

Going Out Guide

We tried all the meatballs at the Meatball Shop and ranked them from worst to best



The Meatball Shop, a new addition to 14th Street, offers its signature dish on salads, in bowls, in sliders and even as “baller” plates. (Liz Clayman/The Meatball Shop)

By **Megan McDonough**

November 14 at 8:00 AM

Temperatures are dropping, which means meatball season is fast approaching. The Italian comfort food — basically synonymous with fuzzy sweaters and giant bowls of creamy pasta — serves as the centerpiece at [the Meatball Shop](#), a New York City chain that recently opened on 14th Street. The 70-seat restaurant, in the former Cork Wine Bar, is the company’s first venture outside the Big Apple.

At the shop, you can mix-and-match seven balls and sauces. Orders range from “naked” cups (four with sauce, cheese and a side of focaccia bread for \$10.50) to “baller” plates (on bowls of pasta, polenta or mashed potatoes, starting at \$22). There are gluten-free and veggie options, and drink offerings include beer, wine, specialty cocktails and — get this — jello shots. (You can relive your college days

for a mere \$4.)

[Does Georgetown Cupcake really have the best cupcakes in D.C.? We tested seven shops to find out.]



The Meatball Shop's D.C. location is the company's first opening outside New York. (Liz Clayman/The Meatball Shop)

We put this operation's signature fare to the test in slider form (three for \$9.50), with its recommended sauce. There are seasonal varieties each month — including delicious “Bienvenidos” balls by José Andrés that were on deck when we stopped by (they were our second favorite in the ranking, but they're already gone from the menu.) Now you can sample a honey-barbecue chicken meatball and soon a “gobble gobble” truffle turkey meatball, which will be released around Thanksgiving.

What makes a good meatball? According to Daniel Sharp, the Meatball Shop's director of culinary operations, it's all about achieving a perfect balance of flavor and texture. “The mistake people make is that they try to make meatballs out of ingredients that [don't lend themselves] to meatballs. They try to remove the ‘filler,’ but that's what gives [the meatballs] a lighter texture. Or they'll try to use a leaner meat, but the well-marbled meat is what gives it all the flavor.”

His advice: “Stick with the classic recipe.”

The frenzied restaurant still has some growing pains to sort out — on a recent Thursday night, our order got jumbled and took nearly an hour to arrive — but it has the potential to become a hit among late-night patrons. (Tip: Save room for dessert. The make-your-own ice cream sandwich, with homemade ice cream and fresh cookies, was a crowd favorite.)

Here’s our ranking of balls, from worst to best.

[24 dishes that shaped how D.C. eats]



Salmon balls over a kale salad. (The Meatball Shop)



Lobster balls. (The Meatball Shop)

6. Lobster

As the priciest protein (\$10 extra), we expected to be wowed by large, pink lumps of Maine lobster and a light brioche bun. Instead, we were met with chewy bits of rubbery lobster and soggy bread. The lemon-butter sauce didn’t help, either.

5. Veggie

Herbs are great in meatballs. Without them, the balls can taste like sad, plain burgers. However, our veggie ball was smothered in a spinach-basil pesto, which overpowered the flavor and texture of the spiced-lentil-and-mushroom ball, which on its own was light and fluffy. If we wanted pure pesto, we would have ordered pasta.

4. Salmon

The roasted salmon ball, made with salmon mousse, tasted healthy and light but had a strange texture and was overpoweringly fishy. The yogurt dill sauce did not improve matters. For \$6 extra, we expected better.



Chicken balls with a parmesan cream sauce and rigatoni. (The Meatball Shop)



Spicy pork meatballs with pesto over polenta. (The Meatball Shop)

3. Chicken

The chicken-based ball — made with white wine, fennel, parsley and gluten-free bread crumbs — was tasty and well seasoned. It also paired nicely with the

creamy and decadent Parmesan sauce. The only reason it didn't rank higher: The sauce-and-ball combination wasn't as memorable as the varieties that surpassed it.



A bowl of classic meatballs with tomato sauce. (The Meatball Shop)

2. Classic

This Italian-style, beef-and-pork ball delivered the familiar, full-bodied flavor of Grandma's cooking. The beef added flavor and texture while the pork added suppleness, fat and moisture. The thick San Marzano sauce rounded out the delicious dish.

1. Pork

These hearty, heritage pork meatballs delivered on all fronts. The pickled cherry-peppered balls — an Italian staple — were bursting with flavor and were delectably juicy and moist. The pickled peppers added brightness and acidity. The chef's kiss, though, was the spicy garlic and chili meat sauce, which delivered the perfect amount of heat.

The Meatball Shop, 1720 14th St. NW. 202-684-8564. Open 11:30 a.m. to midnight Sunday to Tuesday; 11:30 a.m. to 1 a.m. Wednesday and Thursday; and 11:30 to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday.