



Waste Not, Want Not – Savings in the Kitchen Part 2

The first part of **Waste Not, Want Not** concentrated mainly on the benefits of the freezer. I realise, however, that not everyone has one, and the small compartment at the top (or bottom) of the fridge doesn't have the capacity to hold large quantities of frozen food. Even so, there are other ways to preserve fresh food for longer. Admittedly, having to prepare and cook food from scratch isn't as convenient as re-heating a pre-cooked TV dinner in the microwave, but it generally tastes better and at least you know what went into it. More importantly, you can control the percentage of each nutritional element put into a meal, so the amount of carbs, fats, protein, salt, etc. in the daily intake can be adjusted to suit individual requirements. With some extra thought and time, the health benefits are obvious.

Even when you have a deep-freezer, there is still a need to keep certain items either in the main section of the fridge, or in a cupboard or pantry. The best chance you have of storing these in good condition for longer periods is to buy fresh. That may sound easy, but when the word itself is misused, "fresh" doesn't necessarily mean what we think it does. Unless they are in season and straight from the farm, the fruit and vegetables on display could be out of cold store, and the price you'll pay will include processing and storage costs. In some cases, especially with fruit, the crop would have been picked slightly green for storage, then gassed - yes gassed! - to ripen it prior to sale. This is why the skins on your bananas look anaemic and, even after they have turned black, the fruit inside still tastes like plastic. Those powdery apples and pink, tasteless tomatoes probably came out of cold store too. If you try keeping them for any length of time, I guarantee they won't improve with age.

The answer is to buy fruit and vegies when they are in season and at their best. These are the times when the crops of smaller growers are entering the market, pushing prices down. Test the item for freshness before you buy. Lightly press the top of onions - if soft, they are likely to start sprouting before long. Forget potatoes with cuts and bruises; and be careful when buying unwashed ones - they may be cheaper, but the dirt hides the true quality. When buying broccoli, you want a tight head with good, deep colour and no yellowing. Brush the flowers lightly with a finger, in particular around the edge of the bunch - if they fall off easily, this one is on its way out and not for you. Carrots need to be firm, not soft and bendy, and have a good colour. With fruit, check for dents and soft spots, which will show up later as bruising. One last thing - just watch out towards the end of a season when some fruits and vegetables are approaching the end of their use-by date. Don't get trapped into over-buying, or you'll end up throwing food, and money, into the trash!

Once you've managed to buy your fresh fruit and vegies, you want to keep them that way for as long as possible. Store potatoes, sweet potato, onions and whole pumpkin in a cardboard box, then keep this in a dark, cool and dry place. Similar for cucumbers and melons - they need to be kept in a cool, dry place with plenty of air. Avoid storing them in an enclosed environment where they can gather moisture and go off very quickly. Consign to the fridge once they have been cut. Citrus such as lemons and oranges last fine in an uncovered bowl.

The vegie drawer is handy for storing the larger, awkward items. Place a layer or two of kitchen towel in the bottom to absorb moisture. Replace this occasionally and wipe any condensation from the inside of the drawer and the shelf above. If the drawer has a gizmo for ventilation, open it to allow the contents to breathe. Spinach and silver beet seem to keep quite well if placed loosely in the drawer, but cabbage and lettuce last longer in cling wrap, or a plastic bag with the air excluded. Instead of cutting across the head, or heart, peel as many leaves as needed from the outside, then re-wrap the remainder. Both of these will keep up to a month this way.

Often, fresh produce can be bought in bulk packs, usually plastic bags. Even though some of these are perforated to allow air in, ditch the bags - they'll only cause sweating. The environment in the fridge will increase this risk. With a few exceptions, don't store fresh produce in plastic bags because it will rot very quickly. Loose fruit and vegies such as carrots and tomatoes will stay fresher and be less of a nuisance if stored in plastic containers with lids. Line the bottom of the containers with paper kitchen towel and place the items on this, then close the lid. Wipe condensation off the lid and insides at least a couple of times a week, or whenever they are opened for use. Replace the paper weekly. If they are dry to start with, carrots seem okay stacked on top of each other, and celery sticks can go in the same box; but tomatoes, capsicums and chillies prefer their own space whenever possible. If you have to double-layer these, wipe any accumulated moisture off the fruit when you do the lids. Cauliflower and broccoli last really well using the storage-container method. Unless you have a high shelf clearance and a big box, you may have to cut the florets to make them fit, but they'll still keep well. Mushrooms generally last a week when placed stalk-down on the paper, although it is better to use them sooner rather than later. Don't forget to wash all fruit and vegetables, before use.

When cut, pumpkin, sweet potato and cucumbers keep well in the fridge drawer. Just position them cut-face up and let them dry and seal naturally. When needed for use, simply slice off the dry end, then cut and prepare as usual. Half a tomato is best kept in its own mini-container. When only part of a capsicum is needed, cut off as much as required from the bottom, then place the remainder, including the seed and stalk (these can be removed later), back into the container, cut-face down on the paper. See our Handy Hints tips on keeping other prepared vegetables such as part onions, peeled potatoes and carrots.

Dried herbs and spices are convenient and long-lasting, but some are not a patch on the fresh ones. Parsley, basil and chives, especially, lose flavour and colour when dried. Whether you buy these in season, or grow your own, take time to prepare some for later use. Chop the leaves of the fresh herbs, pack small amounts into ice-cube trays, cover with water and pop into your freezer compartment. Once frozen, put the cubes into a labelled container - avoid using ordinary freezer bags as these tear easily and you'll end up with chopped herbs all over the place! Frozen herbs are only good for cooking, but they'll make a big difference to the taste and look of your dishes. For sauces such as Bolognese, or flavouring in a white or cheese sauce, just pop one or two of the cubes into the pan with the rest of the mixture. Stir in as it thaws.

Quick meals are a godsend for the busy family cook, and with all of these fresh ingredients to hand they don't have to be restricted to beans on toast. The microwave (or "nuke") is ideal for this and used wisely it will cost less to run than a conventional oven. Take care to select a lower setting when re-heating pre-cooked meats to avoid drying out. Place them in a covered container with a little water to retain the moisture. The humble potato can be cooked in its jacket (washed thoroughly, of course). Pierce several times with a fork and wrap in kitchen towel, then cook on high for about 6 minutes, depending on size. A peeled potato cut in small cubes and just covered with water takes about 6 minutes to cook. These can be drained, then served as they are, or mashed with a little butter or vegetable margarine (polyunsaturated spreads containing water tend to make the mash too sloppy). Add some milk for creamy mash, and seasoning to taste.

Frozen vegetables can be cooked on high with a little water – an average serve will take 3-4 minutes. Fresh vegies will probably take a little longer, unless you like them crunchy. Bear in mind that some cook quicker than others. If putting cauliflower and broccoli together in the same container, cook the cauli first for 3-4 minutes (depending on quantity), then add the broccoli and nuke the lot a further 3 minutes, or until the right level of tenderness is reached.

Whenever you feel up to it, experiment with concoctions. Whether you use the microwave, hob, or oven, adapting existing recipes, or inventing some of your own, helps add a little mystery and adventure to what some regard as a tedious chore. And if it turns out really well, write down the ingredients and method so that you can repeat it later. Bon appetite.

Next issue: The Diet For Anyone Not on a Diet

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