

Inked

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PLUS:

CHRIS
PONTIUS

THE
GHOST
HUNTER

MICHAEL CHERNOW

New York restaurateur Michael Chernow knew that dropping a late-night meatball joint into the mayhem of rock clubs and hipster dives on the Lower East Side would be a success... but perhaps not this much of a success.

"We pulled the paper off the windows and there were literally 150 people waiting outside," says Chernow from a table skirting the sidewalk of The Meatball Shop. That was February. Multiply the crowd by 10 and that's an average weekend these days. The meatball idea evolved "out of nowhere," but the restaurant is exactly what Chernow pictured when he and co-owner Daniel Holzman schemed as kids to one day open a place of their own. Long before he wrote the all-meatball menu, Chernow wrote his life story in ink.

"It means 'strength and power,'" the native New Yorker explains, rotating his arm to show the Sanskrit text from a drunken trip down Hollywood Boulevard when he was 18. "I was in a bad place. I went through hell and back when I was young, and I needed to find some of both." As Chernow battled his way to sobriety, he added tributes to the people who inspired strength, first a horseshoe around his elbow in

memory of his horse trainer father, and then a sleeve by Inborn's Ray Jerez. Three monkeys from a family statue—see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil—perch over a cascade of Mom's favorite orchids, crowned at the shoulder by an elephant his Buddhist grandmother credits to be good luck. And Chernow's wife, Donna, a model-cum-pastry chef responsible for the restaurant's killer ice cream sandwiches, was the inspiration behind one of the two massive angels on his back and a spiritually significant phrase across his stomach.

"Every tattoo I have has a story behind it," says the extraordinarily grounded bartending vet and graduate of the French Culinary Institute. "But I have to schedule, like, five appointments at a time or else I'll be covered in ink." Good thing, because there's temptation. Troy Denning sometimes stops into The Meatball Shop three times a day, and the guys from Invisible NYC, Daredevil, and New York Adorned are all regulars. "I would love to trade meatballs for tattoos," Chernow adds with a playful glint in his eyes, "but no one's taken me up on that yet." Wait 'til they try the spicy pork balls. —Melissa Wozniak

inked people



Chernow's Pork Balls

Yields 24 meatballs

2 lbs pork shoulder, ground
3 picked cherry peppers, chopped
1 tbsp salt
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup bread crumbs
3 extra-large eggs

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Mix all ingredients thoroughly by hand or in a mixer with the paddle attachment. Roll the balls into tight golf-ball-sized spheres. Place on a lightly oiled baking pan and roast for 15 minutes.