

**P**ickling, curing, smoking: traditional forms of preserving foods are back in fashion — but freezing? While our ancestors buried gluts of summer produce to sustain themselves through the winter, the pure and natural art of freezing has been lost. Instead, it's stuck in a 1990s rut of convenience or retro ready meals and dinosaur-shaped nuggets — blighted by the slow creep of freezer burn and the molten-hot middle of dishes microwaved from frozen.

Yet there's a shudder of change in the freezer aisle. The research consultancy Kantar reported that the value of frozen food sales increased 6.1% last year, making it the fastest-growing food category in Britain. It coincides with a shift away from fast and functional ready meals towards innovative and often premium products that are luring a new shopper to the frozen aisle.

Last year, Iceland's runaway success was its vegan No Bull burger, which outsold all its other summer launches. Waitrose has introduced monkfish, hake and halibut as part of its new frozen fish range, and Field Fare now has a zero-packaging option, allowing customers to scoop apricot halves, chestnuts and gooseberries straight from its freezers.

The health guru Deliciously Ella has also ventured into the freezer cabinet, with a range of plant-based frozen meals, offering up dishes such as cauliflower and lentil dahl and a five-bean chilli. "We make the meals in small batches and freeze them immediately, so it preserves the nutrients and the flavour and stops any food waste," Ella Mills, the founder, explains.

It's this new narrative that is helping reposition freezer food: less about penny-pinching or

# THE NEW ICE AGE

Forget naff ready meals, freezing food is about keeping ingredients fresher and tastier for longer — and reducing waste. *Rachel Walker reports*

Photographs by Dennis Pederson

time-saving and more on the nutritional benefits of freezing ingredients in their prime. This is the message at the heart of the US frozen food start-up Daily Harvest, which raised \$43m in a recent funding round, thanks to initial backing from A-list investors including Gwyneth Paltrow and Serena Williams, who are fans of its blend-at-home smoothies and frozen chia bowls. "Frozen is actually nutritionally better than the food people are buying fresh in the grocery store," says its founder, Rachel Drori.

Daily Harvest calls on some compelling statistics to back this up: blueberries have three times more vitamin C when frozen versus fresh after three days and frozen spinach has 25% more vitamin E than fresh after three days. It's a direct challenge to the traditional supermarket model of buying ingredients that have been picked early and left to ripen in refrigerated containers. According to Drori: "Refrigeration doesn't prevent deterioration, it just turns it into a long, slow, sad death."

It's a statement that the Iceland head chef, Neil Nugent, can get behind. "Nobody likes throwing food away," he says. "Most kitchens have a big fridge full of food that is steadily going off and a dinky freezer. I'd reverse it and have a big freezer with a dinky fridge."

It's estimated that frozen food can reduce household food waste by as much as 47% — and the message is starting to filter through to customers. In 2017, the sector reportedly attracted 320,000 new shoppers. "People are definitely realising the benefits of frozen: frozen garlic, ginger, chillies and herbs — it saves you bucketloads of time and you have no waste," says Nugent. "Soft fruit is great too. It's picked in its prime, so you get



By Neil Nugent, Iceland head chef

## FISH

Fish is often sprayed with water to protect it from freezer burn, so when you defrost it, the moisture is from this ice glaze — it's not coming out of the fish. The best practice is to defrost fish in the fridge overnight on a plate, covered with a bit of kitchen paper. And if you defrost it at ambient temperature — on a work surface for 2-3 hours, or in ambient water for 10-15 minutes — cook it straightaway.

## SPINACH

There's a lot of water in spinach, so it needs squeezing before going in a dish. But don't squeeze the living daylights out of it, because that moisture has a lot of flavour, so just take out a bit rather than squeezing it dry.



year-round seasonality and zero waste from a bag of frozen strawberries or blueberries, which can go straight in your porridge or on your muesli.”

For Nugent, the transparency of frozen food also has growing appeal. “People are reading packaging more carefully and noticing that lots of ingredients on a fresh pizza might have been frozen and then defrosted.” He uses the example of the fish counter: “In British retail there’s no such thing as a fresh prawn —



they’ve all been frozen previously, so why not buy them frozen?

“Frozen fish is often fresher, too,” he continues, referring to Iceland’s sea bass. “Most retailers buy from farms in the eastern Mediterranean. It’s not unusual for it to take more than a week from when the fish is caught to being sorted, loaded on a truck and taken to a depot — and that’s all before a customer even sees it. Our sea bass is frozen within four hours of it being caught, and is half the price of fresh.”

On paper, frozen food might be an easy sell, but there’s uncertainty about freezing and defrosting: according to research by Bird’s Eye, 28% of Brits wish they could use their freezer better and 34% bin

### It’s all about the nutritional benefits of freezing ingredients in their prime

frozen food as they’re unsure if it is still safe to eat. “With the way food education is going, there’s a fair chance of leaving school as ignorant of food and cooking as you arrived,” says Prue Leith, founder of Leiths School of Food and Wine and presenter of The Great British Bake Off, who offers freezing tips in her latest cookbook, *Prue: My All-Time Favourite Recipes*.

She’s not alone. Tom Kerridge’s *Fresh Start* cookbook includes a section on batch cooking and freezing, while the vegetarian expert Anna Jones peppers her writing with tips on freezing fresh pesto in ice-cube trays, making quantities of curry paste that can be divided up and frozen, and churning frozen berries into an instant ice cream. “I use my freezer a lot,” Leith says. “I batch-cook popular dishes such as shepherd’s pie, fish cakes or lasagne. It’s a really useful method of keeping the nutritional value in food, and it’s great when grandchildren arrive unannounced for the weekend.” She recommends making your own stock, reducing it so it is very strong, then freezing it in small pots. She suggests freezing oranges, and placing soft berries on flat sheets before putting them into bags to save space once frozen.

The chest freezer, once the ultimate in white goods, looks set for a revival. As Natalie Hitchins, head of content strategy, home products and services at Which?, says: “People have become savvier about the benefits of frozen food, and manufacturers have responded by introducing freezers with increased storage capacity and more flexible options — for example, fridge-freezers with compartments that can be used as either a fridge or a freezer. What’s interesting is there’s no correlation between higher spend and a better product — we’ve tested freezers costing less than £300 that are far better than models costing more than three times as much.”

Freezing might not yet have the romance of curing or fermenting, but it’s a form of preservation that has spanned generations. As the image of cheap convenience food gives way to preportioned home-cooked dishes and aisles of flash-frozen fish and greens, reaching into the freezer is no longer the lazy option — now it’s the discerning choice ■

#### TOP FREEZING TIPS

##### AVOCADO

Avocados contain a lot of fat, so defrost them at ambient temperature for half an hour, covered in clingfilm, then they’ll be soft enough to cut. For smoothies, the blade of your machine will cut a frozen one up easily.

##### CHIPS

Don’t pile oven chips on top of each other. If you want them crisp, space them out on a thick-bottomed tray. Packs don’t usually have fryer instructions (so few people own one), but if you do, drop the frozen chips straight in and they’ll crisp up nicely.

##### SWEET-POTATO CHIPS

Ingredients that are high in sugar always struggle to crisp up, so if you want a bit of crunch, look for a frozen sweet-potato chip with a polenta coating.

##### PEAS

Peas go starchy if they’re not frozen within a couple of hours, so it’s often better to buy frozen than try to track down fresh. I pop them straight in a fish pie from frozen. Also, never immerse peas in water — all the green water you throw away is flavour going down the sink. Steam rather than simmer.

##### PERSONAL FAVOURITE

We sell a wild red shrimp that is the tastiest, sweetest thing. They’re always in my freezer, ready to drop in a risotto, pop on the BBQ or in a steamer.



FOOD STYLING: IAN GRAHAM. WITH THANKS TO HAMILTON ICE SCULPTORS