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### Chicken wing flavor without the mess

*Elements: One ingredient, one dish*

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Children who recoil at the astringent taste of celery might be comforted to learn that it wasn't considered fit for people to eat for most of human history.

Considered a medicinal ingredient until the 16th century, it wasn't until growers bred versions that tamed its bitterness that celery was added to vegetable gardens. By the 1800s, four varieties were grown in the United States.

Celery is widely used today around the world. It's even been enjoyed by children, with the application of peanut butter, and sometimes raisins.

It's one-third of the classic French mirepoix mixture of onion, carrot and celery, used as a braising base. It's braised and stir-fried by Chinese cooks, sometimes with meat for flavoring, as a vegetable dish. And since Teresa Bellissimo grabbed it from the Anchor Bar salad station that fateful night in 1964, it has been the standard accompaniment to Buffalo-style chicken wings, along with bleu cheese dressing.

Celery is relatively sturdy and can keep for two weeks in a refrigerator drawer. Pull stalks off the bunch and wash as needed. To remove the sometimes-tough strings, snap a small piece off a stalk's small end, leaving it dangling by the strings. Then pull, and most of the fibers will pull right out.

Edible? Neigh: The ancient Greek poet Homer wrote in his "Iliad" about Myrmidon warriors near Troy letting their horses munch on wild celery.

This recipe, from "The Meatball Shop Cookbook" (Ballantine, \$28) offers most of the chicken wing flavor with almost none of the mess, and a fraction of the calories. You hardly even miss crispy chicken skin at all. Three-quarters of an inch might seem small for a meatball, but they puff up to an inch in the oven.

#### Buffalo Chicken Balls

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/3 cup hot sauce, such as Frank's Red Hot
- 1 pound ground chicken, preferably thigh meat
- 1 large egg
- 1/2 cup celery, minced
- 3/4 cup bread crumbs
- 1 teaspoon salt

Celery sticks and bleu cheese dressing, for serving

Heat the oven to 450 degrees. Drizzle the oil into a 9-by-13-inch baking dish and evenly coat the entire surface. Set aside.

Combine the butter and hot sauce in a small saucepan and cook over low heat, whisking until the butter is melted and fully incorporated. Remove from heat and allow the mixture to cool 10 minutes.

Combine the hot sauce mixture, ground chicken, egg, celery, bread crumbs and salt in a large mixing bowl and mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated. Roll the mixture into 3/4-inch balls, making sure to pack the meat firmly. Place the balls in the prepared baking dish, lining them up snugly and in even rows. The meatballs should be touching one another.

Roast for 15 to 20 minutes, until the meatballs are cooked through, registering 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer. Allow the meatballs to cool for 5 minutes in the pan before serving with celery sticks and bleu cheese dressing.

Makes 40 meatballs, enough for four entrees or 10 appetizer servings.