

The Meatball Shop's Hero Worship

Tasty spheres roll to center stage on the Lower East Side

By Robert Sietsema *Wednesday, Mar 24 2010* Comments (3)

The world has never known a more perfect meatball hero. The bread is a demi-baguette from Il Forno Bakery in the Bronx, crusty without being so tough that the ingredients squirt out the sides. The cheese is excellent fresh mozzarella—not the packaged stuff that masquerades as mozzarella, smothering most of the city's meatball heros like a vengeful heir with a pillow. Chunky and bright red, the sauce has a bit of zip to it, but does not overwhelm the other ingredients. And what about the meatballs? They're of small circumference, beefy, and slightly herbal-tasting.



Amelia Beamish

Holden Caulfield would not have liked the phony salmon ball.

Details

The Meatball Shop
84 Stanton Street
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I acquired this magnificent sandwich at the Meatball Shop, a new restaurant on Stanton Street that does only one thing, but does it very well. While the $9 price tag may seem excessive, especially with a similar-size hero available at every pizza parlor in town for $5 or $6, note that this one comes with a baby spinach salad topped with lemon vinaigrette and thinly sliced apples, transforming your hero into a balanced meal.

The Meatball Shop sits just off Allen Street in an unprepossessing Lower East Side location. As is often the case, the hubbub in the open kitchen is your Off-Broadway show, as employees juggle meatballs like circus performers. When you tire of watching that, you can admire the wall of deconstructed meat grinders, which provide a lesson in mechanical engineering if you look long enough. As a venue for gorging an Italian hero, the Meatball's mellow interior is unparalleled.

The hoagie I ate that first day bulged with balls made entirely of beef, but the restaurant insists on making several more varieties, some of dubious worth. Yes, vegetarians will probably be content with their designated hero, even though its faux-meatballs taste too much like lentils. The pork orbs are spicier than the beef, and nearly as good, while the chicken spheres are on the bland side—as things made out of chicken breast usually are. And the salmon variety, aimed at pescatarians like a loaded blunderbuss, are truly awful: coarse-textured, oily, and an odd shade of orange. "It's everything I hate about salmon, all in one tiny package," mused my colleague Peter Meehan, who brought his newborn daughter Hazel with him one evening.

On that same occasion, the daily special meatball was lamb, and it proved better than the beef. ("Stick with mammals" is good advice where meatballs are concerned.) Rather than putting it on a hero, I elected to consign it to one of the other fates the restaurant offers: plopping a serving of three ($7) on a bed of mashed potatoes ($3) and flooding them with mushroom gravy (free). Not bad. The sauce is one of three that may be chosen as an alternative to the chunky tomato sauce (the others are "spicy meat" and Parmesan cream). Indeed, once you depart from the core menu of heros, there's a plethora of perilous paths your meal can take. There are meatball sliders; meatballs gravied or plain, tendered with focaccia; and meatballs served on beds of risotto, polenta, rigatoni, spaghetti, salad, braised greens, or roasted veggies.

The options are so multifarious, you might be tempted to slap your hands to your temples and scream. Which is probably why the restaurant uses a system where you mark your order with a felt-tip pen on a plastic-covered menu, rather than making a waiter stand at attention as you parse all the options. Hint: Treat the potential accompaniments as stand-alone dishes, and don't worry about the restaurant's confusing meatball-matching schemes.

In this way, my companions and I enjoyed a simple dish of spaghetti and tomato sauce. At $3, it was a terrific deal. Similarly commendable are the garlicky white beans, braised market greens, and roasted winter vegetables, while the "freshly milled polenta" was dull and not worthy of its adverb and adjective. The accompaniments make the Meatball Shop an excellent place to dine with kids, who will find the simplicity of, say, rigatoni with tomato sauce or a bowl of three unadorned meatballs just the ticket.

And there's one more thing that both adults and kids will love: the desserts. Only one is available, an ice cream sandwich featuring five options each of ice cream and cookies. We totally grooved on the chocolate-laced meringue cookies matched with plain vanilla ice cream, and the mint ice cream bookended with brownies, while we didn't think much of the ginger snaps paired with caramel ice cream.

But, hey, I wonder what the chocolate chip cookies would taste like with three lamb meatballs in between?