

How the New York City Meatball Helped Build Italian-American Cuisine

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Spaghetti and meatballs made in America. [Photograph: Vicky White, unless otherwise noted]

The Turkish have *kofte*, the Brazilians *almoôdegas*. Polish cooks make *pulpety*, the Swedes *lutfiskuller*, and the Greeks fry *keftedes*. And you can find them all in New York City.

They're all meatballs. But nine times out of ten, when we talk about meatballs in New York, we're only referring to one. It's coated in red sauce and sits over bread or pasta. It's often flecked with dried oregano and hails, clearly, from Italy.

Well, sort of.

In truth, the iconic red sauce meatball—one of the foundational foods of Italian cuisine in the U.S.—has more to do with the New World than Naples. Its development, and its influence on what Italian-American cuisine would become in the U.S., is inextricably tied to New York City. This is the city where Italian-American became *American*, and where the meatball as we know it began.

Yet Italians have been making meatballs since the days of ancient Rome. So why does today's red sauce version look so unlike the meatballs you'll find in Italy?

From Italy to America



[Photograph: Corina Romano]

In Italian, the word for meatballs is *polpette*. Or, if you're in the Abruzzo region, you'd say *polpettine*—tiny meatballs. Yet the phrase "spaghetti and meatballs" is as foreign to the Italians as General Tso's Chicken is to the Chinese.

Head to Southern Italy and you'll find meatballs made with everything from turkey to tripe, but they'll be lighter on the spices and seasonings than American versions, and bread crumbs can make up as much as 50% of the meatball's mass. The Italian *polpetta* is usually no bigger than a golf ball, and primarily used as a protein simmered in soup or stew, or eaten by itself—virtually never served with pasta. And meatballs rarely leave the home: It's uncommon to see meatballs at a restaurant's menu in Italy. If you do, you may be in one geared towards travelers.

*In Italian pasta cookery, few concepts are more vital than a pasta being well matched to its condiment. While ground meat ragus cling well to thick, hearty pasta, a fat meatball does nothing for the noodles beneath it.



The meatball hero from Puma.

Meatballs are inexpensive, hearty fare, and for Italian immigrants in America, they were an easy way to get a taste of home. But as meatballs rolled on in America they transformed from delicate to soup fodder into the fat, richly spiced, red sauce-cloaked items we now so identify with Italian food. It all started on Manhattan's Lower East Side during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where, in 1896, a *New York Times* journalist once wrote, "Of the half million Italians that are in United States, about 100,000 live in this city."

"Thinking back to the immigrants, when people—especially Italians—arrived in the U.S., they didn't have much money," said chef Cesare Casella, the Dean of Italian Studies at the International Culinary Center in New York. "And *polpetta* was something that was always common and popular in Italy, too."

While more wealthy northern Italians tended to move out to central and western states, southern Italians made landfall in downtown Manhattan within proximity of Kleindeutschland, or Little Germany—an enclave of German transplants settled in the Lower East Side, who ran many butcher shops that sold beef and pork. In Italy, those meats were hard to come by in the south, and usually were accompanied by high prices, so a ready supply of more affordable red meat became a gold mine for the growing Italian population.



Soon enough, Italians bought meat from Germans, made meatballs for themselves (with a lot less breadier filler), and—when they realized they could make a profit along the way—sold them to other Italians. But meatballs weren't a meal in and of themselves—even cheap meat need stretching out—so cooks turned to spaghetti, the cheapest noodle around, to fill out their plates, Italian tradition be damned.

Meatball slingers quickly found themselves in possession of new financial and social capital, both among their fellow immigrants and with other New Yorkers, and before long, Italian pork stores started popping up all over the city. They sold all manner of cured meats alongside prepared food, like meatballs, that the rest of New York was still discovering. And an Indo-European fusion food of necessity became, for New Yorkers, an "Old World" delicacy.

The New Convenience Food



The storefront of G. Esposito.

"None of this food existed in Brooklyn when my grandfather arrived!" owner and grandson George Esposito told me. "There was nowhere to get a meatball sandwich, except for here."

George has been working at this Cobble Hill institution since the first grade, and he's proud to say he made his first mozzarella when he was 10 years old. The store's facade is emblazoned with a large pig that advertises the allure of capicola, fresh sausage, and, of course, meatballs made daily on the premises, which come in three styles: fried, saucy, and what George described as "home meatballs," which, he said, "were the ones your grandma made"—big, round, and meaty.

G. Esposito, which opened its doors in 1922, is one of the oldest pork stores of its kind in Brooklyn, and it's seemingly immune to the changing neighborhood around it. New Brooklyn twentysomethings still come in for a container of pesto and a fried prosciutto ball—convenience foods that, like the meatballs, remain popular.



Saucy meatballs from G. Esposito.

"Back then, more difficult foods were not being made—meatballs take a lot of work and ingredients," George explained. "Americans didn't have time for either. Meatballs are time-consuming." But they were easy to like and resembled an already resonant American delicacy: the hamburger. Think of yesterday's meatballs like today's Whole Foods salad bar—a time-saving meal for busy eaters that's homemade-tasting enough to count as comfort food.

The meatball-as-convenience-food concept grew steadily through the turn of the century, as more and more of New York and the country settled into a standardized eight-hour workday. With a greater percentage of the workforce—male and female—conforming to a 9 to 5 schedule, pre-made dishes like meatballs functioned as a kind of fast food, especially when loaded into a crusty hero loaf. Reliable, recognizable, and reasonably priced, they made for an easy meal with few strings attached. And along the way they solidified the American understanding of what "Italian food" meant.

The 20th century also saw Italians integrating more and more into the general population, and as they did so, they left New York for other pastures—taking their meatballs with them. "There was a proliferation of Italian restaurants across the U.S.," chef Andrew Carmellini of New York's Locanda Verde, Bar Primi, and The Dutch told me. "These restaurants became such a staple of American cuisine. Chef Boyardee probably had a lot to do with it, too."

Modern Meatballs on a Roll



Heath's meatballs over polenta. [Photograph: Max Richtwald]

To George Esposito, the family mission of feeding convenience food to busy New Yorkers hasn't changed since the industrial revolution. But his clientele has—Cobble Hill is no longer the tight-knit, closed-off Italian-American community it used to be. Luckily for George, new neighbors still come in for the meatballs.

"A childhood thing has developed around meatballs," Carmellini suggests. "They're made delicious, too—very tasty and tender—and that combines with this unfed, psychological aspect we have with them."

And meatballs aren't standing still. Quite the contrary, they're making appearances on trendy menus all over the city: with potatoes at small plates spot *Pearl & Ash*, stuffed with cheese at Carmellini's Bar Primi, and fried at Danny Meyer's Roman pizzeria Maialino. But no modern restaurant has seen more success from New Yorkers' meatball love than the Meatball Shop, a rapidly expanding mini-chain devoted entirely to the humble meatball. Owners Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow told me, "we love simple comfort food here in New York City that is nostalgic and accessible. Meatballs represent just that."



Meatballs at the Meatball Shop. [Photograph: Robyn Lee]

"For the most part, people in New York don't have big kitchens or time to cook at home, so they are looking to replace home cooked meals in restaurants," Holzman and Chernow continued. "Meatballs are traditionally cooked at home but are now popping up on menus as more and more people are eating out five to seven days a week."

"I didn't see them on the menu before the last couple of years," Carmellini added. "We made duck meatballs at A Voce, and we thought it was a cool idea, so we took it to Locanda Verde." Now Locanda's lamb meatballs are so popular he can't take them off the menu. "People will come here just for them, because they have a unique flavor and cuisine."

The same goes for chef Cesare Casella. At his acclaimed restaurant *Salumeria Rosi Parmacotto* in Manhattan's Upper East Side, he serves his meatballs over polenta. The gluten-free meatballs are made with pork and beef, with added pork and beef fats for flavor.



Meatball sliders at the Meatball Shop. [Photograph: Robyn Lee]

"For the restaurants and chefs who are more farm to table, they can do meatballs too in their own way. Really, it's the best way to utilize the whole animal—the cheap parts especially—and be nose to tail," he explained. "Pasta, meatballs, and tomato sauce. Who doesn't like that kind of comfort food?"

Who indeed?

"It's an iconic American dish now," Carmellini declared. "America takes from New York City. It always has."