Make-Ahead Freezer Meals

Presented by
Alice Henneman
MS, RDN, Extension Educator

Nebraska Extension inn Lancaster County
444 Cherrycreek Road, Suite A, Lincoln, NE 68528
402-441-7180
http://food.unl.edu • ahenneman1@unl.edu

Mexican Skillet Rice with Ground Beef or Turkey

Chicken Pot Pie

Southwestern Pork & Bean Soup

Spinach Lasagna

Photos by Alice Henneman except Mexican Skillet Rice by USA Rice Federation
All the recipes in this booklet are ones both my husband and I enjoyed and I will fix again. I hope you do, too!

Here are the guidelines I followed in selecting the recipes: (1) Taste, taste, taste! (2) Lower in sodium or tell you how to lower the sodium (3) Economical (4) Commonly used and available ingredients (5) Lower in sugar, fat and calories (6) No fancy cooking equipment needed.

**Why prepare make-ahead freezer meals?**
- You can determine the types and amounts of ingredients in the foods you eat.
- Make-ahead freezer meals let you prepare healthy meals when you have time to cook.
- A home-cooked meal can be tastier and less expensive than a purchased one.

**General tips for making freezer meals:**
1. Use home-prepared freezer meals within 3 months for best quality; however, foods stay safe indefinitely when stored at 0° F.
2. Use smaller, shallow dishes to reduce baking time.
3. In most cases, you’ll have the best experience if you thaw casserole-type foods in the refrigerator overnight. Then use the cooking directions that come with the recipe; you may need to add 15-30 minutes to the cooking time.
4. Use a food thermometer to assure foods reach an internal temperature of 165° F when heating them for serving.
5. Freeze pastry, such as pie crusts, unbaked.
6. To freeze baking pans, line the pan with heavy-duty aluminum foil with enough overlap so you can cover and seal the food after it is cooled. Remove the foil from the pan after the food is frozen and place the foil package in the freezer. When you’re ready to bake the food, peel the foil away and bake in the original container.
7. When freezing in glass or ceramic containers, check to make sure they’re freezer-safe. Also, check if you should allow the food to thaw overnight in the refrigerator before placing the container in the oven.
8. Check that all packaging/containers for freezer meals are intended for the freezer. Plastic margarine tubs, whipped cream tubs, plastic “storage” bags etc. aren’t intended for freezer storage.
9. Label items with the date and a description of the food.
10. Add casserole toppings, such as breadcrumbs just before baking or they’ll become soggy.
11. Cool foods thoroughly before you freeze them. You might transfer a hot food to a shallow pan, let it cool on a rack for 20-30 minutes and then transfer it to the refrigerator to cool further. Generally, the faster foods freeze, the better the quality. When food freezes, the water in its cells expands and cells break down. With faster freezing, tinier ice crystals form and there is less breakdown of cells. Freeze foods in a single layer in the freezer; stack after they are frozen.
12. The meat in frozen foods will taste better if the recipe contains some type of gravy, sauce or broth that coats the meat.
13. Leave about ½ inch of headspace in freezer containers to allow for expansion during freezing. Cover surface with moisture-resistant freezer paper or plastic wrap cut or shaped to fit to help prevent freezer burn and preserve flavor. Fill extra space at top with crumpled freezer paper or plastic wrap. Remember to remove the plastic wrap before baking.

**Table of Contents:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chill out over the Holidays by Freezing Foods Ahead <em>(Includes Lentil Soup)</em> – Pg. 1</th>
<th>Red Lentil Soup with Butternut Squash, Coconut Milk and Curry – Pg. 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beef Stew with Vegetable Gravy – Pg. 3</td>
<td>Wild Rice and Pork Soup – Pg. 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef Chili – Pg. 4</td>
<td>Spinach Lasagna – Pg. 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Rice Skillet – Pg. 5</td>
<td>Shepherds Pie – Pg. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Frozen Chicken Pot Pies – Pg. 6</td>
<td>Empanadas – Pg. 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwestern Pork &amp; Bean Soup – Pg. 8</td>
<td>Foods that Don’t Freeze Well – Pg. 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions or comments? Email me at ahenneman1@unl.edu or call 402-441-7180. Alice Henneman
Do you feel like you’re in a holl-
DAZE during the holidays? A
simple quick-cooking technique is to
make extra food at one meal for future
meals. Or, to prepare food ahead and
freeze for a later time. This can free up
valuable time for you when cooking for
family and friends over the holidays.

One easy method of freezing
foods — including liquid foods such as
soups and stews — is to freeze them in
freezer bags. Following are some general
freezing tips, followed by specific tips for
freezing in freezer bags.

• If you’re making extra food at one
meal for future meals, separate and
refrigerate the portion to be served
later BEFORE you put the food on the
table. This keeps food quality higher
by preventing “planned-overs” from
becoming “picked-overs.” It also helps
keep food safe.

• Keep an appliance thermometer in
your refrigerator and in your freezer
to assure they stay at 40°F or lower
(refrigerator) and 0°F or lower
(freezer).

• Refrigerate perishable foods so the
TOTAL time they’re at room tempera-
ture is less than two hours (or one
hour in temperatures above 90°F). At
room temperature, just ONE bacte-
rion in perishable foods could grow
to 2,097,152 bacteria in seven hours!
As a general guideline, eat perishable
foods within four days or freeze them.

Perishable foods include:
• meat, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu
• dairy products
• pasta, rice, cooked vegetables
• fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and
  vegetables
• Freeze foods in portion sizes you’ll
  need for future meals. For example, if
  there are two in your family and you
  each eat a cup of rice for a meal, freeze
  in two-cup portions.

• Limit depth of food to 2 inches.

Step 1. Cool Foods
“slightly” at room
temperature before
refrigeration

It is not necessary for a food to be
completely cool before it is refrigerated.
To help food cool slightly before
refrigeration:
• Place a shallow container of food on
  a cooling rack to allow air to circulate
  all round the pan for about 20 to 30
  minutes.

Step 2. Complete cooling
of foods in the refrigerator

Cool foods to refrigerator tempera-
ture before bagging them for your
freezer. It is OK to refrigerate foods while
they’re still warm.
LOOSELY cover food upon
refrigeration. This allows heat to escape
and protects the food from accidental
contamination from other foods during
cooling.

Step 3. Pack foods into
freezer bags

Use “freezer” bags, not “storage”
bags for storing food in the freezer.
Freezer bags are thicker than storage
bags and will keep the food fresh longer.

Speed freezing and hasten thawing
by freezing foods in a thin, flattened
shape in freezer bags. A rounded shape
takes longer to thaw through to the
middle. Flatter packages also will stack
better in your freezer.

continued on next page
long, bacteria may grow and produce heat-resistant toxins that can cause food-borne illness. Cooking may not be able to destroy these toxins.

It's best to plan ahead for slow, safe thawing in the refrigerator. Small items may thaw overnight in the refrigerator. Up to 5 pounds of food should thaw in about 24 hours.

If there is the possibility a thawing package might leak, you may want to thaw it on a plate or a pan.

If food is thawed in the microwave, finish reheating it right away. Unlike food thawed in a refrigerator, microwave-thawed foods reach temperatures that encourage bacterial growth. Cook immediately to kill any bacteria that may have developed and to prevent further bacterial growth.

• Food may be transferred from a freezer bag to a microwave safe container for thawing in the microwave.
• If the freezer bag manufacturer says it is OK to thaw foods directly in their freezer bag, follow manufacturer’s directions for such things as venting, recommended heat settings, types of foods suitable for microwave-thawing, etc. for the specific bag. Also, follow manufacturer’s directions for your microwave.
• While you may be able to satisfactorily defrost food in some freezer bags in the microwave (check manufacturer’s directions), DO NOT cook the food in the freezer bag — unless recommended by the freezer bag manufacturer. At the higher temperatures used in the microwave cooking process, it is possible for the plastic to reach melting temperatures.

Step 4. Label foods

To avoid mystery meats and other foods of unknown age and possibly origin, label foods using freezer tape, gummed freezer labels or permanent marking pens/crayons. Include:
• name of food;
• packaging date;
• number of servings or amount;
• additional helpful information, such as form of food (sliced, chopped, etc.), any special ingredients.

Step 5. Put in freezer

It is helpful to place filled freezer bags on a flat surface in your freezer, such as a metal pan. Do not stack freezer bags until frozen so they will freeze faster. After they are frozen solid, the bags may be removed from the pan and stored, stacked, directly on the freezer shelf. Or turn them on their edge and store them vertically. This is an especially good idea when freezing liquid foods, such as soups and stews.

Step 6. Thaw and cook frozen foods

DO NOT thaw perishable foods at room temperature. If perishable foods are left at room temperature too

SLOW COOKER LENTIL SOUP

(6 servings)

6 cups water
1/4 cup parsley (chopped fresh, or 2 tablespoons dried parsley), optional
2 teaspoons beef bouillon (or 2 cubes beef bouillon)
1-1/2 cups lentils (dry)
2 carrots (medium, sliced)
1 onion (medium, chopped)
2 celery stalks (sliced)

Mix all ingredients together in slow cooker. Cook on LOW for 8–10 hours or HIGH for 4–5 hours. Serve hot with crackers or bread.


ALICE’S TIPS:
• I omitted adding the parsley to the soup while it was cooking. Rather, I added fresh parsley as garnish when serving the soup.
• For added flavor, I added 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme and 2 finely chopped garlic cloves along with the other ingredients.
• I used a 4-quart slow cooker to cook the soup.
• To lower the sodium level of this soup, use low or reduced sodium beef bouillon cubes or powder. Or, substitute 2 cups of low sodium broth for 2 of the cups of water.
• Unlike dry beans, dry lentils do not need to be soaked before they are cooked.
BEEF STEW WITH VEGETABLE GRAVY
(Serves 4 – 6)

This stew looks like it has a rich gravy, but it’s really nutrient-rich puréed vegetables!

- 1 Tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 pound lean beef stew meat, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 3 cups low fat, low-sodium beef broth
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper, preferably freshly ground
- 1/4 teaspoon salt, if desired
- 1 pound sweet potatoes
- 1 pound carrots

1. Heat oil in large saucepan or Dutch oven over medium heat until simmering. Add meat and sauté until browned on all sides.

2. Add beef broth, onion, garlic, thyme, pepper and, if desired, salt. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for about an hour until meat is tender.

3. While the meat is cooking, wash, peel and cut the carrots and potatoes into 1-inch chunks.

4. When meat is tender, add the cubed vegetables. Cover, and increase heat; when mixture begins to simmer, reduce heat to a slow, steady simmer. Cook for about 20 more minutes or until vegetables are tender-crisp.

5. Remove about half the vegetables (but no meat) with a slotted spoon and purée in a blender until smooth. Add broth from the stew to aid in puréeing the vegetables. NOTE: Cooking Light magazine (March 2003) warns when blending hot liquids, to use caution because steam can increase the pressure inside the blender and blow the lid off. They advise filling the blender no more than half full and blending in batches, if necessary. And, while blending, hold a potholder or towel over the lid.

6. Return puréed vegetables to the stew and stir to combine. If needed, thin broth with water or beef broth.

Alice’s Notes:
Transfer any leftover stew to shallow containers to speed cooling; keep perishable foods (such as this stew) at room temperature no longer than a TOTAL of 2 hours. You can place loosely-covered foods in the refrigerator while still warm; cover when the food is completely cooled. Plan to eat leftovers within 3–4 days or freeze for longer storage.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County
ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu
BEEF CHILI
(Serves 4)

This recipe is full of flavor and nutrition! It is an excellent source of fiber, protein, niacin, vitamin B6, vitamin B12, selenium and zinc. An added bonus: It’s so easy to make. Using black beans provides variation of the usual chili recipe.

1. 1 pound ground beef (93% lean or leaner)
2. 1 can (15-1/2 ounces) black beans, rinsed and drained
3. 1 can (14 to 14-1/2-ounce) reduced-sodium or regular beef broth
4. 1 can (14-1/2 ounces) diced tomatoes with green chiles
5. 2 tablespoons chili powder (Alice’s Tip: Start with 1 tablespoon chili powder and gradually add more to taste — some chili powders are much hotter than others!)
6. Shredded Cheddar cheese, chopped fresh cilantro, minced green onion (optional)

1. Heat large nonstick skillet over medium heat until hot. Add ground beef; cook 8-10 minutes, breaking into 3/4-inch crumbles and stirring occasionally. Pour off drippings.

2. Stir in beans, broth, tomatoes and chili powder; bring to a boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer 20 minutes to develop flavors, stirring occasionally. Garnish with toppings, as desired.

Test Kitchen Tips
Cooking times are for fresh or thoroughly thawed ground beef. Ground beef should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160° F. Color is not a reliable indicator of ground beef doneness.

Alice’s Notes:
1. Some stores offer a “no-salt-added” version of black beans if you’re trying to cut back further on your sodium intake. Rinsing regular salted canned, cooked dry beans removes about 30% of the sodium. You also may be able to find a larger, boxed version of beef broth lower in sodium than a canned form; 14 ounces of broth is equal to 2 cups of broth minus 2 tablespoons.
2. If you can’t find diced tomatoes with green chilies, plain diced tomatoes may be substituted.
3. Transfer any leftover chili to shallow containers to speed cooling; keep perishable foods (such as this soup) at room temperature no longer than a TOTAL of 2 hours. You can place loosely-covered foods in the refrigerator while still warm; cover when the food is completely cooled. Plan to eat leftovers within 3-4 days or freeze for longer storage.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County
ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu

Recipe/information courtesy of The Beef Checkoff www.BeefItsWhatsForDinner.com

Photos by Alice Henneman
MEXICAN SKILLET RICE
(6 servings)

- 1 pound lean ground beef or turkey
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups cooked brown rice
- 1 16-ounce can pinto beans, drained
- 2 4-ounce cans diced green chiles
- 1 medium fresh tomato, seeded and chopped (optional)
- Fresh cilantro for garnish (optional)

1. In large skillet over medium-high heat, cook meat until brown, stirring to crumble; drain. Return meat to skillet.

2. Add onion, chili powder, cumin and salt; cook until onion is tender.


4. Top with tomato and garnish with cilantro if desired. Serve immediately.

Nutrition Facts per serving: Calories 313; Total Fat 9g; Cholesterol 29 mg; Sodium 340 mg; Total Carbohydrate 43 g; Dietary Fiber 6 g; Protein 17 g.

SOURCE: Recipe and photo courtesy of the USA Rice Federation. For more information about rice, visit www.usarice.com
Chicken pot pie is the classic comfort food. When you make your own, you can load up on the vegetables and chicken, limit salt and control the amount and type of fat. Making individual frozen pot pies lets you do the mixing and cleaning up when you have time, not when you’re hurrying to prepare a meal.

I’ve added directions for using an instant-read thermometer, for food safety reasons, as well as, preventing overcooked foods. Digital instant-read thermometers work especially well as they give a fast reading and the oven doesn’t stay open as long and lose heat.

INDIVIDUAL FROZEN CHICKEN POT PIES
(Serves 6)

- 1-1/2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts (TIP: Amount need not be exact. You also can use 4 to 6 cups of diced, cooked store-bought rotisserie chicken. Leftover Thanksgiving turkey works well, too!)
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil (divided)
- Freshly ground black pepper (TIP: Regular pepper also works, but is slightly less flavorful.)
- Salt, optional
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
- 2 cups chopped carrots
- 2 celery stalks, sliced
- 5 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3/4 cup all-purpose flour (TIP: If you don’t use flour much at your house, buy a small container of Wondra flour, which is used mostly for making sauces and gravies as it is not likely to form lumps when mixed with liquids.)
- 1/4 cup milk
- 2 teaspoons minced, fresh thyme leaves (TIP: 3/4 teaspoon dried thyme may be substituted for fresh thyme.)
- 1 (15-ounce, approximately) box Pillsbury Ready to Roll Pie Crust (found in refrigerator case) or other pie crust of your choosing.
- 2 cups frozen peas
- When you’re ready to bake the pies: Beat 1 egg with 1 tablespoon water to make an egg wash for brushing on the crust. (TIP: If baking just a few pies at a time, store any extra egg wash in the refrigerator and use in making scrambled eggs within a day or two.)

NOTE: Bake in 6 2-cup capacity foil or other oven-proof baking containers (check that glass or ceramic containers are also suitable for freezer storage).

1. Preheat oven to 350° F with a rack placed in the middle position for baking. Place chicken breasts on a rimmed baking sheet and coat with 2 tablespoons of the oil. (I like to do this with a silicone pastry brush so I don’t touch the chicken with my hands.) Sprinkle with salt (if desired) and pepper. Roast for 20-30 minutes or until cooked through (food
thermometer temperature of 165° F). Set cooked chicken aside to cool. Cut into generous bite-sized chunks when cool enough to handle.

2. Melt butter with the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in a Dutch oven or large, deep skillet over medium heat. Cook onion, carrots and celery 8-10 minutes or until slightly softened; stir occasionally.

3. While vegetables are cooking, bring broth to a boil in a small saucepan, reduce to a low heat and maintain at a simmer until ready to use.

4. Stir flour into vegetables; cook, stirring, for 2 minutes over medium-low heat.

5. Stir hot chicken broth, milk, and thyme into vegetable mixture. Simmer over medium-low to low heat, stirring, until sauce thickens. NOTE: If your chicken hasn’t been cut into pieces yet, remove the vegetable/sauce mixture from the burner.

6. After sauce has thickened, mix cubed chicken with sauce. Transfer to a shallow pan(s) and let cool on a cooling rack for about 20 minutes. Then, cover with foil or plastic wrap, leaving a corner cracked open for heat to escape. Refrigerate until well-chilled, about an hour. (I place a potholder under the pan on the refrigerator shelves.)

7. Stir the frozen peas into the cold filling. Adding the peas at the end is a tip given by America’s Test Kitchen to help preserve their green color. Divide the mixture among the six pot pie containers.

8. Roll out pie crusts on a lightly floured surface. Cut 6 individual pastry toppings, using the top of the baking container as a guide and cutting around it.

9. Top pot pies with the pastry crusts; seal crust to the inside edge of the pot pie containers by pressing around the edge with a fork. Use a paring knife to make 3 cuts into each crust to vent steam. NOTE: If you’d like to bake some pot pies immediately; follow the directions in step 11, EXCEPT use a 375° F oven and bake for 1 hour or until crust is golden brown and internal temperature is 165° F.

10. Wrap pot pies with 2 layers of plastic wrap, pressed close to pie surface, followed by a layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Label each pie with the contents and date. For best quality, serve within 2 to 3 months.

11. To bake pot pies: Place oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 400° F. Unwrap the frozen pot pie(s) and place on a rimmed baking sheet. Brush crusts with egg wash. Cover loosely with foil; bake 40 minutes. Remove foil; bake about 35 minutes longer or until crusts are golden brown. Test for doneness by placing an instant-read thermometer in the center of the pie (through one of the slits) about 10-15 minutes before cooking time is up. The pie is done when center reaches 165° F. Let pot pies rest 10 minutes before serving.

**Alice’s Notes:**

An easy way to use extra pie dough is Cinnamon Pie Crust Strips. Preheat oven to 375° F with a rack placed in the middle for baking. Roll pie crust to 1/8 inch thick. Brush with melted butter. Sprinkle with sugar and cinnamon. Cut into strips and bake on a cookie sheet — sprayed with no-stick cooking spray — until golden brown, about 8-10 minutes. Store in an airtight container or freeze.

Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended of those not mentioned and no endorsement by University of Nebraska—Lincoln Extension is implied for those mentioned.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County
ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu

Photos by Alice Henneman
SOUTHWESTERN PORK & BEAN SOUP
(Serves 4)

Enjoy a non-traditional form of “pork and beans” in this quick, easy and delicious nutritional powerhouse of a soup. **Pork** is an "excellent" source of thiamin, niacin, riboflavin, vitamin B-6, phosphorus and protein and a "good" source of zinc and potassium based on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines for use of these terms. The pork chops in this recipe meet USDA guidelines for "lean": less than 10 grams of fat, 4.5 grams of saturated fat and 95 milligrams of cholesterol per 100 grams and per labeled serving. **Pinto beans** are loaded with dietary fiber, high in folate and a good source of potassium. **Tomatoes** are second only to potatoes in popularity. The lycopene in tomatoes may help protect against heart disease and cancer.

- 2 boneless pork chops, diced
- 1/2 onion, chopped
- 1 14 1/2 oz can chicken broth
- 1 15 oz can Mexican-style chopped tomatoes
- 1 15 oz can pinto beans, drained and rinsed
- 2 teaspoons chili powder

In deep saucepan, brown pork with onion; stir in remaining ingredients, bring to a boil, lower heat, cover and simmer 10-15 minutes.

**Alice’s Notes:**

1. **You may be able to find a larger, boxed version of chicken broth lower in sodium than a canned form; 14 1/2 ounces of broth is equal to 2 cups of broth minus approximately 1/3 cup.** (One ounce = 2 tablespoons; there are 8 ounces in a cup.)

2. **Transfer leftover soup to shallow containers to speed cooling; keep perishable foods (such as this soup) at room temperature no longer than a TOTAL of 2 hours. You can place foods in the refrigerator while still warm. Plan to eat leftovers within 3-4 days or freeze for longer storage. Plan to eat frozen soup within 2 to 3 months for best quality; however, soup will remain safe indefinitely if stored at 0 ° F.

**Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County ahhenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu**

Recipe and courtesy of National Pork Board. For more information about pork, visit PorkBeinspired.com.

**Photos by Alice Henneman**
RED LENTIL SOUP WITH BUTTERNUT SQUASH, COCONUT MILK AND CURRY
(Makes 8 1-cup servings as a side dish or 4-6 servings as a main dish)

The curry powder and cayenne pepper add so much flavor to this soup, you may not want to reach for the salt shaker. Butternut squash is especially high in vitamin A and also a good source of potassium. Tomatoes provide vitamin C, vitamin A and potassium, as well as, being the richest dietary source of yycopene, an antioxidant that may contribute to heart health and have possible anti-cancer benefits. Lentils are a source of protein with 1/4 cup of cooked lentils providing 1 ounce-equivalent from the Protein Foods Group. Red lentils taste the sweetest and nuttiest of the lentils. And, last but not least...this soup tastes great!

- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- 2 cups dry red lentils
- 2 cups butternut squash, peeled, seeded and cubed into 1/2 to 1-inch pieces
- 4 cups reduced sodium or no-salt-added chicken stock or broth
- 1 (14 oz.) can lower fat, unsweetened coconut milk
- 1 (15 oz.) can diced, no-salt-added tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon curry powder
- 1 pinch cayenne pepper

1. Heat oil in a Dutch oven or large skillet over medium heat until it simmers. Add onion and cook until tender. Add garlic after onion is tender and cook for an additional 30 seconds.

2. Stir in remaining ingredients. Cover and bring ingredients to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for about 15 minutes or until the squash and lentils are tender.

Alice's Notes:
Transfer any leftover soup to shallow containers to speed cooling; keep perishable foods (such as this soup) at room temperature no longer than a TOTAL of 2 hours. You can place loosely-covered foods in the refrigerator while still warm; cover when the food is completely cooled. Plan to eat leftovers within 3-4 days or freeze for longer storage. For best quality and flavor, eat this soup within 2-3 months.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County
ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu

Photos by Alice Henneman
WILD RICE AND PORK SOUP  
(Serves 6)

This recipe introduces the flavor of cumin, a savory-flavored spice, often found in Indian, Mexican and Asian cooking. If you don’t have cumin or don’t care for the flavor, you might substitute an equal amount of chili powder. Using spices with strong flavors like cumin, chili powder and garlic powder makes it easier to reduce or eliminate salt in many recipes.

- 2 boneless pork chops, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1 teaspoon oil
- 1/2 cup onions, chopped
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 cup wild rice, cooked (See tip in notes below)
- 1 15-1/2 oz can Great Northern beans, drained (Alice’s Tip: Cannellini beans can be substituted for Great Northern Beans)
- 1 15-1/2 oz can chickpeas, drained
- 1 4 oz can diced green chiles, drained
- 1/8 teaspoon hot pepper sauce
- 1 14-1/2 oz can chicken broth
- Fresh parsley, chopped

In 4-quart saucepan sauté onions and pork in oil over medium-high heat until onions are soft and pork lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Stir in all remaining ingredients except parsley; bring to a boil, lower heat and simmer 20 minutes. Serve garnished with parsley.

Alice’s Notes:
1. The National Pork Board gives this information on cooking rice for this recipe: “To make one cup cooked wild rice, bring to a boil 1 1/3 cups water (or broth) with 1/3 cup wild rice; cover, lower heat and simmer for 35-45 minutes. Refrigerate until using.” Note: You may have to cook some wild rice longer than this. If the grains are tender, it is not necessary, however, to cook it until all the water is absorbed.
2. You may be able to find a larger, boxed version of chicken broth lower in sodium than a canned form; 14 1/2 ounces of broth is equal to 2 cups of broth minus approximately 1/3 cup. (One ounce = 2 tablespoons; there are 8 ounces in a cup.)
3. Transfer leftover soup to shallow containers to speed cooling; keep perishable foods (such as this soup) at room temperature no longer than a TOTAL of 2 hours. You can place foods in the refrigerator while still warm. Plan to eat leftovers within 3-4 days or freeze for longer storage. Plan to eat frozen soup within 2 to 3 months for best quality; however, soup will remain safe indefinitely if stored at 0 ° F.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu
Recipe and courtesy of National Pork Board. For more information about pork, visit PorkBeinspired.com.

Photos by Alice Henneman
### SPINACH LASAGNA

(Serves 6 - 9)

Using “oven-ready” lasagna noodles makes this recipe easy-to-assemble. If you’d like to add meat to this recipe, either buy a spaghetti sauce with meat or brown and cook ground beef (about 8 to 10 minutes over medium to medium-low heat) and add it to the spaghetti sauce.

- 1 Tablespoon olive oil
- 2 (10 oz) bags baby spinach
- 1 (15 oz) carton fat-free or low-fat ricotta cheese
- 1 egg, slightly beaten
- 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano leaves
- 1 jar (24 oz) spaghetti sauce
- 1 box “oven-ready” lasagna noodles
- 4 cups (16 oz) part-skim shredded mozzarella cheese

1. Heat olive oil over medium low heat in a large skillet. Add the first bag of spinach in stages; turn leaves until they wilt. Remove spinach and place in a bowl. Repeat with second bag of spinach.

2. In a small bowl, mix together the ricotta cheese, egg and oregano leaves.

3. Spray a 9 x 13-inch pan with cooking spray.

4. Add the ingredients in this order:
   a. **Layer 1**: 1/4 of spaghetti sauce (about 3/4 cup), 3 lasagna noodles, 1/3 of ricotta cheese mixture, 1/3 of spinach, 1/4 of mozzarella cheese (about 1 cup), repeat 1/4 of spaghetti sauce (about 3/4 cup)
   b. **Layer 2**: 3 lasagna noodles, 1/3 of ricotta cheese mixture, 1/3 of spinach, 1/4 of mozzarella cheese (about 1 cup), 1/4 of spaghetti sauce (about 3/4 cup)
   c. **Layer 3**: Repeat Layer 2
d. **Layer 4**: 3 lasagna noodles, 1/4 of spaghetti sauce (about 3/4 cup), 1/4 of mozzarella cheese (about 1 cup)

5. **To Bake Now**:
   a. Preheat oven to 350° F. Loosely cover pan with foil.
   b. Bake for 30 minutes; remove foil and bake 10 more minutes. Test with a food thermometer; lasagna should reach a temperature of 165° F. If not at this temperature, continue baking until 165° F; replace foil if cheese is beginning to brown too much.
   c. Let stand 10 minutes before serving; it will be easier to cut.

6. **To Freeze and Bake Later**:
   a. Cool in a shallow pan on a cooling rack 20 to 30 minutes; place in refrigerator until completely cooled.
   b. Wrap cooled pie in a layer of plastic wrap, followed by a layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Label with contents and date; place in freezer. For best quality, serve within 2 to 3 months; however, lasagna will remain safe indefinitely if stored at 0° F.
c. Thaw for about 24-hours in the refrigerator.

d. Preheat oven to 350° F. Remove foil and plastic wrap; then, loosely cover pan with foil.

e. Proceed with steps “b” and “c” in “To Bake Now.” Lasagna baked cold from the refrigerator, may take slightly longer than if baked immediately

Alice’s Notes:
1. Read directions on “oven-ready” lasagna package on how to place it in the pan.
2. Eat leftover baked lasagna within 3 to 4 days or freeze it and eat within 2–3 months for best quality. However, lasagna will remain safe indefinitely if stored at 0°F.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu

Photos by Alice Henneman
SHEPHERD’S PIE
(Includes directions for freezing)
(Serves 6)

Higher starch potatoes like Russets or Yukon golds make for the fluffiest mashed potatoes. Start potatoes in cold water or they’ll cook unevenly with the outside starting to fall apart while the inside remains uncooked. Drain well after cooking — you might even heat the potatoes gently on low heat on the stove top for about a minute. Avoid mashing potatoes in a food processor as it can turn them into glue. By the way, did you know one medium-size (5.3 ounce) potato has only 110 calories?

(Bake in 9-inch square baking pan or 2 8-inch pie pans)
• 1-1/4 to 1-1/2 pounds of potatoes (See note 1 at end of pg. 2)
• 1/2 teaspoon salt (See note 2 at end of pg. 2)
• 4 oz. Neufchatel or cream cheese, cubed and softened at room temperature. (See note 3 at end of pg. 2)
• 1 cup shredded Cheddar cheese, divided
• 1 to 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
• 1 lb. lean ground beef (90% lean)
• 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
• 4 cups frozen mixed vegetables (i.e. peas, carrots, corn, green beans), thawed
• 1 cup savory beef gravy, purchased or homemade

1. Wash, peel and quarter potatoes, cutting into even chunks. Place in a large sauce pan; add enough cold water to cover by 1 inch. Salt water, if desired. Cover pan, bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, uncovered, 20-25 minutes or until fork tender.

2. While potatoes are cooking: Brown ground beef in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat 8 to 10 minutes or until beef is no longer pink. Break beef up into 3/4-inch crumbles and add the onion while beef is browning. Remove from burner and drain.

3. Stir vegetables and gravy into meat. Spoon into a 9-inch square pan or 2 8-inch pie pans.

4. Remove cooked potatoes from saucepan and drain in a colander. Return potatoes to pan; heat gently on stovetop on low heat for about a minute to further dry potatoes. Mash potatoes in pan with a potato masher or remove potatoes and add them back by passing them through a potato ricer (see photo).

5. Mix in cream cheese, 1/2 of the shredded cheese and the garlic. Add a little hot milk if the potato mixture appears too thick.
6. Cover meat mixture with potato mixture. Sprinkle with remaining 1/2 cup shredded cheese.

TO BAKE NOW:
Preheat oven to 375° F and bake 20 minutes or until heated through (165° F as measured by a food thermometer) and potatoes begin to brown.

TO FREEZE AND BAKE LATER:
1. Cool in a shallow pan on a cooling rack 20-30 minutes; place in refrigerator until completely cooled.
2. Wrap cooled pie in a layer of plastic wrap, followed by a layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Label with contents and date; place in freezer. For best quality, serve within 2-3 months; however, shepherds pie will remain safe indefinitely stored at 0° F.
3. Thaw for about 24-hours in the refrigerator.
4. Preheat oven to 375° F. Remove foil and plastic wrap; bake pie 20 minutes or until heated through (165° F as measured by a food thermometer) and the potatoes begin to brown. Shepherd’s pie baked cold from the refrigerator may take slightly longer than if baked immediately. Loosely cover with foil at the end if needed to prevent pie from getting too brown.

Alice’s Notes:
1. Weight need not be exact for potatoes; however, size of potatoes should be similar. One medium potato weighs approximately 5.3 ounces and is about the size of a computer mouse – 4 medium or 2-3 large potatoes should be sufficient for this recipe.
2. Some recipes say to add 1 or more tablespoons salt to the water in which you cook the potatoes. Or, you can leave the salt out entirely and your potatoes will still turn out OK. Salt adds to the flavor; not all the salt is absorbed.
3. Neufchatel cheese is lower in fat than cream cheese and can be substituted for it in most recipes.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County
ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu

Photos by Alice Henneman
GRANDE BEEF EMPANADAS
(Includes directions for freezing)
(Serves 4 – 6  Makes 2 large “grande” empanadas)

These large empanadas are delicious as a main dish, and (if you count tomatoes as a fruit) they contain foods from all five food groups. If you’re feeding just one or two people, bake one empanada right away and freeze the other one for later. Use these directions for making empanadas with other fillings; for example, turkey empanadas made with leftover chopped turkey (2–3 cups), gravy, assorted veggies and your choice of seasoning. You might even top them with leftover cranberry sauce!

- 1 pound ground beef (90% lean)
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- 2 cups frozen corn
- 1/4 cup salsa
- 1/2 teaspoon chili powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt (optional)
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper, preferably freshly ground
- 1 cup shredded cheese (such as cheddar or Monterey Jack or a favorite cheese of your choice.)
- 2 refrigerated pie crusts
- 1 egg, slightly beaten with 1 tablespoon water (Prepare just before baking empanadas)

Serve with salsa.

1. Heat large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until hot. Add ground beef, onion and garlic. Cook 8-10 minutes, breaking into small crumbles; stir occasionally until beef is no longer pink. Pour off drippings.
2. Reduce heat to medium. Stir in corn, salsa, chili powder, salt and pepper. Cook and stir until corn is thawed, 1-3 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in the cheese.
3. Transfer meat mixture to a shallow pan, set on a rack to cool about 20-30 minutes; then refrigerate until mixture is thoroughly cool.
To Make Frozen Empanadas:
1. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper or plastic wrap. Unfold one of the pie crusts on the sheet. Spoon beef mixture evenly over 1/2 of dough, leaving 1/2-inch border around edge. Moisten edge of dough with water; fold pastry over filling. Press edges of dough together with fork to seal. Prick center of dough with fork once or twice to form steam vents.
2. Repeat with second crust. Cover the baking sheet loosely with plastic wrap and transfer to your freezer.
3. After empanadas are frozen solid (about 2-3 hours later), remove them from the baking sheet and wrap individually in plastic wrap. Then bag into freezer bags or overwrap with heavy-duty aluminum foil. To prevent them from breaking when in the freezer, place the wrapped empanadas in a rigid container.
4. Label and date empanadas. Use within three months for best quality and flavor; however foods that remain frozen at 0° F will stay safe indefinitely. **Bake frozen empanadas directly from the freezer after removing the wrappings.**

To Make Empanadas Without Freezing Them:
After meat mixture has cooled, spray a rimmed baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray. As when making the frozen empanadas, unfold one of the pie crusts on the sheet. Spoon beef mixture evenly over 1/2 of dough, leaving 1/2-inch border around edge. Moisten edge of dough with water; fold pastry over filling. Press edges of dough together with fork to seal. Prick center of dough with fork once or twice to form steam vents. Repeat with second crust.

**Baking Instructions for Both Frozen And Non-Frozen Empanadas:**
1. Place oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 400° F. Spray a rimmed baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray.
2. Lightly beat the egg with 1 tablespoon water and brush the crusts with the egg wash.
3. Bake until golden brown, 20-25 minutes or until empanadas are done (empanadas are done when they reach an internal temperature of 165° F as measured by a food thermometer.) Start checking for doneness about 5 minutes early. If empanada browns before it is done, cover loosely with foil and continue heating until done. It may take frozen empanadas slightly longer to bake.
4. Let empanadas cool for 5 minutes before cutting into wedges. Cut each empanada into 2-3 wedges. Enjoy with salsa.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County ahenneman1@unl.edu • http://food.unl.edu

Photos by Alice Henneman
# Foods That Do Not Freeze Well

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foods</th>
<th>Usual Use</th>
<th>Condition After Thawing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabbage*, celery, cress, cucumbers*, endive, lettuce, parsley, radishes</td>
<td>As raw salad</td>
<td>Limp, water-logged, quickly develops oxidized color, aroma and flavor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish potatoes, baked or boiled</td>
<td>In soups, salads, sauces or with butter</td>
<td>Soft, crumbly, water-logged, mealy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooked macaroni, spaghetti or rice</td>
<td>When frozen alone for later use</td>
<td>Mushy, tastes warmed over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egg whites, cooked</td>
<td>In salads, creamed foods, sandwiches, sauces, gravy or desserts</td>
<td>Soft, tough, rubbery, spongy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meringue</td>
<td>In desserts</td>
<td>Soft, tough, rubbery, spongy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icings made from egg whites</td>
<td>Cakes, cookies</td>
<td>Frothy, weeps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cream or custard fillings</td>
<td>Pies, baked goods</td>
<td>Separates, watery, lumpy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk sauces</td>
<td>For casseroles or gravies</td>
<td>May curdle or separate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sour cream</td>
<td>As topping, in salads</td>
<td>Separates, watery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese or crumb toppings</td>
<td>On casseroles</td>
<td>Soggy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayonnaise or salad dressing</td>
<td>On sandwiches (not in salads)</td>
<td>Separates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelatin</td>
<td>In salads or desserts</td>
<td>Weeps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit jelly</td>
<td>Sandwiches</td>
<td>May soak bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fried foods</td>
<td>All except French fried potatoes and onion rings</td>
<td>Lose crispness, become soggy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Cucumbers and cabbage can be frozen as marinated products such as "freezer slaw" or "freezer pickles". These do not have the same texture as regular slaw or pickles.

## Effect of Freezing on Spices and Seasonings

- Pepper, cloves, garlic, green pepper, imitation vanilla and some herbs tend to get strong and bitter.
- Onion and paprika change flavor during freezing.
- Celery seasonings become stronger.
- Curry develop a musty off-flavor.
- Salt loses flavor and has the tendency to increase rancidity of any item containing fat.
- When using seasonings and spices, season lightly before freezing, and add additional seasonings when reheating or serving.