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HOW TO MAKE

## Spaghetti & Meatballs

The chef of New York City's Meatball Shop shares his favorite recipe.

BY DANIEL HOLZMAN

I GREW UP HEARING STORIES about my mother's Italian neighbors who hosted Sunday night spaghetti and meatball feasts for the whole neighborhood. When my best friend and I decided to open a restaurant specializing in meatballs, those stories were part of the inspiration: We wanted to create a place where people could make those same kinds of warm, happy memories. The first step, of course, was making delicious, satisfying meatballs.

At the five branches of The Meatball Shop we have 55 meatballs on rotation—spicy pork, buffalo chicken, shepherd's pie, and vegetarian, to name a few—but my favorite ones are more classic. They're a blend of beef (for flavor), veal (for tenderness), and pork (for succulence), and they're roasted, not fried. They come out juicy and tender, with savory oregano and fennel flavors. Tossed with a simple, rich tomato sauce and served over perfectly al dente spaghetti, they taste just like I imagine those neighborhood Sunday suppers did.

### Need to Know

**Make a thick, chunky sauce,** which will cling to the pasta and add some welcome texture to this simple dish. I like the fresh flavor of Pomi brand diced tomatoes, but feel free to use your favorite brand—just avoid preseasoned tomatoes and petite-diced tomatoes, which will make a thinner sauce.

**Add ricotta for juicy meatballs.** Its fat content adds a little bit of extra moisture and a mildly creamy flavor without making the meatballs dense or heavy.

**Combine the meatball mix with your hands,** and don't overmix. Overworking the mixture can lead to dense meatballs. Using your hands literally gives you a feel for mixing, which helps keep the meatballs light.

**Use an ice cream scoop to form the meatballs** (as shown below). A 2-oz. ice cream scoop that's 2 inches in diameter quickly makes uniform balls that are just the right size.

**Salt the pasta water until it tastes briny.** You'll need about 1 Tbs. of kosher salt for every 2 quarts of water. As the pasta cooks, it will absorb the salt and become more flavorful.

**Thin the sauce with pasta water.** Starch from the pasta will prevent the sauce from becoming too watery, and the salt adds flavor.

**Finish cooking the pasta in the sauce.** Stopping short of the recommended time and then simmering the pasta in the sauce lets it absorb the sauce's flavor without becoming overcooked.



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Roasting is a quick, no-mess way to cook meatballs. Roast them uncovered until they're set, and then ladle about half of the sauce over them to give them extra flavor and keep them from drying out.

## spaghetti and meatballs

Plenty of oregano and a touch of fennel makes these tender meatballs super flavorful. I use a higher proportion of pork than beef or veal in the meatballs because I think it gives the best texture, but meatloaf mix—equal parts beef, veal, and pork—is an easy-to-find substitute. **Serves 6 to 8**

### FOR THE SAUCE

- ½ cup olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped (1½ cups)
- 3 medium cloves garlic, crushed
- 2 tsp. chopped fresh oregano or 1 tsp. dry oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 Tbs. tomato paste
- 2 26- to 28-oz. containers diced tomatoes, preferably Pomi brand
- Kosher salt

### FOR THE MEATBALLS

- 1 Tbs. olive oil
- 8 oz. ground pork
- 6 oz. 80% lean ground beef
- 6 oz. ground veal
- 1 cup coarse fresh white breadcrumbs
- ½ cup whole-milk ricotta
- 2 large eggs
- 2 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh oregano or 1½ tsp. dry oregano
- ½ tsp. freshly ground fennel seed
- ½ tsp. crushed red pepper flakes
- Kosher salt

### FOR THE PASTA

- Kosher salt
- 1½ lb. dried spaghetti

### MAKE THE SAUCE

Heat the olive oil in a heavy-duty 4-quart saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic, oregano, and bay leaf. Cook, stirring often, until the onion is soft, 6 to 10 minutes. **Add the tomato paste and cook**, stirring constantly, until darkened, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the tomatoes and their juice and 1 tsp. salt. Bring to a boil and then simmer over low heat, stirring frequently, until the sauce has reduced by about a third, 40 to 60 minutes. Remove the bay leaf and season to taste with salt. Keep warm, covered. (The sauce can also be refrigerated for up to 5 days, or frozen for 1 month.)

### MAKE THE MEATBALLS

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 450°F. Coat the bottom and sides of an 8x8-inch baking dish with the olive oil. Set aside.

**Combine the ground meats, breadcrumbs, ricotta, eggs, parsley, oregano, fennel seed, red pepper flakes, and 2 tsp. salt** in a large bowl. Mix gently but thoroughly with your hands.

**Divide the meat into 16 golf-ball-size portions** using a 2-oz., 2-inch-diameter ice cream scoop or your hands; roll with wet hands to make them round. Arrange the balls snugly in the baking dish.

**Bake the meatballs** until they register about 90°F on an instant-read thermometer and are firm to the touch, 10 to 12 minutes. (If

you've made the tomato sauce ahead, heat it while the meatballs are cooking.)

**Remove the meatballs from the oven** and drain excess fat, if there is any, from the pan. Ladle half of the sauce over them, return them to the oven, and continue to bake until an instant-read thermometer inserted into one reads 165°F, about 15 minutes. (The meatballs can be refrigerated for up to 3 days or frozen for 2 weeks.)

### COOK THE PASTA

Bring a large covered pot of well-salted water to a rolling boil.

**Add the pasta and cook**, stirring occasionally, for 2 minutes less than package timing for al dente. Reserve 2 cups of the pasta water and drain.

**Return the pasta to the pot** and mix with the remaining sauce. Add 1 cup pasta water to thin the sauce and cook over medium heat until the pasta is al dente, 2 to 3 minutes. Add more pasta water if necessary, and season to taste with salt.

**Transfer the spaghetti** to a large heated serving bowl. Top with the meatballs and their sauce and serve.

*Daniel Holzman is the executive chef and co-owner of The Meatball Shop restaurants in New York and co-author of The Meatball Shop Cookbook.*