



**THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO  
BUYING, STORING, AND ENJOYING  
PASTURE-RAISED MEAT IN BULK**

**Maxine Taylor**





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*There's a Cow in My Freezer; The Complete Guide to Buying, Storing, and Enjoying Pasture-Raised Meat in Bulk.*

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## CHAPTER 7

# **FREEZER ORGANIZATION AND THE FREEZER INVENTORY**

Having a freezer full of locally raised, grass-fed meat is undeniably satisfying, but that large stockpile can quickly turn from bounty to burden if you don't stay organized. Luckily, there are only two elements needed to achieve this: a system for keeping your meat physically organized within your freezer and a freezer inventory that allows you to see, at a glance, what you have on hand.

### **Organizing Your Freezer**

The first step to making good use of the meat you've purchased is being able to actually locate what you're looking for. If finding a particular item always requires a frustrating 20-minute rummage through the freezer that leaves you with numb hands and a sore back from being bent over so long, you'll soon find yourself avoiding the freezer—and its contents—altogether. Having a

well-organized freezer allows you to quickly and easily find what you're looking for. Organization is especially important when using chest freezers because they lack the convenient shelves of upright models.

### *Grouping Packages and Using Containers*

To make specific packages easier to find, they should be kept together with other similar items. How you divvy up your meat is completely up to you, but the most commonly used distinctions are by species (beef with beef, pork with pork, etc.) and/or by general type of cut (steaks and chops, ground beef and sausage, roasts and stew meat, organs meats, etc.). Whether you choose to use one system or the other—or both—will depend on what makes most sense for you given the meat you have and the size of your freezer. For example, if you only have beef in your freezer, of course it makes sense to separate packages by cut. Someone who has a small freezer might decide to group their beef steaks and pork chops together, since they're a similar type of cut (suitable for quick, high-heat cooking) and combine their packages of ground beef and sausage together as well. Another person with a larger freezer might decide to separate packages by both animal and cut type, with beef steaks, ground beef, pork chops, and sausage all kept separately. Keep in mind that the more similarly shaped items are, the easier it is to efficiently pack them together.

Once you've decided how you're going to separate your meat, you need to find a way to actually keep it separate. If you're using an upright freezer, this may be as simple as stacking packages together on designated shelves. If you're using a chest

freezer, however, you'll need to find some form of container. These can take many forms—milk crates, large plastic storage bins, cardboard file boxes, heavy-duty canvas bags, etc. The only requirements for a container are that it be sturdy enough to be lifted in and out of the freezer when full, won't be damaged by the cold temperature, and can be stacked with relative ease.

The key is finding containers that fit the dimensions of your freezer well. The containers themselves take up space (especially if they have thick plastic sides), and the empty space between containers must either be filled with loose packages or given up. To maximize usable freezer space, find containers that fit the freezer's internal dimensions as snugly as possible while still allowing for enough space for you to get your hands around them to lift them up. Unfortunately, since a freezer's dimensions are model-specific, there's no shortcut to finding containers that are a perfect fit—you'll have to take measurements, shop around, and crunch the numbers. Use a tape measure to determine each internal dimension of your freezer: top to bottom, side to side, and back to front. If you have a chest freezer with one or more hanging baskets, be sure to measure both from the bottom of the freezer to the top of the freezer and from the bottom of the freezer to the bottom of the basket. If your chest freezer has a "shelf" on one side (under which the motor is housed), be sure to measure its dimensions as well. Remember to allow for enough space to get your hands around each container and to slide a basket (if you have one) over a container.

When looking for containers that best fit your freezer's dimensions, it's important to keep container size and weight when full in mind. If, for example, the internal dimensions of your

freezer are 38" long x 26" deep x 35" high, you could fill that space with three 36" x 24" x 10" plastic bins stacked on top of each other. But such large containers will be unwieldy and very heavy when filled with packages of meat. In this case, it would be much better to get a larger number of smaller containers—for instance, perhaps six 18" x 12" x 10" containers. Remember, however, that unless your containers fit together perfectly like pieces of a puzzle, the more small containers you use, the more freezer space you'll lose.

While places like The Container Store have numerous higher-end options for containers, be sure to check retailers like Target, Lowe's, and Staples for potentially less expensive possibilities, as well as taking a look around Craigslist, local yard sales, and your own garage or basement. If you're having trouble finding rigid boxes or bins that meet your size needs, consider heavy-duty canvas or vinyl bags, which can easily conform to the space they're placed in.

If you're using many containers, you may want to label each to help quickly identify the contents. When placing containers in the freezer, place the ones you'll be accessing most frequently toward the top if using a chest freezer or toward the front at eye level if using an upright freezer.

### *An Alternative Option*

While grouping packages together based on type of animal and/or broad categories of cut is the most common—and usually most useful—method for organizing a freezer, there's another option that may appeal to you.

The “Bag Method” is a time-based organizational system. In this method, you calculate how many pounds of meat you and your family will eat in a given time period (typically a week, but perhaps two) and find a combination of packages that equals or comes close to that weight and place these together in a plastic grocery bag that is then tied close. For example, if you know your family typically eats 4.5 pounds of meat per week, you might include a 3-pound ham and a 1.5-pound package of stew meat in one bag, two 1-pound packages of ground lamb and a 2.5-pound chuck roast in a second bag, and a single whole chicken in a third. Then, at the beginning of each time period, you select a bag at random to move to your refrigerator (or fridge freezer if each bag covers a longer time period) and create a meal plan around whatever’s inside.

This method is great for people who don’t mind being surprised, and it’s particularly helpful if you need to maximize the square footage of your freezer, since bags can be layered on top of one another so that all available freezer space is used. It can also make meal planning for the week a bit easier, since you can focus on choosing recipes to suit whatever cuts of meat the bag contained. But apportioning all the meat this way takes more effort upfront, and you’re at the mercy of the contents of whichever bag you choose. While you could certainly put back a bag if you didn’t feel like having whatever it contained that particular week and choose another, this system is not effective if you or other family members frequently crave specific foods. If you absolutely *must* satisfy your yen for lamb chops with mint sauce and your four-year-old is going through a phase where he only wants to eat burgers, you’re not going to be able to quickly

locate the specific items you need with this system. This system can also make it more difficult to meet meal needs for specific occasions. For example, if you plan to make a ham on Easter, you'll need to sort through your freezer to find a bag that contains a ham.

## **Creating and Maintaining a Freezer Inventory**

Sorting the items in your freezer to make finding packages easier is only the first half of an effective organizational plan. The second is creating and maintaining a freezer inventory. A freezer inventory is a list of your freezer's contents that allows you to quickly see what you have without needing to actually open the freezer.

### *Inventory Options*

You have several options when it comes to creating a freezer inventory, so choose the one that works best for your situation. The first is creating a paper inventory. This can be as simple as using the invoice your butcher gave you, or you may choose to hand-write or type out a list. This sheet can be taped to or near the freezer for convenience and items can be crossed off as they're removed and used. For cases in which you have a number of packages of the same item, you can use tick marks to keep track of how many you've used and then cross the item off completely once all packages have been eaten.

You can also keep your inventory on a small dry erase board or chalkboard. The ability to both easily erase and add items will help keep your inventory neater and easier to read and makes

this an excellent choice if you anticipate frequently adding items to your freezer (additional meat purchases, large batches of things like stock or pasta sauce, etc.).

The third option is to keep an electronic inventory—on your computer, your phone, or saved on the cloud through a service like Google Drive so that it can be accessed from multiple devices. An electronic inventory is easy to add to, subtract from, and rearrange. If you save the inventory on your phone or in the cloud, you can access it when away from home, making grocery shopping a bit easier if you haven't had time to meal plan. This format is also best if you're planning to keep a lot of optional information on your inventory (see below). However, because an electronic inventory isn't always in plain view, you may have trouble remembering to update it when you add or remove something. And if multiple people will be getting in and out of the freezer, you'll need to make sure that each person has access to and the ability to edit the electronic inventory.

### *What to Include in Your Freezer Inventory*

Regardless of the medium used, a freezer inventory should include the following, set up as column headings:

- Cut of meat/contents of package ("Italian sausage," "whole chicken," "sirloin steak," etc.). If it's important to you, include the number of individual items in each package ("Italian sausage (4 links)" or "sirloin steak (2x)"). Be sure to arrange your inventory so that the list follows a logical order. For instance, in addition to grouping beef items together, list the different

types of steaks one after another before moving on to the different types of roasts.

- **Weight of each package.** It's fine to round to the nearest quarter- or half-pound. In most cases all packages of the same item will be very close in weight, but if not, you can either list exactly how many packages are each weight (for example, "1.5lbs (2x), 2.5lbs (1x)") or you can simply give a range ("1.5–2.5lbs"). If the butcher's inventory or the package labels do not include weights, you'll need to use a food scale to weigh each package.
- **Total Packages.** Knowing how many packages of each cut you started with is helpful for determining how quickly you're eating a particular item and may be useful to refer back to when making future bulk meat purchases.
- **Packages Used/Packages Remaining.** If you'll be using tick marks on a paper inventory, you'll want to keep track of packages used. If using an erasable or electronic inventory, you can keep track of either or both.
- **Packages/Pounds Eaten This Month.** To ensure that your meat lasts as long as you need it to last, it's important to set a limit of a certain number of pounds or packages of meat per month (for more information, see the next chapter). The Pounds/Packages Eaten This Month column allows you to track your monthly consumption and can be cleared at the beginning of each month. So, in addition to noting when you use an item in the permanent Packages Used and/or Packages Remaining column(s), you'll also put that informa-



tion in the revolving monthly column. (If tracking pounds per month, multiply number of packages removed by the weight of each package.)

In addition to the above, you may also want to include some or all of the following, depending on how much space you have on your inventory and what details are important to you:

- **Date Added.** Because most or all of the contents of your freezer will be meat purchased in bulk at one time, it's not necessary to list the date added for each package. You may, however, want to note the date that all the meat from a particular purchase was placed in the freezer (for example, the quarter beef was added May 15, 2018). Because meat purchased this way is very fresh and well-wrapped, keeping track of the date added is less about making sure you use packages before they go bad and more about keeping track of how quickly you're eating down your freezer. If, however, you have a lot of items coming in and out of the freezer, you may want to include a package's add date on the inventory.
- **Date Last Used.** If using an erasable or electronic inventory, you may want to note the date you remove an item, updating that date the next time you remove another package of the same item. This can be useful if you're trying to more evenly stagger your consumption of particular items. For example, if you see from your inventory that you had one of your two packages of filet mignon two weeks ago, you'll probably want to wait a few months before having that second package. Or perhaps after looking at your inventory you'll see that you haven't had one of your whole chickens in a while.

- **Time to Defrost.** This is information that will be filled in as you use your meat and, once you know it, can be helpful for future meal planning. The first time you take out a particular item, write down how long it takes to defrost in the refrigerator or in a sink full of cold water.
- **Notes.** This is a catch-all for any other information you may want to keep track of, and the notes section is generally something that's filled out as you go through the meat in your freezer so that it can be referred back to later. To improve your experience buying bulk meat in the future, you may want to note if there are any changes to the cut instructions you would make next time (larger/smaller packages, grinding certain tougher cuts, sausage flavors you particularly liked or didn't like, etc.). You can also leave yourself reminders for cooking instructions or favorite recipes. But because including a notes section on an inventory can clutter it up very quickly, it's usually best to keep these notes in a separate document.

### *Tips for Maintaining a Freezer Inventory*

A freezer inventory is only beneficial if it's accurate and faithfully kept up-to-date. If you find yourself forgetting to update your inventory when you add or remove items (which is especially likely if your inventory is not physically attached to or near the freezer), consider putting a reminder someplace you're likely to see it, such as taped to the inside of the freezer door or in a highlighted, all-caps note at the top of the document you use for meal planning. It's also a good idea to re-inventory the contents

of the freezer every four to six months to double-check that your records are accurate.

If you're at the point where you've made a subsequent purchase of the same type of meat and now have both new and old packages of the same cuts, it's best to list these separately on your freezer inventory—for example: “top sirloin (2017)” and “top sirloin (2018).” This way, it's easy to keep track of which items from the older order still need to be consumed before you begin enjoying the same cuts from the new order. (Older packages should also be kept on top or in front of newer ones so that they're more accessible.)

Because knowing how many total packages you began with can be a useful planning tool for making future bulk purchases, do not completely erase or delete an item when all packages have been removed. If using paper, dry erase board, or chalkboard, you can simply cross out the item (ensuring that the words underneath are still legible) or place an X in front of the item name. If using an electronic inventory, you can use the strikethrough tool or move the item to a separate part of the document.

Appendix C includes a sample freezer inventory and a blank template that you can customize and either print or copy for your own use.



Keeping your freezer's contents organized and being able to quickly know exactly what you have without digging around go a long way to ensuring you'll actually use the meat you've purchased. There are, however, other important strategies you'll

need to use in order to make dining from your freezer a regular, hassle-free habit. In the final chapter, we'll explore the more "hands on" side of the equation, including meal planning and cooking techniques.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Maxine Taylor* is a health and wellness acquisitions editor, freelance content developer, and lover of all things tasty. Since making her first purchases in 2011, she's become an outspoken champion of the "whole animal" way of buying and enjoying local, humanely raised meat.

Her goal is to show everyone how easy and rewarding this traditional way of eating can be. She holds degrees in literature, history, and professional writing from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is a certified technical writer and instructional designer. Maxine currently lives in Portland, Oregon.



**Imagine enjoying delicious, nutritious, locally raised, and ethically produced meat whenever you wanted, without the hassle of a trip to the farmers market or the hefty price tag at a high-end grocery store.**

That's what buying meat in bulk is all about. Ordering beef, pork, lamb, chicken, and other meats by the quarter, half, or whole animal is an excellent way to save time and money. It also better connects you to your food, the people who produce it, and a more traditional and holistic way of eating. But how do you even buy an entire cow or half a hog? What exactly do you get? Where do you put it all?

Based on years of research and the firsthand experience of a health editor who's been eating this way since 2011, *There's a Cow in My Freezer* is an easy-to-follow, step-by-step guide that walks readers through the entire process of buying meat in bulk. You'll discover:

- why local grass-fed and pasture-raised meat is better for you, the animals, the community, and the environment, and how buying meat in bulk can simplify your life
- how to choose what to buy based on your household's budget, space, and eating preferences
- how to find local farmers and pick the one that's the best fit based on the things that matter most to you
- how to choose a freezer, plus creative options if you're short on space
- how the buying process works, including deposits, cut instructions, and replenishing your freezer year after year
- how to keep your freezer organized and keep yourself on track with a freezer inventory and weekly meal plan
- how to take the guesswork out of cooking grass-fed meat, and tips for keeping things fun and stress-free in the kitchen

... plus much, much more.

**If you've ever been curious about buying meat in bulk but didn't know where to start, or felt overwhelmed or intimidated by the idea of whole-animal eating, then this book is for you!**

