



What's for Dinner?

Menu-planning for the weary cook.

Much of the information I gather is directly tied to a need in my life. One day I just didn't feel like cooking anymore. This is somewhat strange because I *really do* enjoy cooking. But I found myself tired of my recipes, and tired of the late afternoon scramble to decide "what's for dinner?" I was also tired of cooking *every* night. I was looking for a change.

This must have happened to my mom too, because we had a long-standing tradition of Pizza Night and Popcorn Night. Popcorn Night was always on Sunday evening, and in case you are worried about our nutrition, it followed a very large Sunday noon meal.

I started asking friends what they did to overcome the drudgery. Here are the results of my informal survey:

- 1)** Some ate out once or twice a week, or ordered take-out. If you eat out a lot there is an interesting site that offers reduced price coupons and gift certificates to local restaurants. You pay \$10. And receive a \$25 coupon:
www.restaurant.com.
- 2)** Some had a free for all one night a week. Each family member is responsible for themselves, eating whatever they could find: leftovers, a can of soup or cold cereal. This sounded similar to what my husband refers to as "refrigerator clean-out."
- 3)** A friend mentioned a local company called Mix it Up!. They chop and prepare all of the ingredients necessary for meals. The customer packages all of the necessary components using zip lock bags. The packaged food is then frozen at home. It is a time saving way to bring home fresh meals without all of the preservatives. It costs about \$135. for eight to nine meals. The price varies depending on your selection.

One month, Mix it Up! had a steak grill pack special for six. It cost \$30. We invited my in-laws for dinner and served it. It was delicious and a very easy way to entertain.

Later, I went with a friend and packed 9 meals and a side for \$130. Entrée might

be a better definition. Side dishes are available for an additional charge. The meals are tasty and quite easy to prepare. We had left-overs following several of our meals.

I have heard of three others: Let's Dish, Sociale and Take Away Gourmet. They each vary their menus from month to month. All four have websites:

www.mixitupmeals.com

www.letsdish.net

www.take-awaygourmet.com

www.socialegourmet.com

4) I went online and discovered a whole *make ahead and freeze* movement. Occasionally, I have doubled the recipe and made two casseroles at one time. It's nice to have an extra in the freezer. But this, *this* is much more. They call it "once a month cooking." (I read about it on www.stretcher.com.) The premise is that if you spend a Saturday making large batches of food for the freezer, you will always be prepared for dinner. They listed a ground beef collection that would produce cheesy meatloaf, taco filling, stew and lasagna. An added advantage is that you can plan your menu around sale items and save money.

I suddenly remembered a Taste of Home cookbook a friend had given me. One contributor made a "big batch beef sauce." It took 4lbs. of hamburger and many other ingredients. It rendered about six servings of a meat sauce that can later be used as the base for chili, tacos, spaghetti sauce and lasagna.

5) While I was looking through that cookbook, I found quite a few entries for the crockpot. I have been storing mine in the basement for some time now. I pulled it out and dusted it off. I surprised myself. I had forgotten that with just a few minutes in the morning, I could have a fabulous aroma in the house all day and a lot less stress at 5:00.

6) In the Monday to Friday Cookbook, Michele Urvater describes a trick she calls "Sunday Start Up." She might roast two chickens, one for dinner and one to be used later in the week. She occasionally makes a big pot of soup which she could later revise with some fresh ingredients in the middle of the week, to be served as a main course. She sometimes makes a double batch of a vegetable dish or bakes some extra potatoes. She recommends chopping some vegetables for Monday nights dinner or cutting up chicken and freezing it for later.

7) All of this reading, trying recipes and experimenting, reconfirmed a few things for me. **Menu planning** is *such* a time and money saver. When I started doing this again, I really noticed a drop in my grocery bills.

8) I started stocking up for "pantry meals," you know, the ones that don't require any fresh ingredients. I have a few stocked up right now. Linguini and

clam sauce and tuna fish casserole can be made without a trip to the store. Frozen hamburger patties and frozen hamburger buns are ready if we decide to grill at the last minute. Having meals in the freezer gives peace of mind. There will always be days when I just want an easy meal. Knowing that they are waiting for me eliminates dinner time stress.

A recap of ideas:

- Eat out. (You probably didn't need my help on that one.)
- Create your own family traditions.
- Purchase meals like take and bake pizza or ready to assemble meals.
- Try once a month cooking. Or if this seems like too big of a time commitment, double up every time you are making a dish that would freeze well. In no time at all, you will have built up a reserve.
- Try the Sunday Start Up technique.
- Pull out your crockpot.
- Menu plan.
- Have a few pantry meals for emergencies.