



5 RULES FOR GROWING YOUR BUSINESS LIKE A BALLER (AND MAKING A GREAT MEATBALL)

Michael Chernow and Daniel Holzman will open their fifth Meatball Shop this summer and here they share their insight on growth, staying fun and keeping the flavor. Plus: bonus video on making the perfect meatball.

When childhood buddies Michael Chernow and Daniel Holzman opened their 39-seat eatery on Manhattan's Lower East side in February, 2010, almost immediately, a line of hungry patrons stretched down a chilly block. The two had been confident their concept, [The Meatball Shop](#), would be a hit, but they hadn't expected it to take off quite so quickly. "Meatballs are delicious," Chernow says, "so we figured locals would come for the balls, but we didn't expect such immediate success." This summer, Chernow and Holzman will open their fifth New York shop. With 1,000 hungry customers waiting up to an hour per night per restaurant, the Meatballers walk a fine line to maintain a neighborhood comfort-food-joint ambiance in their legit New York foodie hot spots without turning into Applebee's. Here, they talk about how to grow a business while maintaining its original flavor (and below: bonus video on how to make the perfect meatball).

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Chernow: I worked for years as a bartender at a great place called Frank. The most common question I got from customers was for a recommendation on the best something--the best hot dog, the best pizza, the best ice cream. I realized that people don't need giant menus of pretty good food, they really want the top tier of one thing. We knew we could make the absolute best meatball.

Holzman: Simplicity doesn't have to mean boring. People don't realize just how much you can do with meatballs. It's not just a "Nana's secret recipe kind of thing"--balls are an international staple. Swedish meatballs are tasty, obviously, but Russia, India and China all have variations on balls. We can include so many crazy flavors into our special balls and sauces, plus we offer different sandwich styles, seasonal sides and starches. The idea is simple--and importantly for us as we grow--repeatable, but the experience for the customer can be as complex as they make it.



EMBRACE F-- UPS

Chernow: I still have the log book from when we first opened our first shop. It's comical how many things went wrong. We actually planned to open more of a counter service place to keep labor costs down, but when we tried that out in our first location, it was a disaster. The space was way too small. We couldn't keep track of anything, people's orders were getting lost. It was mayhem. But in the end, I'm glad it didn't work out. I like the vibe of having servers in our shops, and the current structure is easier to replicate as we expand into different spaces.

Holzman: And our first menu concept was so awful for us. We stole it directly from a great L.A. burger spot called Counter. There, you get a piece of paper and you check off your bread, your sauce, toppings, and so on. It works so smoothly for them. We had like 10,000 pads printed off to use that system with our menu, and they came back looking like hieroglyphics with lines zig zagging all over the place. It got so bad that one night during service, we designed a new, clearer quadrant-style menu and had somebody run over to Kinkos and get a bunch laminated. We've been using those laminated menus that are specific to our offerings ever since. We're constantly figuring things out on the fly. We still haven't found the perfect chairs. We have nightmares about chairs.

PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD



Chernow: I always wanted to open a place I wanted to eat. I'm not a big fine dining guy where you take credit card reservations and it takes fifteen minutes to go over specials. I just don't think that's the way people want to unwind these days. Our menu is kind of a Choose Your Own Adventure thing, you pick your meat, your sauce, whether you want sliders or what we call a smash or over pasta or with risotto and veg on the side. It's all about creating a fun, delicious good time.

Holzman: We also think it's imperative that our staff has fun. If the cooks are just making the same thing day in and day out, they're going to be miserable and that oozes out to the front of the house. We have a chef meeting every two weeks to go over menus. I have a seasonality chart--which sounds really corporate, but it's not that lame--listing all of the seasonal vegetables that are available. And we have a clear idea of what meats we're getting from our providers. With that information, the chefs just run wild and come up with what special balls, risottos and vegetable concoctions they want to offer in the next couple weeks. If it's something completely weird, we'll have them cook it and then taste and decide. More often than not, some of the most unusual combinations turn out to be hits. When one of our chefs first suggested The Reuben ball with ground corned beef, sauerkraut and Russian dressing, I thought it was going to be so gross. That Reuben ball is perfect.

PICK YOUR BATTLES, KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS

Chernow: We're best friends, so we fight each other harder than most colleagues do. We've definitely learned that when we finally get to the point where we agree on something, it's generally a good idea. But he's the chef. He's the guy who decides on our suppliers and manages the kitchens. I have to take a step back on that stuff.

Holzman: Michael handles the design and front of the house business. He also picks the locations. I have no instinct for where we should open. I'm not cool. I don't go out and eat and drink in hot spots. I drink, but only at home alone. I'm mostly kidding.

LET THE NEIGHBORHOOD DRIVE THE VIBE



Chernow: We have always 100 percent wanted to be a local joint. Even though we're technically a chain of Meatball Shops, our goal was to have regulars and know our customers. Initially, I think we were trying to be too cutesy with what The Chelsea store should feel like or how Brooklyn should look, but we've learned that a neighborhood will create its own special feel organically. We've made a few tweaks for different spots, like on the Lower East Side, we just serve beer and wine because that neighborhood is already littered with bars where people go to get drunk and rowdy. We're a restaurant first. But in Chelsea, we added a bar in the basement for folks to wait for tables that we call Under Balls. Everyone comes to eat, but we have a cocktail program there and in a couple other locations that works for those customers. People always ask us why we aren't expanding out of New York. I think eventually we will--we've had successful pop ups in L.A. and San Francisco--but right now, there's still a lot we can do here at home. We've grown pretty quickly in three years, and I don't think we've fully saturated this market yet because we're finding success in so many unique locations.

Holzman: I was terrified when we opened the Chelsea Shop because it was only ten blocks from our Greenwich Village restaurant. I thought for sure we'd scavenge our own business. And for a week, sales at Greenwich were down, but they've been rising ever since. Chelsea is also making great money for us. Some of our customers tried Chelsea and hated it. Others will never go back to Greenwich because they fell in love with Chelsea. It is mind boggling how distinct each New York neighborhood is, and how people just take to one location or another even though the food is consistent. Our Brooklyn restaurant is definitely the coolest crowd. On the Lower East Side you'll see 20-somethings shoulder to shoulder with a group of 75-year-old men celebrating a birthday. Uptown will be our biggest shop with 100 seats. We won't be exactly sure what personality that restaurant has until it creates its own identity.