



The Meatball Shop Daniel Holzman & Michael Chernow

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// Q&A

Daniel Holzman & Michael Chernow Co-Owners at The Meatball Shop, NYC

Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow of The Meatball Shop chatted with Total Food Service about their life-long friendship, their successful new book, and their plans for the future.

How did you two meet?

Michael Chernow (MC): We both grew up in New York City. We went to high school together, but Dan's a year older. Our mothers introduced us, actually: They worked

in the same building, and they got to talking one day, and then they brought us to meet each other on the Met steps and it was love at first sight.

Where did the idea for the Meatball

Shop come from?

MC: When Dan first came back to New York, we had a totally different concept in mind. We were looking for a space for that concept, and we found one on the Bowery. The space had a side window, and right next to that space was a very busy bar, which had a lot of drunken people outside all night and all day. We realized that was a revenue stream we ought to take advantage of. So we came up with the idea to serve meatballs out that side window--it's cheap, it's easy, and it's delicious. Eventually, that space on the Bowery fell through, but we decided that we were going to stick with the meatball concept, because it was the kind of innovation that we felt we needed to compete in a market as tough as New York.

Dan, you spent some time in San Francisco. What impact did that experience have on building the Meatball Shop menu?

MC: The creative role of being a chef is different out there. In New York, we were always asking ourselves how we take these ingredients and make them into something special. Out there, it was more a matter of taking these special ingredients and staying out of the way. My approach is always to start with what's available and what your resources are. I once worked for this

fancy French chef who was screaming and screaming because he was making this very unstable dish and his waiters couldn't carry it to the table intact, and I was thinking, if your waiters can't handle it, just make a more stable dish. What are you screaming about? Everything has limitations, and you have to recognize that. When I'm in a situation where I'm just cooking at home or cooking for friends or family--where everything doesn't have to be perfect--I try to challenge myself. Let's try cooking a dinner for 15 using only the fireplace, things like that, and if we screw up, well, it was fun. But no one wants to eat at a restaurant that someone screwed up the experiment.

What are some of the more exotic meatballs on the menu?

MC: We have so many different meatballs. Right now we're running tandoor meatballs in a tikka sauce, which I guess is fairly exotic. We also have rabbit meatballs, which are the most difficult to prepare because of the time it takes to remove the meat from the bones. The goat meatballs are certainly out of the ordinary, but I don't know if you'd call them exotic.

What's the approach to dessert?

MC: We looked at a wide variety of restaurants, and we were usually disappointed, because it never tasted as good as a piece of pie or an ice cream sandwich. Those are our two favorite foods. We went back and forth, whether we wanted to do pie or ice cream sandwiches. We ended up going with ice cream sandwiches: we found this place in Los Angeles where college students line up and they pick their ice cream and their fresh baked cookies, and we said, "let's do that."



(L to R) Daniel Holzman & Michael Chernow



To give one example, we get all our vegetables from spring to fall from a woman named Linda. She owns a small farm upstate called Newton Farm. She asks us what we'd like her to grow and she grows it--it's super artisanal, it's incredible.

What's your approach to building a team?

MC: I focus a lot of my time on the staff. Danny Meyer is an icon of mine, and his philosophy in his book, is pick out your employees first. My staff doesn't work for me, we work together, and communication is key for me. I meet with the general managers twice a week, and I'm in every restaurant every day. I make a point of remembering everyone's name. I hire people who are really good at what they do so they can do it, not so I can tell them what to do. If they make a mistake, we try to figure out what they did wrong and move on. When we implement a policy, we run it by every single manager. We try to learn from our mistakes, as well.

Can you give us an example of a mistake you made and how you learned from it?

MC: When we opened our third restaurant, we started focusing on the numbers a lot more, and we discovered we were spending a lot of money on family meals. We allow our staff to eat pretty much whatever they want, and some of our staff were taking advantage of that and eating two or three meals in a shift. So we had all our managers remind the staff that they could only have one meal per shift. There was an immense amount of blowback. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't a big mistake, but it made a lot of people angry, and that matters to me.

What was your approach to designing the building?

Daniel Holzman (DH): We did it all on our own, and at this point, we feel really good about it. We walked down the Bowery together. We both had experience working in restaurants, but you look at the price tags of everything you want and just throw all your opinions out the window with the first pass. We learned that for some things, the cheap stuff is just as good as the expensive stuff, but there are some areas you really don't want to skimp on. The first time your oven breaks and you don't have a



The Meatball Shop interior design reflects a hybrid of both comfort food and hip design

backup, you learn that the two or three thousand dollars you saved just isn't worth the headache and aggravation. I go to New York Restaurant Equipment. They'll make twenty trips back and forth to your restaurant if that's what it takes. They'll haul big pieces of equipment down to your basement, and pick it right back up if it doesn't work for you.

What about a green or sustainability agenda? Is that something you think about at all?

DH: Everything we use in our restaurant is a green product, right down to our to-go cups. The big paper companies have pushed us away from sustainable products at every step of the way. But sustainability is one of the things that we won't compromise on. We're not going to let the price of our product dictate our moral principles.

What's your approach to buying?

DH: We've stuck with the same vendors since the beginning. If we find someone we like, we stick with them. Because of those relationships that we've developed, people really do well by us. To give one example, we get all our vegetables from spring to fall from a woman named Linda. She owns a small farm upstate called Newton Farm. She asks us what we'd like her to grow and she grows it--it's super artisanal, it's incredible.

How has your business evolved from restaurant one to restaurant three?

DH: Each opening has gotten easier and easier, because we've been able to refine our training processes. For our newest place, we were able to hire 75 people and train them at our other restaurants, so they could hit the ground running. When we opened our first restaurant, on Stanton Street, we were in there every day for eight months without a day off. For our second restaurant, on Bedford Avenue, we were in there every day for three months. For our most recent restaurant, it was three weeks. The ease with which the restaurant has stabilized has been something special.

What was the idea for the book? Is the book doing what you wanted it to do?

DH: We didn't know what we were getting into. When we opened our first restaurant, we had book agents three months in come to us and say, "hey, we think you should write a book," not only because of the food, but also because of the story, because we're best friends and we've been in the industry since we were kids. It was a year-long

process, picking an author and a photographer we felt comfortable with and putting together all the recipes and the other materials. The fact that it's taken off has been incredible.

So what's the vision? Vegas, Atlantic City, South Beach?

DH: I think we've cornered the hip, cool, downtown market in New York City, which is one of the hardest mar-



The Meatball Shop's menu offerings span from the traditional to the exotic

kets in the world to tackle. Now that we've opened up in the West Village, we see that the concept appeals to families, so I see us going into more family-friendly areas. It's special to see young kids coming into the restaurant and sitting down and eating their food and not screaming and running around, and looking across the room and seeing a 75-year-old woman with the same exact bowl of food in front of her, just as excited about it as that little kid. So I see the Upper West Side, places like that. If we keep doing what we're doing, we could potentially take it out of the city eventually.

Are meatballs a fad, or are they here to stay?

MC: I don't think they're a fad. I think people are really excited about them right now, but meatballs have been a part of peoples' lives forever, they're one of those staple peasant foods that has and always will exist and be popular.