

Make ahead freezer meals

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"I feel virtuous!" said my friend who had just told me about spending part of her Sunday making some meatballs to put in the freezer. It is a good feeling to get ahead of the feeding of the family sometimes. Do-ahead meals take some of the pressure off. It's kind of like money in the bank. You may not even know what you'll need it for but it's comforting to know it's there if something comes up.

I've worked outside the home for so many years that I'm more used to cooking big items on weekends and evenings than during the day. Even though I work half-time instead of full-time now, it's a hard habit to break. It just seems right to do a big pot of stew or soup on a Saturday or Sunday.

Do-ahead meals are especially helpful when I know I'm going to be in a hurry. In fact, as soon as my kids were old enough to come home by themselves after school, they learned to follow the directions to finish up the meal. There are many casseroles that are fine fixed the night before, refrigerated and then baked for supper. There are even several that need to set overnight to have flavors blend or the moisture absorbed. Strata, a souffle-like casserole that can have a wide variety of meats and vegetables, is best if it stands overnight in the refrigerator so the egg and milk mixture penetrates the bread.

The other time I just love having meals that are done ahead is when I have an extremely busy or tiring day. It is so nice to come home, put something in the oven, sit down, prop my feet up and read the paper. It's like having "maid service" or a resident cook. Even a half hour of resting can rejuvenate me. It is sometimes disconcerting for the other family members, though. They may worry that you've given up cooking and that they're going to starve or have to cook for themselves. Not such a bad idea—makes them appreciate you more.

It's also nice to have some of the mess out of the way when you're having a party or luncheon. It gives you a feeling of control and time to spend with your guests.

If do-ahead meals are so great, how can you get ahead without working yourself to death? You can do what my friend did with her meatballs. She just made a big batch, served some for dinner and put the rest in the freezer. You can do this with or without sauce. Then you can vary how you use them.

Every time you make a casserole for a meal, you can split it into two containers. Most casseroles make a large amount anyway. Then freeze one and bake one. Some people line their casserole dish with foil, so they don't have to do without that container all the time the casserole is frozen.

This principle applies to other things besides casseroles, too. That bran muffin mix was popular because you could mix up a batch and easily have some fresh baked muffins any time you wanted them. I do marinated vegetables the same way. A big batch of mushrooms, carrots or mixed vegetables will be readily available for two or three weeks if they aren't eaten before then.

Fresh vegetables can be fixed when you have time available and then stored for a day or two. Carrot or celery sticks, spinach or leaf lettuce can all be prepared ahead. I even like to wash spinach and sort it into the tender young leaves which I use for salads and the larger leaves which I cook for a vegetable.

Here are two recipes that are delightful to do ahead. One is a casserole, similar to a strata with a Mexican flavor. The other is a very light yeast biscuit that makes a large batch. The dough can be frozen and baked when you want to add a special touch to a meal.

VIVA LA CHICKEN

- 1 to 2 cups cut up, cooked chicken or turkey. A 6½ ounce can of chicken can be used.
- 4 cups medium white sauce with some chicken broth and/or mushrooms to flavor it. OR 1 can, 10 ounces each, cream of chicken and cream of mushroom soup.
- 1 can chopped green chilies, 4 ounces
- 18 corn tortillas
- ½ cup cheese, grated

Combine meat, white sauce or soup and green chilies. Tear tortillas into bite size chunks and add to mixture. Mix lightly. Let sit covered in the refrigerator overnight. Bake covered at 350° for 1 hour. Add cheese for last 10 minutes. Serve with taco sauce or salsa.

FRAN'S ANGEL BISCUITS

- 5 cups flour
- ¼ cup sugar
- 3 teaspoons baking powder

- 1 teaspoon soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup shortening
- 2 packages dry yeast
- ¼ cup warm water
- 2 cups buttermilk
- melted butter or margarine

Sift dry ingredients. Cut in shortening. Dissolve yeast in warm water and add with buttermilk to dry ingredients. Roll out ¼ inch thick, cut with round biscuit cutter. Dip in melted butter or margarine, fold in half. Bake on cookie sheet at 400°

for about 15 minutes or until golden. Bake only what you can use for the meal. Form the rest very close together on a cookie sheet, freeze and then put in a freezer quality bag. When you want them, remove from the bag, put on a cookie sheet, let thaw, rise and then bake. Thawing and rising may be hurried by putting the cookie sheet into an oven that has been warmed to 200° and then turned off. It takes about 15 minutes. Then remove, preheat the oven and bake.



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