniment to many dishes, and it doesn't take all night to prepare. One cup of rice with two cups of water in a deep microwave container with a lid needs about 2 spins on medium at 6 minutes a time, stirring at the half-way stage. Once cooked, flush it with clean water – boiling water just before serving, or cold water when it is going to be stir-fried. This gets rid of the starch and help the grains to separate. I bag and freeze half for later use.

There are plenty of jokes about green furry things growing in the fridge. In truth, it isn't really funny. Consider how it starts: not green at all, not even visible to the naked eye; yet it's ALIVE and waiting to make you sick! Freeze your left-overs as soon as they are cool, or use them no later than the following day. If neither is practical, bag and bin them.

With respect to health in general, good hygiene is essential. No doubt you ensure that you wash your hands before handling food, and the utensils, pans and surfaces used will have been properly cleaned; but how much thought is ever put into the state of the fridge or freezer? Please ensure that yours are cleaned regularly. Wiping the inside of the cabinet, shelves and drawers with a solution of water and sodium bicarbonate will clean, de-odorize and disinfect. Leave this for about 30 minutes, then simply wipe with clean water and dry.

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