

The Meatball Shop: Food Destination Or One-Trick Pony?

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[Photographs: Robyn Lee]

Macaroni and cheese. Cannoli. Poutine. Lobster rolls. It's long been true that New York restaurants can earn immediate attention through hyper-specialization. Serving just one thing may not guarantee success—does anyone miss Flatiron's baked potato bar, now that it's gone? But it does all but guarantee you a slew of opening press and a line out the door on the first day.

Such is the case with **The Meatball Shop**, opened recently on Stanton Street. Co-owners **Michael Chernow** (general manager, formerly of Frank in the East Village) and **Daniel Holzman** (executive chef, former co-owner and exec chef at San Francisco's SPQR), have built a menu based entirely around meatballs—on top of spaghetti, on top of polenta, as heros or as sliders. * There's beer and wine, and ice cream sandwiches for dessert, but other than that, it's all meatballs, all the time.

The Meatball Shop

84 Stanton Street, New York
NY 10002 (b/n Allen and
Orchard; map); 212-982-
8895; meatballshop.com

Service: Friendly but slower
than it should be

Setting: A cheery, loud LES
restaurant and bar

Must-Haves: Meatball hero,
ice cream sandwich

Cost: \$10 for a sizable meal

Grade: B

Open until 4:00 AM Thursday through Saturday, and until 2:00 AM every other day of the week, the bar and restaurant slides seamlessly into the Lower East Side: tin ceilings and communal tables, Passion Pit blasting, Brooklyn Lager on tap, comfort food at all hours. From one red wall stares down a family of photos—black-and-white portraits of mustached and bouffant-ed individuals who could be someone's Italian great-grandparents. All those hard surfaces (plus a lively bar) make for one mighty din, even at mid-afternoon on a weekday.

As good-looking as it is cosmetically predictable, The Meatball Shop has already attracted crowds both daytime and night, and it's been written up in *New York, Time* Out, and twice in the *Times*—but not a single one of those writeups told how the meatballs actually, well, tasted.

As always, that's where we come in.

*Sorry, Adam, it's their terminology and I'm going with it.

SLIDERS		
1 Ball on Bun w/ Sauce - \$3 ea. CHECK A BOX FOR EACH:		
CLASSIC BEEF	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	TOMATO SAUCE
SPICY PORK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	SPICY MEAT
CHICKEN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MUSHROOM
SALMON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	PARM. CREAM
VEGETABLE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
SPECIAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

2 Balls on a Brioche Bun - \$5 ea.
CHOOSE...

Sit down, grab a felt-tip pen, and mark your order on these wipe-away laminated sheets. Though the basic menu is quite simple—pick a meatball, pick a sauce, pick a delivery vehicle—the combinations add up quickly. Salmon meatballs with parmesan cream? Pork with mushroom gravy? Those who like to design their own way through a menu will appreciate the creative freedom, but others may find it all a bit overwhelming. Let us help you narrow it down.



Any of the six **meatballs** can be ordered in their purest form—four balls to a dish, smothered in sauce, served with a slice of focaccia (\$7). Of the six options on offer, the **classic beef**, **spicy pork**, and **chicken** are your best bets.

Ground pork meatballs (that pork, sourced from [Heritage Foods](#)) are drippy and juicy, with a decently spicy red pepper kick that manages not to get lost in a sea of red sauce. Quite light, they're not as leaden or as mushy as a few of the others. The spicy meat sauce pictured, while well-seasoned and tasty, doesn't pack as much heat.



Classic beef balls are equally moist and light, though the bready elements are large enough to be visible, rather than fully incorporated. These are what one would call solid meatballs, even good meatballs—juicy, well-seasoned, tasty—but there's nothing that differentiates them from any other good meatballs you've ever had. And given the quality of the meat involved (the beef is from [Creekstone Farms](#)) it'd be nice if that meat came through a bit more.



The **chicken meatballs** (on the plate of \$3 sliders above) taste nothing, in fact, like chicken—though they're every bit as moist and well-seasoned as the others. For the red-meat or pork-averse, they're a fine option.

The mellow, not-too-sweet brioche buns that cradle these sliders are a good way to sample the lot, though some of the options are less worth your stomach space. A **veggie meatball** is more than edible, managing to avoid that dry, stale veggie burger taste—though it doesn't end up tasting like much of anything one could pin down and define. **Salmon meatballs** were the only ones we found unpleasant—heavy, bready, and with vaguely Asian-tasting soy and spice notes that made them taste a bit like Chinese fishballs, though no more appealing because of it. A poor match for the creamy, well-salted Parmesan cream sauce shown here.



If you're into the brioche, a more substantial option is the **Smash**—two meatballs of your choice, with sauce and cheese (either provolone or mozzarella from Connecticut's [Calabro](#)). It's a big, filling sandwich for \$8, though by the time it hits your table—more than 40 minutes, in our case, on a weekday afternoon—the sauces have already started to soak into the brioche bun, and three minutes later, that bottom half may have liquified entirely. Your better bet?



The **meatball hero** (\$9). It's a classic for a reason. The crunchy baguette (from **Il Forno**) is a much better sandwich base, drinking up the meatball runoff without dissolving under the pressure. Melting mozzarella drapes elegantly over the top.

Sides (\$4) and **underpinnings** (\$3) were hit-or-miss. No complaints about the spaghetti, but the polenta, though well seasoned, was grittier than it should have been; the braised green of the day on our visit, a **cabbage with onions**, was limp and over-vinegared.



“ *Trust us: don't skip dessert.* ”

When you've had your fill of meatballs, there's a short and equally customizable dessert list—cookies, ice cream, and the two stuck together. **Chocolate chip cookies** were forgettable; **ginger cookies**, on the other hand, pliant and chewy and studded with chunks of ginger, were anything but. On either side of a scoop of salty, creamy caramel ice cream—an almost-as-delicious version of [Otto's](#) salted caramel, and that's high praise indeed—they made for one of the best **ice cream sandwiches** (\$4) we've had in recent memory. Both cookies and ice cream are made in-house by Donna Chernow, wife of co-owner Michael Chernow. Trust us: don't skip dessert.

It's a funny thing. Ice cream sandwiches, like meatballs, are such a familiar comfort food that it's hard to have one stand out. These did—while the meatballs themselves fell a bit short. **It all depends on what you're expecting.**

If the pedigree of the owners (and the sourcing of their products) leads you to expect cheffy, ingredient-driven, innovative meatballs, where the beef tastes like beef and flavors are distinct and memorable, you'll likely be disappointed. But if you're looking for a **hearty, tasty meatball meal on the cheap**, perhaps washed down with a \$3 PBR or \$9 quart of Brooklyn Lager—yes, quart—you've come to the right place. And there's nothing wrong with that.

