

Stash Figgy Pudding in the Freezer: Freeze the Feast Now, Serve it to Guests Later

Tallahassee Democrat

Rebecca Moore, Extension Agent, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service—Family & Consumer Sciences

Did you find yourself spending way too much time in the kitchen over the holidays? Last year my hands were so raw from hand washing, dish washing and preparing food I walked around with a tube of lotion for relief! I remember my mother saying how she never got to watch the Thanksgiving parades on TV because she was always in the kitchen. I understand that now . . . do they still have those parades?

Unless you eat out or get invited to a holiday dinner elsewhere, you may not be able to completely avoid the kitchen during the holidays. But, you might be able to lessen your time in the kitchen and enjoy your company and family more if you prepare a dish or two ahead. Your freezer could be the answer.

All foods don't freeze well, but many of your holiday favorites will freeze well. The secret to successfully freezing foods, is learning which foods do best, which to avoid, proper preparation and packaging, and recommended time in the freezer and temperature.

By planning a steady flow of casseroles, main dishes, baked goods and desserts in and out of your freezer, you can make good use of your freezer and good use of your time. There are a lot of advantages of freezing prepared foods. First, you prepare food at your convenience, instead of during the holiday meal rush. Your oven is used more efficiently by baking more than one dish at a time. Also, you avoid waste by freezing leftovers and using them as "planned overs". This is a great way to handle special diet foods and baby foods that can be prepared in quantity and frozen in single portions.

If you are not sure about how a prepared food freezes, try freezing just a small portion the first time and checking to see if the quality is acceptable. When preparing food to freeze, be sure to cool cooked foods quickly for safety and freshness. Keeping foods at room temperature for several hours before freezing increases chances of spoilage and foodborne illness. Also flavor, color, texture, and nutrient content are likely to deteriorate.

To speed cooling, put pans of hot prepared food-main dishes, sauces, etc., in a pan or sink of ice water. This is especially important when preparing large amounts of food. Change ice water frequently or run cold water around the pan. When cool, package and freeze immediately. Do not place glass or ceramic containers in ice water- they may break.

Package foods in the appropriate freezer materials in the amounts you will use at one time. Flexible freezer bags and moisture-vapor resistant wrapping materials such as plastic freezer wrap, freezer paper and heavy-weight aluminum foil are suitable for dry packed products with little or no liquid. Bags and wraps work well for foods with irregular shapes. Bags can also be used for liquid packs. Vacuum packaging works best for dry packs. Vacuum packaging removes more air from the packages that can't be pressed out and seals the air out. Be sure to fully label each item.

A lot of your holiday favorites do well in the freezer. Pies, cookies, breads, coffee cakes, dressing and casseroles can be frozen baked or unbaked. Shortened cakes, Angel food cakes and cup cakes freeze best without icing. If icing is used, those made with confectioners' sugar and fudge freeze best (do not use egg white in frosting that will be frozen). These are just a few examples of prepared foods that freeze well.

Give us a call at (229) 225-4130, if you would like a free, 12-page publication, on freezing prepared foods. This publication gives a list of foods that freeze well, how to prepare and package specific foods for freezing, serving recommendations and suggested storage time in the freezer.

I've already started trying to talk my family into a new Christmas dinner tradition. Instead of the usual big turkey and fixings, I'm thinking about grilled steaks, a baked potato and salad. It just sounds like a whole lot less food preparation and cooking time!