

Chatting With Michael Chernow Reveals His Favorite Recipes From *The Meatball Shop Cookbook*

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Photo courtesy Michael Chernow
Michael Chernow makes a mean meatball

Michael Chernow is one half of the duo behind the wildly successful *Meatball Shop*, located on the Lower East Side. This past summer saw the opening of the shop's Williamsburg branch, and now Chernow has co-written *The Meatball Shop Cookbook* along with chef Daniel Holzman and Lauren Deen. But the Meatball Shop almost wasn't meant to be. Chernow tells us how he and Holzman had originally intended a very different restaurant all together.

So, how did you come up with the meatball concept for a restaurant?

Daniel [Holzman] and I grew up in New York City together. We've been best friends since we were 13 and had a dream to open a restaurant together. After high school, I worked in restaurants and Daniel went to California to work. I did front-of-house and then went to culinary school to put fire under my butt to get going. Then Daniel came back to help launch the

restaurant. We had another concept in mind and the meatballs were a side project but then as we were looking for investors, we cooked them meatballs. Once we saw the action at the table, we decided to hop on the meatball concept and bang out the idea. What we found out was that people love meatballs. They're accessible; everyone has a meatball story. Ask about their meatball pasts and they'll have skeletons in the closet.

What was the other concept that you scrapped?

The other concept was more of a Mediterranean one. We had been working in fancier restaurants and wanted to bring a fancy Mediterranean concept to a more casual setting. Instead we took an at-home food and brought it to the restaurant.

Is it hard running a business with your best friend?

There are definitely challenges. But we've known each other for 18 years and love each other dearly and fill in the gaps for each other, for sure.

Let's talk about the book. What should everyone know about making meatballs at home?

The book is really self-explanatory. It makes it really easy for you. I guess the A-Number One tip is don't intellectualize when cooking. Really have fun with it and don't over-think it and don't squeeze your meatballs into a tightly packed ball; roll a fluffy light ball. Having fun is the number one piece of the puzzle. Lots of people are scared that it'll taste bad. Unless you're in pastry where precision is important, it's going to be fine.

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What are some of the meatballs you'll find in the book that you can't get at the restaurant?

We have about 50 meatballs that we rotate at the restaurant. There are always four staples and then it's that fifth meatball slot that we rotate. Most that we serve in the restaurant you'll find in the book. There might be some in the restaurant that aren't in the book because we wrote it awhile ago. But some [meatballs in the book] that are super are the Fightin' Irish Balls, the Steak 'n' Bacon Cheddar Balls, and the Reuben Balls.

What are the most popular types of meatballs ordered at the Meatball Shop?

Statistically, the beef meatballs with tomato sauce in a bowl is the most popular dish. Just classic, naked meatballs of beef with tomato sauce. For a meatball veteran, the chicken meatballs with Parmesan cream sauce over mashed potatoes is incredibly delicious. Or the spicy pork meatballs over polenta. The steak 'n' bacon meatballs on a hero is a hangover helper. Me, personally, I'm really healthy and the food at the Meatball Shop is really healthy. It's all-natural and there's nothing in there that'll kill you. I kind of err on the healthier side. I have a kitchen sink salad with vegetarian meatballs and pesto sauce.

Have there been any meatball flops?

One that we did early on -- the salmon meatballs. Some people loved it; some didn't love it. When we get three people saying they aren't stoked with it, we'll take it off.

You opened an outpost in Brooklyn this summer. What, if anything, is the biggest difference between the two spots?

There are a few differences. When you walk into the shop on Bedford, you'll know instantly that you're in the Meatball Shop. One thing you'll notice is that [the Meatball Shop on] Bedford is double the size of [the one on] Stanton Street. Another difference is that we have a full liquor license with a full cocktail program that we put a lot of energy into. It's similar to the slider grid in that you choose your mix-in and alcohol. But the energy and service are the same, and lots of fun. We've been in restaurants for the longest time and just wanted to create a place where we could hang out with our friends.

Any indication for when the next location will open?

We are definitely getting ready to open our West Village location. It's at 64 Greenwich Avenue at Perry Street. We'll open sometime in November. The West Village is a different demographic for us, so we're hoping to serve younger families.

Check back in tomorrow when Michael tells us where he's eating when he's not chowing down on meatballs.