

Convenience Foods Buy Time — At a Price

Today, about half of every dollar spent on food to be consumed at home buys convenience foods. Supermarkets offer everything from complete frozen dinners to boil-in-the-bag vegetables to mix-in-the-pan cake mixes.

The main selling points of most convenience products are that they're quick to prepare -- they save time -- and they're easy.

TIME

Convenience foods save time because they come to you partly or wholly prepared. Some -- like canned pudding and dry cereals -- are ready to eat. Others -- like frozen dinners -- need only to be heated. Some require the addition of fresh ingredients -- ground meat to a one-dish pasta dinner, milk to instant pudding, and egg and some water to a cake mix. But all of them offer the promise of time saved.

COST

The reason convenience foods save you time, of course, is that someone else bought the ingredients, measured and mixed them, cooked the food, packaged it and sent it to the store. Someone, obviously, must pay for all that time, know-how and energy. So it should come as no surprise that a 1979 U.S. Department of Agriculture survey found that 58 percent of convenience foods cost more per serving than their fresh or homemade counterparts.

Often the difference in price is more than offset by the difference in preparation time. Few people have hours to spend getting dinner on the table these days. Convenience foods that allow a person to put a tasty, reasonably nutritious meal on the table in half an hour definitely have a place in our busy society.

EASE OF PREPARATION

A big plus of convenience foods is that you don't have to be a graduate chef to prepare them. Generally, you won't need a lot of fancy equipment or kitchen gadgets, or a lot of specialized ingredients that might spoil or get stale before you use them up. (Spices that you use only twice a year when you whip up your super-duper, homemade, cooks-all-day spaghetti sauce, for instance, will lose their zip long before you see the bottoms of the jars.) There's no measuring to do and no way to leave out ingredients. Often there aren't even any dishes to do afterwards!

WHAT ABOUT QUALITY?

The quality of convenience foods runs the gamut from excellent to not so tasty. Price is not a foolproof guide to quality, but you might suspect that less expensive products are cheaper because the manufacturer cut some corners. Ingredients may be of lower quality or simply less expensive than those in homemade or more costly prepared foods. Storebought granola, for example, may be mostly oatmeal sweetened with brown sugar, whereas a homemade product might also call for nuts, sunflower seeds, honey and raisins in addition to the oats. A inexpensive macaroni and cheese box mix may use processed American cheese; whereas a high-priced frozen macaroni

and cheese entree may have two or three kinds of aged cheese.

Price per serving may be low because servings are small. You may find that you have to buy three less expensive frozen entrees to give two people the same quantity you would prepare at home for 2 people.

A big advantage of many convenience foods is that they are reliable and consistent. Because you don't have an opportunity to leave the baking powder out of a cake mix, for example, you rarely get half-inch high cake layers when you start with a box mix.

If your cooking skills or facilities are limited, a convenience item may be of much higher quality than anything you could turn out from scratch.

STORAGE

Anyone who's ever set out to make mashed potatoes and found the raw materials soft and sprouted will certainly appreciate the ease of instant mashed. Unlike fresh foods, which have very limited storage lives, many convenience items will sit patiently on a shelf for months and suffer no loss in quality or nutritive value.

However, storage space is required for frozen convenience foods.

BASIC INGREDIENTS & ADDITIVES

Family food preferences and food allergies may rule out foods that would be acceptable if only one ingredient had been left out or replaced by another. A quick-and-easy main dish is no time or money saver if you have to prepare something else for someone who can't or won't eat it or if you end up throwing it away.

It's easy to jazz up your home prepared products with a dash of your favorite herbs and spices, but it's very difficult to disguise seasonings that you don't like that are part of a convenience food.

Convenience foods may not allow you to alter the product or select ingredients to add or delete,

depending upon how much preparation is already included in the product.

Additives are used to preserve freshness, prevent spoilage and improve flavor, color and texture. If you don't want to consume these additives, you must read labels carefully and be prepared to do without a lot of the advantages of convenience foods.

Salt and sugar are common additives in dozens of foods. If someone in your family must avoid these substances, he/she must also avoid a great many convenience foods in addition to other processed foods.

COST

Some convenience foods may be quite a bit more expensive than homemade. If you have more time and skills than money, you may come out ahead on cost if you cook from scratch. And then some items like frozen orange juice concentrate usually are less expensive than squeezing your own juice.

When All Else Fails

Convenience foods give consistent, reliable results IF you follow the directions on the container. Adding extra eggs to a box cake mix, for instance, will change the final product, whose recipe has undergone test kitchen preparation to ensure consistent results:---

PACKAGING

Processed foods require special packaging for marketing and storage. It could be argued that filling sanitary landfills is not the best use for the natural resources and energy investment that packaging represents.

BUY CONVENIENCE -- AND SAVE!

Use the same comparison shopping skills when buying convenience foods as you use when selecting other items.

Compare ingredients. When deciding between two similar products, read the labels to find out whether there are any differences in ingredients

that might account for a difference in price. The deluxe macaroni and cheese dinner in a box may be more expensive per package than the standard dinner, but you have to add milk and margarine to the less expensive mix -- the deluxe mix comes complete with cheese sauce in a can. As a result, the final cost per serving of the deluxe dinner is about five cents lower.

Compare various forms of the same product. An expensive frozen macaroni and cheese dinner may cost two or three times as much as a box mix and take at least as long to heat as the box mix takes to prepare. Your decision then may be based upon cost or your personal preferences. Pudding canned in one-serving containers may cost nearly twice as much as pudding in a larger can, pudding from a box mix or homemade.

Compare preparation time. A box mix takes a little longer to prepare than canned macaroni and cheese. Frozen takes about twice as long as a box mix, and homemade even longer. While the frozen or canned product is heating, however, you're free to toss a salad, prepare a vegetable, feed the dog or change your clothes for a quick dash to an evening meeting.

Take Time to Save Time

Making your own convenience foods is like putting time away in a bank and drawing on that account when you need a quick meal at some later date. That's what you're doing when you make a double batch of spaghetti sauce and freeze or can part of it. You're also banking time when you make a four-loaf bread recipe and freeze two loaves for later or stew a turkey carcass and freeze the broth in various quantities for soup, sauces, gravies, etc. You get the homemade quality you want but the quick preparation of convenience foods.

Make-your-own convenience foods can also save you money. Try this one on the hot chocolate lovers at your house:

- 1/2 cup cocoa
- 1/2 cup sugar (more or less, according to your taste)
- 2 cups nonfat dry milk

Sift together four times. Use 4 heaping teaspoons per cup. Add hot water and stir.

Once this is mixed, it's as quick to fix as comparable storebought products. And the cost per serving is lower, especially if you compare it with mixes in serving-sized packets.

Most packaged coating and seasoning mixes are quite expensive when you consider that they're mostly flour or bread crumbs. The next time you have time to spare and some dry bread to recycle, try mixing up a batch of seasoned crumbing:

BASIC SEASONED CRUMBING

- 2/3 cup dry bread crumbs
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 teaspoons parsley flakes, crumbled
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 1/8 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/8 teaspoon thyme
- 1/8 teaspoon white pepper

Mix ingredients together well and store in a tightly covered container.

Makes enough for 2 chickens, 2 1/2 pounds each. To use, measure 1/2 of the mix into a plastic bag and shake with chicken parts, 2 or 3 pieces at a time, which have first been moistened with milk or water. Bake in a single layer in shallow pan at 375° F. for 50 minutes, or until done.

For fish, use the same basic mix but add 1 teaspoon grated lemon rind; for pork, 1/2 teaspoon ground sage; for lamb, 1/2 teaspoon rosemary.

Variations: Try substituting cracker meal, crushed cornflake crumbs or cornmeal for bread crumbs.

Granola fans will like the following make-it-yourself cereal:

GRANOLA

- 5 1/3 cups rolled oats
- 1 cup wheat germ
- 1/2 cup hulled sunflower seeds
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/3 cup honey
- 1/3 cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2/3 cup raisins

Mix together oats, wheat germ, sunflower seeds, cinnamon, and salt in a large bowl. Over medium heat, stir oil, honey, sugar and vanilla until hot and well blended. Pour over contents of bowl and blend well. Divide between 2 baking sheets, spreading mixture evenly. Bake at 325° F. for 20 minutes, stirring once or twice. Cool on trays and stir in raisins. Store in large jars or plastic bags.

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For a not-so-sweet product, leave out either the honey or the brown sugar. To lower the cost of the recipe, increase the oats and substitute brown sugar for the honey. Optional ingredients that will increase the cost include nuts and coconut. (Add coconut for the last 10-15 minutes of baking time -- it burns easily.) You can use this cereal as a cookie base, too, or as a topping for pudding or yogurt.

Here's a basic quick biscuit mix:

BISCUIT MIX

- 8 cups all-purpose flour
- 4 tablespoons baking powder
- 4 teaspoons salt
- 1 cup shortening

Mix flour, baking powder and salt in large bowl. Cut in shortening with a pastry blender or two knives until mix resembles coarse meal. Store in tightly covered container. Makes about 9 cups. Keep refrigerated. You can use this in any recipe calling for a commercial quick biscuit mix.

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