

OUR TOWN downtown

FEBRUARY 9, 2012 | WWW.OTDOWNTOWN.COM

TALKING UP DOWNTOWN

Michael Chernow and Daniel Holzman

OWNERS OF THE MEATBALL SHOP

BY LINNEA COVINGTON

Michael Chernow and Daniel Holzman opened the first Meatball Shop in the Lower East Side in February of last year. Almost a year later, the popular joint has expanded to Williamsburg and the West Village, and Chernow and Holzman have released a cookbook sharing how to make their delectable, um, well, balls.

Including Shop staples like the classic beef, spicy pork, veggie and chicken, *The Meatball Shop Cookbook* breaks it down for your cooking pleasure. Not only do they share tips for making the perfect meatball, they also include recipes for their market green salads, roasted vegetable combinations, savory sauces and a variety of cookies and ice creams so you can recreate their famous dessert sandwiches.

We got them on the phone to talk about the book, the shop, their ball technique and what's in store for the future.

Did you ever think meatballs would be this popular?

Michael Chernow: At first I thought the concept was brilliant, but as we got closer to the opening, I was a little nervous about meatballs being the focus of the menu. But I think everyone loves meatballs. Rarely do I run into someone who doesn't like them. That's what I was banking on and, sure enough, it worked out.

How does running The Meatball Shop compare to other restaurants you have worked in?

MC: I have been working in restaurants since I was 13 years old—that makes it about 18 years. I have taken bits of what I learned in each restaurant and incorporated my own theories. I feel we have been able to create a really special place that I would like to work in and that I would want my friends to hang out in. I think the key is to create a special environment for the staff and make them my first priority. I have taken Danny Meyer's lead in that.

Why did you pick the location for the businesses?

MC: For our first shop we knew we wanted to be in the Lower East Side. I worked in that area for 10 years; I knew the demographic would eat us up, literally and figuratively. The density of bars in the LES was the deciding factor for us. We wanted to attract younger bargoers to stop in before going out, and on their way home after drinking. The positioning of the first shop was strategically planned to categorize The



Meatball Shop as a young, hip place to eat. It worked. We had the same motivation when looking for the Brooklyn store, so we secured a location on Bedford Avenue, right in the heart of Williamsburg.

Once we felt comfortable in our targeted demographic, we took a swing in a more family-oriented market, the West Village. We were a bit nervous, but the concept proved to be viable there as well.

Any reason two are downtown rather than uptown?

MC: The food scene downtown is thriving. As I mentioned before, we wanted to be considered as a restaurant that would not only be known for its food, but for its atmosphere.

The Meatball Shop as a unique system of ordering. Why did you format the menu in that way?

Daniel Holzman: There is a burger joint in Los Angeles called The Counter, and they have a check-box system where you choose your bun, patty, sauce and topping. Mike and I loved it, and we liked the idea of doing something that was kind of kitschy.

At first, The Meatball Shop was going to be counter service only, but it was too busy so we started full service. The immediate feedback was that people loved filling out the menu—eventually, we started using dry erase markers because we got sick of wasting the original paper menus. Now, I when I go to a restaurant, I want to write on their menu, too.

How long did the book take?

MC: The book took around a year from start to finish, from writing to taking photos. We wanted to make sure it was consistent with the restaurant, from the music to the

food to the energy. I think we were able to portray that when you open up the book.

How did you pick the recipes for the book?

MC: For the original recipes, Dan and I spent a lot of time honing in on the flavors we love. We would look at the flavors and say, "Hey, let's make that into a meatball." Usually, I come up with the name and Dan comes up with the recipe.

DH: We wanted to document the restaurant using all the recipes we liked. We had to pare down quite a bit and now, the book is almost completely made up of recipes we make at The Meatball Shop.

How far do you want to take the Meatball Shop concept?

MC: Dan and I are very excited with where we are right now, though we always have our ear to the ground and are constantly looking for ways to make the concept more efficient.

DH: We have been talking about it a lot. Mike and I said we would wait until we opened these two restaurants to get some hindsight. We weren't sure what it would be like to open them, but people are responding well and I would like to open more.

Any new concepts in the works?

MC: I think meatballs have really taken over our lives, and stepping into a different concept isn't something we are looking into right now. Also, the demographics of meatballs are so wide and vast, I don't see us opening another concept outside the meatball shop.

DH: I would be really surprised if at some point in our lives we don't do something else. But right now, meatballs are fun and I love it.