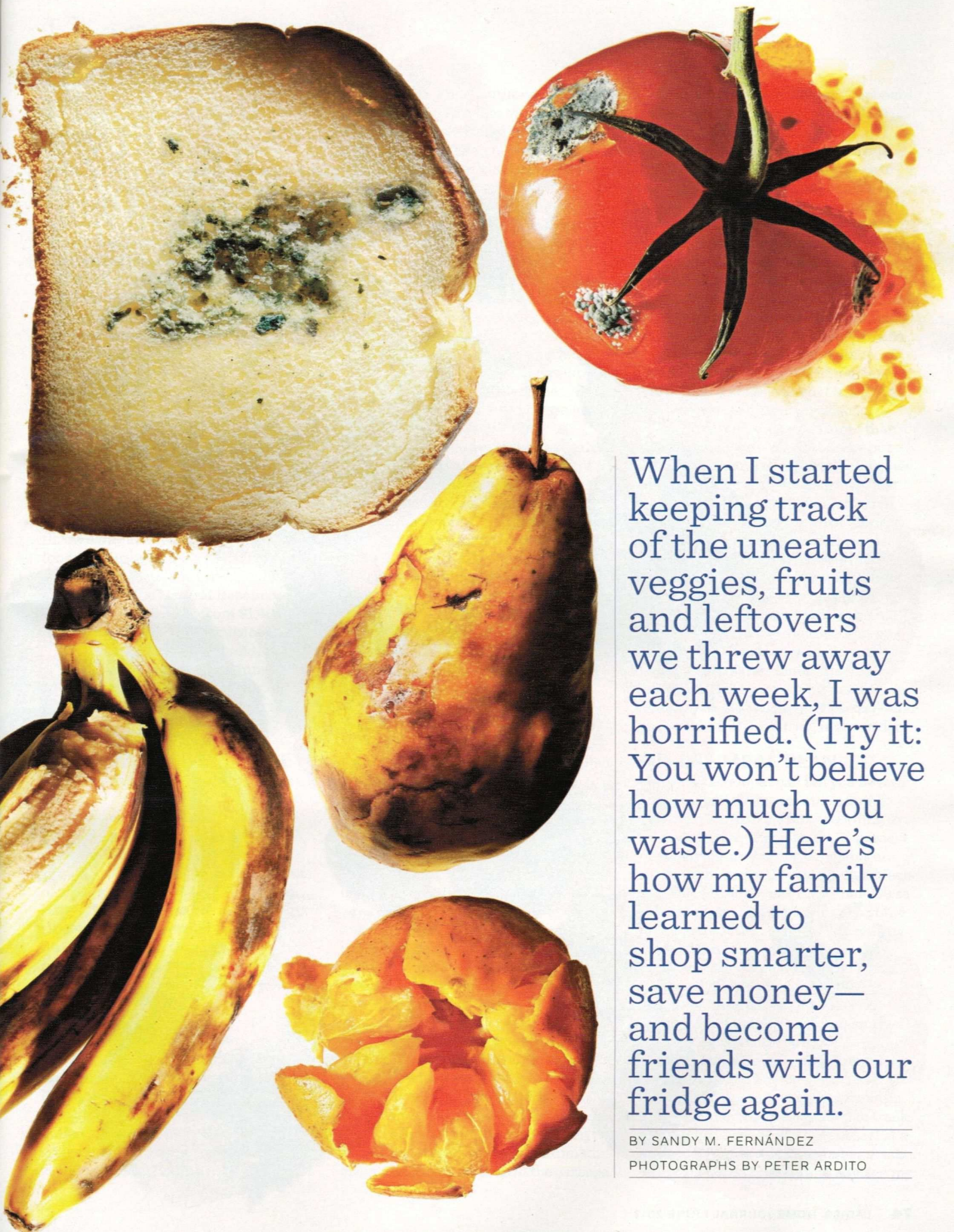


# WASTE NOT!







When I started keeping track of the uneaten veggies, fruits and leftovers we threw away each week, I was horrified. (Try it: You won't believe how much you waste.) Here's how my family learned to shop smarter, save money—and become friends with our fridge again.

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BY SANDY M. FERNÁNDEZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER ARDITO

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# I began to notice how much food my family threw away last summer,

when I was buying lots of fruit, fresh veggies and meats for grilling. All were full of juicy promise when I dropped them into the grocery cart. A couple of weeks later I'd open the fridge and discover some part of a past haul quietly liquefying in the crisper. One morning, in a bag containing some rotting spinach, I found a 16-day-old supermarket receipt. Of the \$41 I'd spent, more than \$10 had gone into the garbage rather than our stomachs.

This was infuriating, expensive and environmentally indefensible. But as it turns out, my family's outrageous waste is the American norm. Most households throw away about 12 percent of all the food they bring home and 25 percent of the vegetables. The annual tab, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council, runs from \$1,400 to \$2,300 for the average family of four.

"That's it," I told my husband, Rob. "From now on we throw nothing away. If we buy it, we eat it."

"I'm scared," he replied. I don't think he was being sarcastic.

## THE PANTRY CHALLENGE

I was raised to keep a full fridge, freezer and pantry. But my larder no longer looked plentiful—it looked profligate. I decided to launch our no-waste experiment with a shelf-clearing challenge: For a week we'd eat just out of what we had on hand. That meant stir-frying three times to use up every single wilting carrot and zucchini, finally digging out that hunk of mystery meat in the freezer and opening plenty of canned goods that were bumping up against their expiration dates.

I've always considered myself the type who'll eat anything. But when I perceive a food as being old—even if it's unexpired, frozen and perfectly fine—I've discovered that I turn on it. So the first night of our challenge, when Rob pulled an ancient box of creamed spinach out of the freezer, I shuddered at the thought of eating it. Psychologist

Rachel Herz, Ph.D., author of *That's Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion*, confirmed that my queasiness was all in my head. "With common foods that you know are okay, you just need to suck it up," she said. So I held my breath, dug in—and the creamed spinach tasted fine. From then on, when I was iffy about an aging food, Rob would be the one to cook it.

We also got stricter with our 5-year-old son, who'd balk at a slightly spotty banana or any apple with a bruise. (He's not alone: American consumers now consider slight cosmetic imperfections that our parents wouldn't have blinked at to be spoilage.) "Think of the Pilgrims," I told him. "They were happy to have any food at all!"

We were so pleased with the results of our pantry challenge that we kept it going past the first week, then the second and into the third and fourth. Our dinners weren't elegant, but eating from our shelves and freezer saved us \$400 in a month and primed us for the next step: becoming smarter shoppers.

## SUPERMARKET SAVVY

Our pantry challenge uncovered, among other items, a languishing tube of anchovy paste (bought for a recipe I never made), a bag of frozen hake (because it was on sale) and several cans of corn I thought our son would like (when he was 3)—all proof that Rob and I are hopelessly undisciplined food shoppers.

"Most of us cook from a recipe, whether written down or in our head," says Ronna Welsh, a former restaurant chef who now runs Purple Kale Kitchenworks, a culinary school for home cooks in Brooklyn, New York. "So when we lack an ingredient, we don't improvise—we end up buying it for that one-time use." Welsh's words hit home. In recent years, as I've cooked less, my kitchen confidence has plummeted. So instead of throwing in a dash of this or a pinch of that or swapping out one ingredient for something else, I've become a recipe slave: I follow the directions to a tee, right down to sending my husband out for fresh herbs if we only have dried or a can of tomato paste when I need only a tablespoon. Then the remaining parsley, or thyme or tomato paste, eventually ends up in the garbage.

A similar fate awaits many "cupboard castaways," as Brian Wansink, Ph.D., director of a food lab at Cornell University, has dubbed them. In one study Wansink asked 412 families to unearth a food item they'd bought at least six months earlier and explain why they still had it. His discovery? Most were special purchases, acquired for a specific occasion. When that passed, the food rotated to the back of the shelf to die a slow death. "This kind of waste is really misplaced optimism," Wansink told me. "You think, 'Oh, this is cool' or 'I'll serve that at a dinner party,' but once you get the item home, you either don't know what to do with it or forget its original purpose."

With Rob and me, it was more than buying foods we wanted to serve but never got around to making (though we definitely did that). We were also just plain buying too much—which is far and away the biggest cause of home food waste, says Jonathan Bloom, author of *American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half Its Food*. A fear of hunger seems to be wired into the human brain; research shows we tend to overestimate pantry shortages and under-remember overages. So when doubt hits in the grocery aisle (*Do we have cream cheese?*) we'll stock up just in case—and then find a full tub sitting in the fridge.

## ON THE MEAL PLAN

Any frugal shopper can tell you how to avoid this dilemma: menu planning. But there's a reason that, according to one retail trade association, 76 percent of supermarket-buying decisions are made in the aisles. Planning ahead feels like dull, burdensome *work*—much less fun than spotting something awesome and tossing it into the cart. Indeed, my foodie friends were appalled at the very concept. "What if you're not in the mood for the meal that's on the schedule?" one asked. "I bet French women don't menu plan," said another.

To get a pragmatic perspective, I called Monica Knight, cofounder of the Boise-based Fabulessly Frugal. A dedicated couponer with four mouths to feed, Knight has a lot of food to track: She once bought 60 boxes of cereal at a single go. And she deals with her stash with ruthless efficiency and advised me



to do the same, buying in bulk when items I know I'll use are on sale and a coupon is available, and planning my family's meals a week or two at a time based on what's in my always-stocked fridge and cupboards. She also recommends shopping from a list (and never succumbing to impulse buys), cooking in large batches that can be frozen for future meals and scheduling leftover nights into your menu plan.

I set out to put Knight's strategies into action. The reconnaissance part was fun: I enjoyed perusing supermarket flyers and figuring out how to fit their specials with the items that are usually on our (now-sparse) shelves. It was like a puzzle. But a glitch quickly arose: my overly ambitious estimate of kitchen time. I like to cook (*really*), so I'd buy food thinking that I'd make a meal three or four nights a week—but actually came through only once or twice. That meant I was once again stuck with a fridge and pantry overflowing with food we weren't eating.

The other surprise was our unexpected resistance to a crucial piece of Knight's gospel: meals composed of leftovers. These dinners, almost by definition, are unorthodox, often consisting of small amounts of unrelated foods from other nights. In theory this is an "interesting," more creative way of eating that Rob and I should embrace. But in reality I found it... *inadequate*. I can't help it—I like a protein, a carb and a vegetable on my plate. And Rob feels the same way. Plus I enjoy the big reveal of cooking, the ta-da! that comes with putting a roast chicken fresh from the oven, or even a big pot of soup, on the table.

## FRIDGE MANAGEMENT 101

It was no secret that Rob and I had a slovenly approach to refrigeration. We'd scoop leftovers into old yogurt cartons or cloudy plastic containers

bought from an infomercial six years ago, then stick them somewhere in the back of the fridge where they'd go unnoticed for days, even weeks. I'd store herbs in the plastic bags I'd put them in at the market and keep restaurant and takeout food in their original containers. When I told this to B. J. Stein, a senior product manager at OXO, he was gentle but disapproving. "Ultimately, there are two requirements of stored food," he said. "It has to last as long as possible and it must remind you to eat it in time. That's why you need good, clear containers." If the food looks better, he explained, you're more likely to eat it the next day. "It's a subconscious thing. If something's in a leftover Chinese takeout box, it's like, 'What *is* this mystery food?'"

Lucinda Ottusch, a senior home economist at Whirlpool, also touts the virtues of good containers, but her chief focus is fridge organization: grouping like with like so all dairy is in one area, for example, and all leftovers in another. She told me to pay attention to the labels on the fridge and freezer drawers. "Those compartments are designed for the best preservation of the items they're meant for," she said. (Yikes! Am I the only one who just chucked stuff in according to size?)

The upshot of talking to Stein and Ottusch is that I bought a new set of clear plastic refrigerator containers. The novelty of having something so nice-looking helped us keep our fridge neater and cleaner and even made packing lunches of leftovers a bit more exciting. For a while.

## THE BIG CHILL

In our house the freezer is the place where food winds up after it's already endured several days of purgatory in the fridge. Why? Because I've fixated on the notion that fresh is best. I'll cling to

the ideal of never-frozen tilapia, even as days pass, before I jam it in the freezer at the last possible moment. By then, of course, it's a little slimy, so it stays frozen and uneaten for months.

Not that I needed to be told this was wrong, but Ottusch scolded me and reiterated her belief in labeled—and dated—containers for the freezer as well as the fridge. Knight, my Fabulously Frugal role model, keeps a list of what's inside on her freezer door so she doesn't even have to open it to plan a menu. She thereby minimizes freezer burn, which is essentially caused by food unfreezing and freezing as the door opens and closes.

I got so excited about food lists that I taped one to the fridge and the freezer. But keeping up was hard, and the fridge list didn't last. Rob and I made a point of putting something from the freezer on our menu plan at least once a week.

And I began thinking of the freezer as a first-option cooking tool, just like a stovetop or oven: If I had aging tomatoes and roasting them felt like work, I'd puree them and freeze them for sauce. Or I could freeze leftover vegetables in a bag for making stock later. In fact, timely freezing (who knew?) can extend the lives of a staggering array of foods. (See "Don't Toss It, Freeze It," at right.)

In the end I loved having our fridge, freezer and pantry organized and easy to navigate. But stopping food waste takes an ever-vigilant eye: Look away for a day and the cottage cheese has turned green. We haven't achieved my goal of 100 percent no waste, but we're shopping less (which saves time and money) and improvising more. Recently I even used lemon zest in a recipe calling for lemon grass, which meant I wouldn't be throwing out that expensive ingredient a week later. Cordon Bleu it's not, but in our house, most days, the food tastes just fine.

## STOP THROWING FOOD AWAY

I keep pizza dough in the freezer, then thaw it and top it with leftovers. We love raw spinach, but it goes bad quickly, so I'll make a yummy spinach-and-tomato pizza.

**NANCY DEVINE**  
LEVITTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

I brown several pounds of ground meat at a time. I'll use some for the dish I'm cooking, then freeze the rest in two-cup bags. Next time I need ground meat, I grab a bag.

**MARY ENNINGA**  
BLOOMINGTON, MINNESOTA

### WE ASKED FOUR CLEVER READERS TO SHARE THEIR SOLUTIONS.

In summer I have more zucchini than I can use, so I'll sauté a bunch with onion, garlic, parsley and other spices and freeze it for future omelets and frittatas.

**JOYCE RAWLEY**  
RENTON, WASHINGTON

When we have yogurt that's about to expire, I'll mix in some fresh or frozen fruit and make smoothies for my kids. You can also freeze this mixture for yogurt pops.

**JEANNE RODRIGUEZ**  
MADISON, WISCONSIN

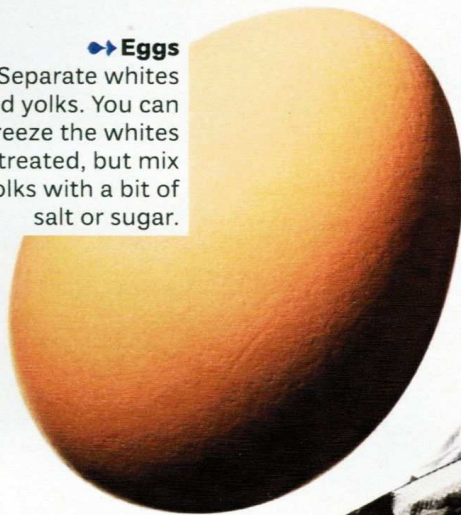


# DON'T TOSS IT, FREEZE IT

PRETTY MUCH EVERYONE KNOWS THAT MEATS, FRUITS AND CASSEROLES CAN BE FROZEN TO EAT LATER, BUT ORGANIZING GURU ANDREA DEKKER DOESN'T STOP THERE—NOT BY A LONG SHOT. HER BLOG, [ANDREADEKKER.COM](http://ANDREADEKKER.COM), LISTS A WIDE RANGE OF FOODS YOU PROBABLY HAD NO IDEA COULD BE STASHED AWAY IN COLD STORAGE.

## ◆◆ Eggs

Separate whites and yolks. You can freeze the whites untreated, but mix yolks with a bit of salt or sugar.

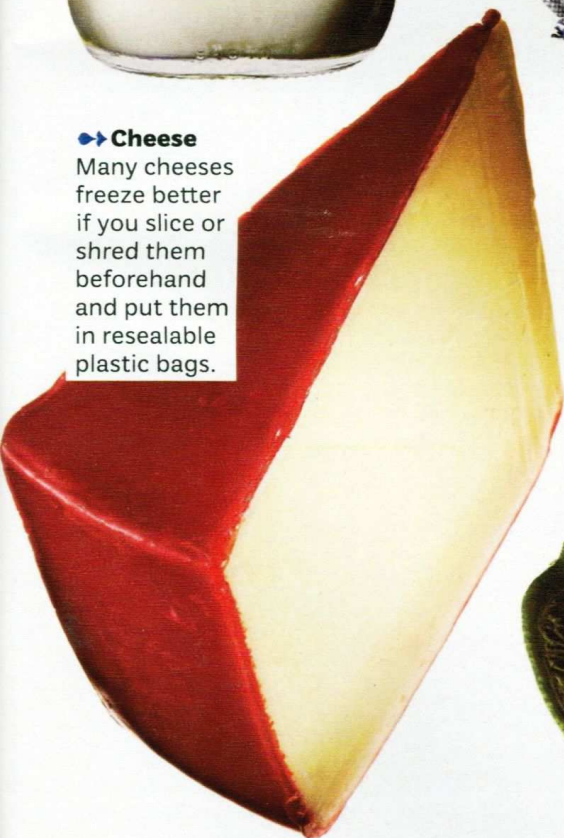


## ◆◆ Milk

In a pinch you can freeze it right in the carton (pour out a cup so the carton won't expand and be sure to secure the top against leaks).

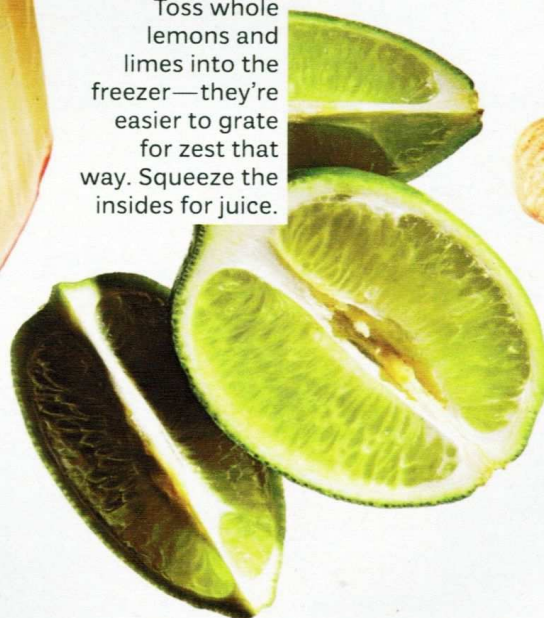
## ◆◆ Cheese

Many cheeses freeze better if you slice or shred them beforehand and put them in resealable plastic bags.



## ◆◆ Citrus Fruits

Toss whole lemons and limes into the freezer—they're easier to grate for zest that way. Squeeze the insides for juice.



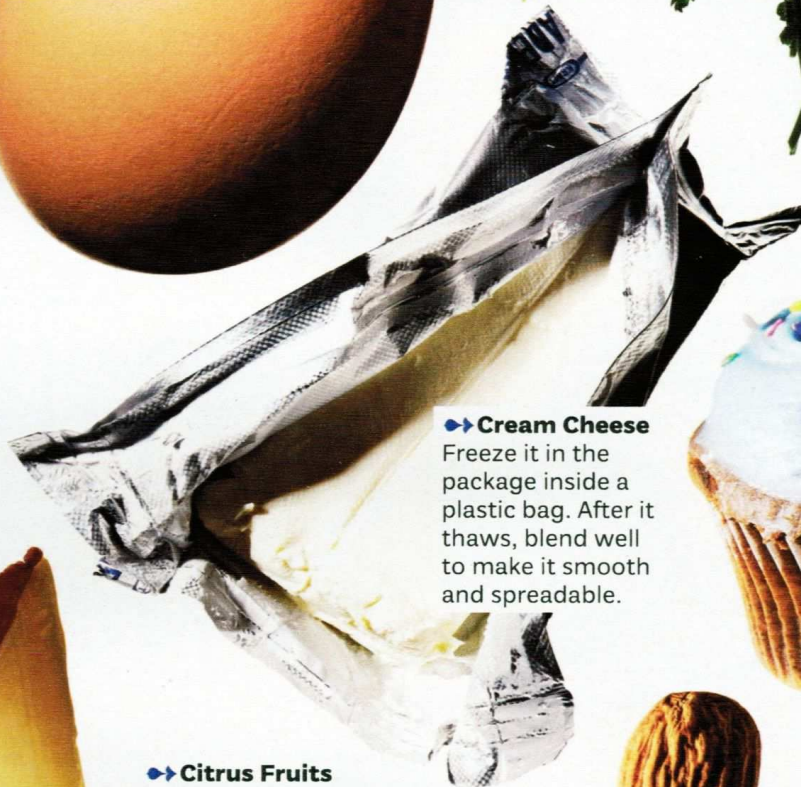
## ◆◆ Fresh Herbs

Chop and pack into ice-cube trays, fill with water, freeze and then store "herb cubes" in plastic bags.



## ◆◆ Cream Cheese

Freeze it in the package inside a plastic bag. After it thaws, blend well to make it smooth and spreadable.



## ◆◆ Cupcakes and Cakes

Ideally, you should freeze the cake and the frosting separately; they'll look prettier.



## ◆◆ Nuts

They can turn rancid quickly, so store them in the freezer in a sealed container.

