

Freezer Surprise

My family considers our freezer unorganized. There is a system (only known to me) but I admit there are several unlabeled items. Unfortunately, my family doesn't share my excitement for freezer surprises.

One of my memorable freezer surprises happened when I was thawing refried beans. I used the microwave to thaw the brown mixture. After stirring, I realized it was not refried beans but beef stroganoff. I had used a container that would have required labeling with tape. I didn't have tape in a convenient location and I thought "I'll remember what is in this container." Unfortunately, it was a freezer surprise.

Using a freezer is a great method of food preservation. Food kept at 0 °F will keep safe indefinitely but quality will reduce over time. Some foods (lettuce, cream sauce, and mayonnaise) do not freeze well. Raw meat and poultry maintain quality longer than cooked items because moisture is lost during cooking.

If you find a freezer surprise, check the odor. Some foods will develop a rancid or off odor when frozen too long and should be discarded. Some foods may not look picture perfect or be of high enough quality to serve alone but may be edible; use them to make soups or stews.

Freezer burn is a disappointing freezer surprise. It may occur when air comes in contact with the surface of the food. Options include cutting away freezer-burned portions before or after cooking. Sometimes, the food might have to be discarded for quality reasons.

It is safe to freeze meat or poultry directly in its original packaging. This type of wrap is permeable to air, so quality may diminish over time. For longer storage, overwrap these packages and label with contents and date.

To maintain quality, freeze food as fast as possible. Slow freezing creates large, disruptive ice crystals. Rapid freezing is preferred. Avoid stacking packages to be frozen; instead, spread them out. Ideally, a food (2-inches thick) should freeze completely in about 2 hours. Packages can be stacked once frozen solid.

My favorite items to freeze include peeled ginger, peeled bananas, breadcrumbs, cheese, and leftovers. After using my food processor to grate cheese, I will spread it out on a pan and freeze. After about an hour, the cheese is frozen and can be transferred to a zip bag or other container. (If possible, use a pan with a lid so the cheese doesn't spill for an unnecessary freezer surprise).

For food safety tips and ideas, follow @CowleyCountyExtension on Facebook or visit cowley.k-state.edu. Phone calls are always welcome - 221-5450 or 441-4565. I like hearing about freezer surprises and other food adventures.

Source: www.fsis.usda.gov

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