



## We Chat With: Chef Daniel Holzman of The Meatball Shops

Posted by [Jacqueline Raposo](#), April 3, 2012 at 9:00 AM

*"Everything about New York makes it the right home for the Meatball Shops. I really, really do believe that it's just the greatest place to have a restaurant."*

It's easy to get executive chef and co-owner Daniel Holzman to open up; he's got the casual, confident demeanor of a New Yorker who's returned home, worked his fingers to the bone and is now ready to tell it like it is. At his three [Meatball Shops](#) he plays with fresh ingredients and flavor combinations that inspire him, which he shares in his new [cookbook](#). On a seasonably warm afternoon, we took in the street traffic of the Lower East Side and chatted about what makes New York the perfect home for his menu.

**You established your trade in pretty fine restaurants with classic, romantic leanings, yet you seem to be drawn to more rustic fare. What kind of food do you most love to eat?** Lately I've been interested in more healthy food, and the idea of eating for more than just taste. Maybe because I'm slightly older now, I've started to think about how you filter a lot of food through your body in your lifetime.

**Has that affected the menu at your restaurants?** My partner (Michael Chernow) has had a lot of influence on that because he's a really healthy guy. So when we designed this restaurant we tried to make sure that there's something for everybody. If you prefer to lead a little bit more of a healthy lifestyle, it's available to you here.

**How does it feel to have your career, right now, focused primarily around a little ball of meat?** Well, I was really nervous that I would feel pigeonholed and kind of not creatively stimulated, but it's just not the case. **The challenge has really changed and all the stuff I've been forced to learn has really kept me pretty excited.** There haven't been any dull moments when I've felt kind of depressed, or like, "geez, you know, I really wish I could make something *flat*."

**Most people associate meatballs with Italy, but you're not Italian.** No, I'm a Jew from New York. And, like, half a Jew really because I'm a Jew by culture and by association, not by religion.

**Did your heritage affect your current state of cooking?** You know, I guess it hasn't really affected it so much, interestingly enough. I became interested in Italian food working in Italian restaurants in San Francisco. I had always worked in French restaurants, and then started working in Italian restaurants and got really excited about it.



[Photographs: Brent Herrig]



Has there been something liberating or comforting in leaving the fine restaurant scene in California and coming home to New York? Yes! 100%. One of the main factors for me personally is that I have always struggled with my anxiety. I'm one of the unfortunate people (and even more unfortunate for the people around me) that turns into a real dick when I get stressed out. And one of the greatest parts of this restaurant is that the stress level is just a few notches lower. **When something isn't perfect, I don't have to freak out or scream or be upset. It's okay, it's a seven dollar bowl of meatballs**, and most people that come into our restaurant are really cool and forgiving. It's really nice to work in an environment where I can enjoy myself, have a good time, laugh, and watch other people enjoying working with me.

---

*Everything about New York makes it the right home for the Meatball Shops.*

---

**What about New York makes it the right home for the Meatball Shops?** *Everything* about New York makes it the right home for the Meatball Shops. I really, really do believe that it's just the greatest place to have a restaurant. People here get behind you and support you.

They eat until late at night, seek out really good food, appreciate good quality, and when you do something that's good they notice it.

**You and [co-owner and manager] Michael seem to do pretty damn well in interviews...** Yeah I think it's his looks and my... um... dry wit.

**How much press did you expect, and how do you feel about it?** We didn't expect any of it. I'm really, *really* happy that everybody's had a good time with it and been down to support us; it means a lot. And I didn't realize this about myself, but I love it. It's fun and I enjoy the attention. I think I always just wanted attention and now I don't have to throw a temper tantrum to get it.

**Let's pretend you hated meatballs—** I do. I don't even have to pretend. I never said I like meatballs.

**I'll put it this way, let's say you didn't have the Meatball Shops. What kind of specialty restaurant would you want to have?** Oh, shucks, I don't want to giveaway my great ideas here. I'm super passionate about a different idea every week. **I definitely wouldn't open a coleslaw shop. There would *not* be a coleslaw shop in my future.** You know, I think the guys doing the old-school candy shops are cool. I would love to have an old-school candy shop and soda fountain. That would be fun.

**Are there other cuisines you'd like to explore more?** I would love to go to an Indian restaurant with Floyd Cardoz and ask him how to make a real deal samosa.

**About the author:** [Jacqueline Raposo](#) is a writer and alternative baker with a thing for juggling spatulas. She can be found at [www.thedustybaker.com](http://www.thedustybaker.com)

