

The Chef's Take: Vegetarian Meatballs from Daniel Holzman

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"Vegetarians want the vegetarian option not to feel like an afterthought," says Daniel Holzman. "And so the question was how can we celebrate vegetables and make something really delicious." This question was particularly perplexing to chef Holzman, who, in 2010, along with his partner Michael Chernow, opened a restaurant called The Meatball Shop on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The plan, as you can imagine, was to specialize in meatballs. "We wanted to include a vegetarian meatball to be as inclusive as possible," Holzman explains.

Their solution to the vegetarian meatball conundrum came in the form of this recipe, a green lentil meatball, which Holzman is partial to serving with a basil-spinach pesto, one of five sauces guests can choose from at each of the Meatball Shop locations (a sixth shop is opening this summer on New York City's Upper West Side).

In developing this particular meatball recipe, Holzman says, he knew what he was after from the get-go. "I wanted something satisfying and filling that reminded you of home and the past. I wanted flavors you can understand. In the end," he says, "the method for making this is like making a really hearty lentil soup." The addition of breadcrumbs, Parmesan and walnuts helps bind the mixture.

Over time, this dish has become the menu item Holzman, who is not a vegetarian, eats most often. "I'm a chef, so I struggle with healthy eating and exercise in my life. I always have an occasion to celebrate and there is always an excuse to over-indulge. I'm lucky because this recipe is comforting and healthy," he says, "so I end up eating these meatballs like six days a week."



Vegetarian Meatballs

Makes about 24 golf-ball-size meatballs

2 cups green lentils

2 carrots, chopped (about 1 cup)

1 large onion, chopped (about 2 cups)

2 stalks celery, minced (about 1 cup)

1 clove garlic, minced

4 sprigs thyme, picked (about 1 tablespoon)

2 teaspoons salt

¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons olive oil

3 tablespoons tomato paste

½ pound button mushrooms, sliced (about 3 cups)

½ bunch parsley, chopped (about ½ cup)

½ cup breadcrumbs

3 eggs

½ cup Parmesan cheese, grated

¼ cup chopped walnuts

Basil-Spinach Pesto, for serving (see recipe below)

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. In a medium pot, add lentils and 2 quarts water. Set pot over high heat and bring water to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer lentils until soft but not falling apart, about 25 minutes.

Pour cooked lentils through a colander and let cool. In a large frying pan set over a medium-high heat, saute carrots, onion, celery, garlic, thyme and salt with ¼ cup of olive oil until vegetables soften, about 10 minutes.

When vegetables are tender and begin to brown, stir in tomato paste. Cook, stirring constantly, until paste darkens, about 3 minutes. Stir in mushrooms and saute, stirring frequently, until completely cooked and browned on edges, about 15 minutes. Remove vegetables from frying pan and set aside to cool.

In a large mixing bowl, combine cooled vegetables with lentils and all remaining ingredients, save for the 2 tablespoons olive oil and the pesto. Mix until well combined. Place mixture in refrigerator to cool completely, about 25 minutes.

Drizzle remaining olive oil into a large 9-by-12 baking dish, making sure to evenly coat. Roll lentil mixture into round, golf-ball-size meatballs, making sure to pack the balls firmly. Place lentil balls into the oiled baking dish, making sure none of the meatballs touch one another.

Roast lentil balls until firm and cooked through, about 30 minutes. Allow the meatballs to cool for five minutes before removing from the tray. Serve with pesto.

Spinach-Basil Pesto

Makes 4 cups

1/8 cup walnuts

4 cups baby spinach leaves

2 cups basil leaves

1 teaspoon salt

½ cup olive oil

1/8 cup grated Parmesan

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Spread walnuts out on a 9-by-13 baking dish and roast until golden brown, about 12 minutes. Set nuts aside to cool.

Fill a large stock pot three-quarters of the way full with water and bring to a rolling boil over a high heat. Next, fill a large bowl with ice water.

Drop spinach and basil into boiling water and give leaves a stir. After 1 minute, remove greens and plunge them into ice water. Discard boiling water

Once cool, remove greens from ice bath and squeeze them dry. Give them a rough chop and transfer to a food processor.

Add all remaining ingredients to the food processor and blend until an uniform, pesto-like consistency is reached.

*Kitty Greenwald is a Brooklyn-based food writer and recipe developer. She eats a lot for work and pleasure. Her column *Slow Food Fast* appears in the [Wall Street Journal](#).*