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DIVAS ON A DIME

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By Patti Diamond

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PHOTO CAPTION: Chop once, freeze in portions and give future dinners a flavorful head start.



Flavor bases that run the world and rescue dinner

Nearly every cuisine relies on a traditional combination of aromatic vegetables to create its distinctive foundation of flavor. The French have mirepoix. Many Latin and Caribbean kitchens have sofrito. Across several East Asian cuisines, ginger, garlic and scallions provide the opening notes.

These aromatics may not be the stars of the show, but they are indispensable supporting players. Cooked together, they give meals the distinctive flavors we associate with cuisines around the world.

The only drawback is that they require chopping precisely when we are hungry, tired and considering cereal for dinner.

Why not prepare several batches now and freeze them in meal-size portions? You will create your own homemade convenience foods: little cubes of concentrated flavor ready to jump-start dinner.

Make one batch for tonight and one for the freezer. Cool cooked bases promptly, spoon into silicone muffin cups or ice-cube trays and freeze until solid. Transfer to labeled freezer bags, press out excess air and use within three months for optimal quality.

There is no need to thaw. Drop a portion directly into a hot pan, soup pot or slow cooker and proceed as though you had just chopped the ingredients. Look at you, starting dinner before you even knew what it was.

First, mirepoix traditionally con-

tains approximately two parts onion to one part each carrot and celery. Use it to begin soups, stews, sauces, potpies, casseroles or braised dishes.

CLASSIC MIREPOIX

Yield: 6 cups or 12 (1/2-cup) portions

Total time: 30 mins., plus cooling

2 tablespoons oil or butter

4 cups diced onion

2 cups diced carrots

2 cups diced celery

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add vegetables and cook, stirring occasionally, for 10 to 15 minutes, until softened but not browned. Cool and freeze in 1/2-cup portions.

Sofrito varies wonderfully by country, region and family. This versatile version lends rich flavor to beans, rice, soups, stews, ground meat and tomato sauces.



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TOMATO-PEPPER SOFRITO

Yield: 2 1/2 cups or 10 (1/4-cup) portions

Total time: 30 mins., plus cooling

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 large onion, chopped

1 red or green bell pepper, chopped

4 garlic cloves, minced

1 teaspoon dried thyme

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 teaspoon paprika

1 can (14.5 ounces) diced tomatoes, drained

1 bay leaf

large pinch of salt

Heat oil over medium heat. Add onion and pepper; cook until tender, about 8 minutes. Add garlic, thyme, oregano and paprika; cook 1 minute. Stir in tomatoes, add the bay leaf and cook until the mixture is thick and most of the liquid has evaporated, 10 to 15 minutes. Cool and freeze in 1/4-cup portions.

This Asian inspired blend is not intended to represent all Asian cooking, but it is a handy beginning for stir-fries, brothy soups, fried rice, noodles and marinades.

GINGER-GARLIC-SCALLION STARTER

Yield: 1 1/2 cups or 24 (1-tablespoon) portions

Total time: 5 mins.

1/2 cup peeled, chopped fresh ginger

1/2 cup peeled garlic cloves

1 cup chopped green onion

2 tablespoons neutral cooking oil

Pulse everything in a food processor until finely chopped but not liquefied. Freeze uncooked in 1-tablespoon portions.

With a few fragrant cubes tucked into the freezer, you're never starting dinner from scratch. You are starting with an advantage, and on a busy evening, that is worth its weight in onions.

Lifestyle expert Patti Diamond is the penny-pinching, party-planning, recipe developer and content creator of the website *Divas On A Dime* — *Where Frugal, Meets Fabulous!* Visit Patti at www.divasonadime.com and join the conversation on Facebook at [DivasOnADimeDotCom](https://www.facebook.com/DivasOnADimeDotCom). Email Patti at divapatti@divasonadime.com

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