

CHILL OUT OVER THE HOLIDAYS.....BAKE AHEAD & FREEZE!

Does the thought of baking for the holidays leave you in a holi-daze? Frozen with fear that you won't get it all done?

You may have favorite recipes for festive holiday baked goods that you always like to make. You may enjoy experimenting with new recipes. You may see the following as your options for holiday baking:

- A) bake all night before the event;
- B) bake early the day of the event;
- C) bake the first free day before the event.

There is another way.

With the first two options listed above, your food will be fresh but you'll be tired. With the third option, you'll be fresh but your food may be stale! Or, possibly unsafe to eat!

Instead of baking to a frazzle this holiday season, try chilling out. Bake ahead and freeze foods to avoid last-minute hassles. Here are some guidelines to help you start. If you're in doubt about whether a food will freeze well, it's always a good idea to give it a trial run. Try making and freezing a small batch earlier in the season and see if you're satisfied with the results. Or, experiment with a small amount this year and apply what you learned next year.

Remember: Commercial manufacturers have equipment and ingredients not available to home bakers and can successfully freeze many products you can't. Also, commercial products contain preservatives that permit longer storage both in the freezer and at room temperature.

Coverings for Frozen Food

It's important to use freezer containers or wrappings that are moisture-vapor-resistant. Here are some general guidelines.

Wrapping Materials

Suitable freezer wrapping materials include freezer paper, plastic freezer bags, plastic wrap designed for freezer use and extra heavy or heavy duty freezer aluminum foil. Some brands of freezer bags are available in 2 and 2 1/2 gallon sizes suitable for freezing larger foods.

Check wrapping labels for specific information about whether the wrappings work for freezing. For example, not all plastic wraps are designed for freezer use. It's important to use materials intended for freezing as they're more likely to keep moisture out and are less likely to tear in the freezer.

For freezer paper, check directions for which side of the paper is placed next to the food.

Unless directed otherwise, the plastic coated side goes next to food. Secure freezer paper with freezer tape.

Rigid Containers

Rigid freezer containers include plastic, glass and ceramic containers labeled suitable for freezing. Foil pans work well for freezing foods you'll re-heat in the oven. You can bake food in foil pans and then freeze it in the baking pan. Cover pan tightly with freezer-quality foil, paper, plastic wrap or a plastic bag. Plastic freezer/microwave safe containers are a good choice for foods you'll reheat in the microwave.

CAUTION: Carefully read manufacturer's directions about safe handling when using glass or ceramic dishes labeled freezer/microwave/oven safe.

Choose a container that fits the amount of food you're freezing. If there's greater than about a 1/2 inch space between the surface of a baked product and the top of the container, wrap the food with a layer of freezer wrapping before placing it in the container. This helps prevent moisture loss.

Some containers aren't suitable for freezing. For example, milk and cottage cheese cartons aren't moisture-vapor-resistant enough for freezing.

When using glass and ceramic containers, use only those designed for freezing. Other types of glass and ceramics may break in the freezer.

Packing Food for the Freezer

Thoroughly cool baked goods before freezing or they'll become soggy. Place food on a wire cooling rack to allow air to circulate around the food and promote faster cooling. For food safety reasons you may need to completely cool perishable foods like cheesecakes in the refrigerator. The recommended time for holding perishable foods at room temperature (includes both cooling and serving) is 2 hours.

Pack food compactly and try to get as much air out of the package as possible. The quality of food declines faster when excess air is left in the package. Wrap well and seal tightly to keep moisture out.

"Freezer burn," when the surface of the food appears light colored and dried out, occurs when moisture on the surface evaporates. Proper cooling, air removal, moisture-vapor-resistant packaging, a tight seal and an appropriate length of storage help prevent freezer burn. While a food with freezer burn is safe to eat, the quality is lower.

Label each package with the type and amount of the contents and the date it was frozen. You also may wish to include a suggested "use by" date based on the information in this article. Consider dividing foods according to events -- for example: Package and label one container of

cookies for your Dec. 1 party, another for the Dec. 10 party, and so on. You may wish to keep a written list of frozen holiday baked goods.

Freezing Guidelines

Freeze food at 0 F or below. Avoid overloading your freezer with too much food for freezing at one time. Shirley Corriher, author of the award-winning book "CookWise" (William Morrow) writing in "Fine Cooking Online," recommends adding only about 10 percent of the freezer's available capacity at a time. Leave space between packages so air can circulate around them. Then, when the food is frozen, stack or move the foods closer together.

It's hard to give an exact recommended storage time for specific foods. While a food will remain safe indefinitely at 0 F, the quality declines over time. The suggested times listed by the foods in this article represent the shorter range of the various times recommended in the literature.

During freezing, the water in food freezes and the resulting ice crystals can affect the texture of foods. Baked goods low in moisture freeze well with little change in their texture. This includes breads, rolls, cakes, cookies and pie crusts. These same types of foods thaw rapidly. High-fat frostings also freeze well.

Thawing/Reheating/Heating Guidelines

Precooked foods, lower in moisture content -- such as breads, cakes and cookies -- usually can be thawed safely at room temperature. Baked goods higher in moisture content and containing eggs or dairy products -- such as cheesecakes, etc. -- should be thawed in the refrigerator. These products could cause food-borne illness if they're kept at room temperature for more than 2 hours (this includes total cooling and serving time).

Thaw most baked foods in their freezer wrapping to prevent drying out and condensation of moisture on the surface. For quickest thawing and to help prevent condensation, thaw on a wire cooling rack to allow air to circulate around all sides of the frozen food.

For refrigerator thawing, about 24 hours should be sufficient for most foods to thaw. For thawing at room temperature, allow about one to two hours for the food to thaw.

Some foods can be heated directly from the frozen state. Be sure your container is rated as freezer-to-oven or microwave safe by the manufacturer before baking in it.

Check directions on plastic freezer bags for whether they're recommended for microwave use. (Note: In general, sandwich and snack bags should NOT be used for freezing or microwaving.) Manufacturers of some popular brands advise you can "defrost" and "reheat" in their freezer bag. But, they advise against microwaving food on "high" in them. Opening the bag one inch to vent is recommended. You're also advised to be careful if reheating foods high in fat or sugar. These foods reheat quickly and may cause the bag to melt. Check manufacturer's directions for the

SPECIFIC brand of plastic bag you're using.

CAUTION: Watch closely and be careful when opening plastic bags as steam can build up and cause burns. Place in the microwave on a microwave-safe plate or dish.

Check if freezer plastic wrap is microwave safe. Follow the manufacturer's directions for microwave use.

As a general rule-of-thumb, use a **PRE-HEATED** oven when reheating baked goods or heating unbaked frozen foods. This helps avoid overbrowning and/or drying out baked products.

Freezing Specific Foods

Quick Breads (coffeecake, fruit, nut breads)

(Note: Traditional low-fat muffins and biscuits are of maximum quality right out of the oven. Quality decreases when they are frozen.)

Prepare and bake as usual. Cool. Package and freeze. Thaw at room temperature in original wrapping. Slice fruit and nut breads while partially frozen to prevent crumbling. Foil-wrapped coffeecakes may be reheated in foil in a 325 to 350 F oven for 15 to 20 minutes or until hot.

Suggested freezer storage time: 2 - 3 months.

Yeast Breads (Rolls, sweet rolls, bread, coffee cake)

Make as usual. Cool. Package and freeze. Thaw in original wrapping at room temperature. To serve warm, reheat in foil-covered container or in foil wrapping at 300 F for 15 to 20 minutes; 5 to 10 minutes for rolls.

Suggested freezer storage time: 3 - 6 months.

Cakes

General Information -- To prevent crushing, place wrapped or bagged cakes in sturdy containers in the freezer. If you freeze slices of cake, put a double layer of freezer wrapping between slices. Avoid cream-type fillings as these often decline in quality when frozen. Cakes may be frozen unfrosted or frosted.

Unfrosted -- Wrap UNFROSTED cakes BEFORE freezing. Frost AFTER cake is thawed. Thaw UNFROSTED cakes in their original wrapping at room temperature.

Frosted -- The best frostings for freezing are fudge frostings and uncooked powdered or confectioner's sugar frostings made with fat. Cooked frostings, seven minute frostings and other egg-white-based frostings don't freeze well. Freeze FROSTED cakes BEFORE packaging to

prevent the wrapping from sticking to the frosting.

Thaw FROSTED cakes in the refrigerator. Remove the immediate wrapping so it won't stick to the frosting as the cake thaws. Thaw the unwrapped cake on a serving plate in its protective container or a cake keeper. This prevents possible cross-contamination from other foods and accidental damage to the delicate frosted surface as you add and remove refrigerated items. If space limitations force you to thaw a frosted cake completely uncovered, place it on the TOP shelf of the refrigerator. Choose a location where cross-contamination and bumping, etc. will be avoided.

Angel Food, Chiffon, Sponge, Layer, Loaf, Cupcakes -- Prepare and bake as usual. Cool. Wrap tightly and then store in a sturdy container. Angel, chiffon and sponge cakes are very delicate; store on top of other foods as an added precaution to prevent crushing.

Suggested freezer storage time: varies, about 2-3 months should be satisfactory for most cakes.

Cookies

Prepare and bake as usual. (NOTE: Meringue-based cookies and cookies containing beaten egg whites, such as macaroons, don't freeze well. Also, fragile cookies don't freeze well.) Cool thoroughly. Pack in a rigid container to help keep them from breaking. Place moisture-vapor-resistant freezer wrapping between layers.

Remember, too much air in a container can lower the quality of a food. If you don't have enough cookies to fill the container, you might place the separated layers of cookies inside a large plastic freezer bag or surround them with freezer wrapping within the container. Thaw in original wrapping at room temperature.

Suggested freezer storage time: 3 to 6 months.

Pies

General Information -- Meringue toppings toughen in the freezer. Custard and cream pies get watery after thawing and aren't recommended for freezing.

Choose a pan suitable for the freezer, such as the disposable aluminum foil pie plates found in many supermarkets, or rust-proof metal pie pans. Freezer/ovenproof glass also might work but needs to be handled with more care.

If you're using an aluminum foil pie plate, compare its capacity to that of your regular pie pan. An easy way to obtain a general idea of differing volumes is to fill your regular pie pan with water. Then pour the water into the foil pan. Measure the amount of liquid left in your regular pan; reduce the amount of filling by about that much.

A soggy crust can be a problem with frozen filled pies. Brush the inside of the bottom crust

lightly with melted butter or margarine before adding the filling to help prevent a soggy crust.

As filled pies are higher in moisture content and take longer to cool/heat/reheat than many baked goods, pies can be trickier to freeze than many foods. The best advice: Do a trial run with freezing a favorite pie BEFORE you freeze it for a special event. Here are an assortment of tips that may help you decide how to most successfully freeze your favorite pies.

Unbaked Pie Crust -- Prepare your regular crust recipe. Place in a freezer-suitable pie plate. If the pastry will be baked unfilled, prick the bottom of the crust in several places. Stack the pie pans, separating them with two layers of freezer paper. Put in a freezer bag or overwrap with aluminum foil. To use, while still frozen, bake at 475 F until light brown (about 8 to 10 minutes) or add filling to the frozen crust and bake as usual.

Suggested freezer storage time: 6 to 8 weeks.

Fruit, Mince, Nut Pies, Unbaked -- Prepare as usual. The flavor of a pie is fresher when it's frozen before baking. Some sources suggest using quick-cooking tapioca to thicken pie filling instead of your usual thickener. Cornstarch and flour are more likely to separate when the pie is thawed.

Here are some general guidelines if you'd like to adapt your recipe for quick-cooking tapioca: Approximately 1 tablespoon of quick-cooking tapioca is equal to 1 1/2 teaspoons cornstarch or 1 tablespoon flour. Mix the fruit, tapioca, sugar and flavorings and let stand in a bowl for 15 minutes before placing in your pie shell. This helps the tapioca hydrate and absorb the fruit juice. If you find that juicier pies tend to boil over more when baked from the frozen state, add an extra tablespoon of tapioca next time.

When freezing unbaked pies with light-colored fruits -- such as apples, peaches, pears and apricots -- be aware these fruits may turn dark. The quickest way to prevent this is to treat them with a commercial anti-browning product for fruit, such as Ever-Fresh (TM) or Fruit-Fresh (R). These are found in most supermarkets in the food preservation supplies section. Follow package directions.

Do not cut vents in the top crust before freezing. When ready to bake, cut vents in the upper crust. Place pan on a foil-covered cookie sheet and bake without thawing at 450 F for 15 to 20 minutes. Placing a cookie sheet under the pie helps it bake more evenly and protects your oven should any juices bubble over. Then bake for 20 - 30 minutes at 375 F until the top crust is brown. As pies, pie plates and ovens vary, adjust time and temperature as needed.

One method to help determine doneness is to check the tenderness of the fruit by cutting into the pie through a steam vent with a sharp knife. If the edges of your pie crust are browning too quickly, crimp strips of foil, shiny side up, around the rim of your crust. About a 2-inch wide strip should be sufficient for covering your crust edges.

Suggested freezer storage time: 3 - 4 months.

Fruit, Mince, Nut Pies, Baked -- Make as usual. Cool as rapidly as possible on a wire cooling rack. (Note: Pies baked in metal rather than glass pie plates will cool faster.) Freeze and then wrap. It's easier to wrap a pie after freezing.

To serve, thaw in the refrigerator and serve chilled or reheat in a 325 F oven until warm. As a test of when your pie has warmed, "Joy of Cooking" (Scribner) suggests heating until a knife inserted through a steam vent on top of your pie comes out warm. As recommended for unbaked pies, cover edges with foil if they start browning too rapidly during reheating.

Suggested freezer storage time: 3 - 4 months.

Pumpkin Pie -- If you'd like to prepare pumpkin pie ahead, it's easiest and safest to freeze just the crust. Add the filling to the frozen crust just before baking and bake as usual. It takes just a few minutes to mix together the ingredients. As pumpkin pie is a perishable food and shouldn't be left at room temperature more than two hours, your pie is safer to eat when you bake it the day of your meal. Also, the quality of a freshly baked homemade pumpkin pie is usually higher than a frozen one.

Cheesecake, Baked

Make as usual, bake and cool as rapidly as possible on a wire cooling rack. As cheesecake is a perishable food, it shouldn't be left at room temperature more than 2 hours. After the first hour of cooling, transfer to the top shelf of your refrigerator to complete the cooling. Place in a location where cross-contamination won't occur. Freeze unwrapped, then wrap and place in a rigid container to protect from crushing. Thaw wrapped cheesecake in refrigerator.

Suggested freezer storage time: 4 weeks.

Candy

Make as usual and freeze. Most candies freeze well. One notable exception is chocolate covered cherries. The filling may expand during freezing and break open the candy. Wrap candies individually in freezer plastic wrap and place in a rigid container to prevent crushing. Thaw, wrapped, at room temperature. A whitish fat "bloom" may appear on the surface of chocolate during freezing. This should disappear after candy is thawed.

Suggested freezer storage time: 6 to 8 months.

A Holiday Wish

So, mark your calendar for B-Day (Bake Day), buy your ingredients, play some holiday music and enjoy yourself as you bake ahead favorite foods!

References

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5. Joy of Cooking, Irma S. Rombauer, Marion Rombauer Becker and Ethan Becker, Scribner, 1997
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Nutrition educators can download a free copy of a PowerPoint presentation on "Nutrition and Osteoporosis."

Pyramid Power: The Food Guide Game

Pyramid Power has received awards from the American Dietetic Association and the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. Use Pyramid Power to teach youth and adults how to eat healthy according to the Food Guide Pyramid.

Don't Get Bugged by a Foodborne Illness (game)

Use this game to help youth and adults understand and use recommended food safety practices. Don't Get Bugged received an award from the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences.

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