

# CAPITAL

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TATE SESSION

AFTER FRACKING



Meatball Shop co-owner Daniel Holzman with Mayor de Blasio, wife Chirlane McCray, and Health Commissioner Dr. Mary Bassett.

## The chain stores of New York

WHEN LOCAL CHARACTER HAS TO SCALE

By Sarah Laskow

**T**he commercial avenues of Park Slope are filled with cute little shops and restaurants, and many of them are the first and last of their kind, existing only here. But a significant number are part of a slightly more successful species: the neighborhood mini-chain.

**W**hen, just about five years ago, the Meatball Shop opened up on the Lower East Side, the wait to get into the warm, tight space, check off the boxes on the menu and be delivered tasty, saucy meatballs always seemed to be at least an hour long. Sometimes it was two. The place was, immediately, a huge success.

Before that first shop opened, the co-owners, Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow, high school friends who grew up in New York, had promised each other that they would just concentrate on the first store. That had to come first: It would be crazy to think too far ahead. But at the same, they were planning for the possibility of more Meatball Shops.

"We designed the whole concept to be able to open multiple restaurants," said Holzman, in an interview with Capital. "We said, we're going to be conscientious of it. We're not going to make choices that would hinder that. We're not going to make a choices just for that. But we'll be conscientious of it."

They decided, from the very beginning, to have a commissary operation, where nothing was cooked to order on-site. They designed the restaurant economically, so that if they opened more than one, they wouldn't have to splurge on the same \$5,000 piece of kitchen equipment time after time. They designed the restaurant to "give ourselves a brand feel, as much as possible."

Holzman had worked in fancy, chef-driven restaurants, and he wanted the Meatball Shop to be something different, where he wasn't betting his entire life on being a Daniel Boulud or an Eric Ripert. He wanted a place where he could know the quality would stay consistent, even if he wasn't there. The type of place that could really make some money.

"I'm sensitive to the idea of not wanting to sound like a capitalist douchebag," he said. "But my dad is broke-retired, my mom is still working as a secretary, and that's tough. It doesn't only have to be about the money. But that can be part of it."

By the summer of 2011, another Meatball Shop opened in Williamsburg. In November, the meatballs came to the West Village. In 2013, they opened their fourth location, in Chelsea. Now there are six Meatball Shops, a cookbook, Meatball Shop-branded high top Vans, a limited edition Meatball Shop skate deck that says "NYC Born & Bred" on the top, and a Meatball Shop-inspired sitcom in the works.

"You can run a two restaurants the way you run one restaurant," said Holzman. "You train everyone yourself. You can do the same thing with three restaurants, but it's a lot. When you get to four places, all of a sudden, stuff starts to really change. You need some real way of training people. You need to have a method for interviewing and hiring people so you're finding consistent types of people. That's when the panic sets in."