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A chance on meatballs: A Lower East Side sub shop gets serious foodie props, and heads to Brooklyn

BY GILLIAN REAGAN

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Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow, two childhood friends from the Upper East Side, opened The Meatball Shop on February 19 on Stanton Street. It's a hit.

The concept was simple: serve a comfort-food classic on as-you-like-it plates—stuffed in sliders or heroes, or on beds of polenta or steamed vegetables, with \$3 cans of beer and ice cream sandwiches to wash them down.

They dressed the room with a long communal table and vintage framed photographs, a white subway tile bar stacked with wines and whiskey, and a simple wood counter and register between the dining room and the kitchen. They imagined they were creating some combination of your grandmother's dinette set, your neighborhood tavern and your local hero spot all in one place.

But keeping the doors open Thursday through Saturday until 4 a.m., originally a play for the Lower East Side's after-after-party stumbler, endeared them to the sous chefs of neighboring restaurants who finish their shifts just a little earlier. A late-night foodie mecca was born; or, rather, Foursquared.

Within weeks, the shop was mobbed.

A cast of locals and tourists, the kind who read about a place in the *Times* and then try to make "reservations," clustered on Stanton Street for two-hour waits throughout the summer, baking in the heat.

"Our dream was to have a small neighborhood spot that would serve the neighborhood," said Holzman, sitting at one of the wood tables outside the Stanton Street shop on a recent windy afternoon. "But it blew up."

Next year, they'll get what they claim to have wanted all along, a neighborhood restaurant rather than a destination: The Meatball Shop boys have secured a spot on Bedford Avenue at North 7th Street, in the heart of Williamsburg, where they'll be feeding the artsy types and slanty hip kids.

Holzman, 31, has a shaved head and thick glasses and was dressed in a blue and yellow flannel shirt and camel-colored Wallabies. One of his pant legs was folded up and hidden in his knee into the city from Carroll Gardens that morning and was still recovering, sartorially. He kept jumping up from his chair to greet passersby who were peering into the giant shopfront window to see if there were any open seats.

"You want to eat here? Come in, come in," Holzman said, waving in graying mom-and-pop tourist types gripping maps. The restaurant was supposed to close for a half-hour staff meeting in ten minutes. "But, come on, what am I going to do, turn grandpa away?" Holzman said, pawing the back of his chef, Scott Jaffe.

"We're going to get stomped," Jaffe said, specking the early evening rush. But he grinned and returned to the kitchen where he makes more than 1,200 meatballs a day. Then, there are the catering orders for art parties.

"We've been open for months and I don't think I've exhaled yet," Holzman said.

The Meatball Shop was busy that afternoon, as usual. Casual businessmen and casual daters were crowded by the bar. Tourists and tattoo artists—the Lower East Side's version of hard-hat lunchers—mingled in the dining room.

The place looks unassuming from the outside. There's a red-and-white striped awning, a wood-picket fence surrounding a bunch of small tables, and giant windows with a letter painted in meat-sauce red on each one, spelling out H-E-A-T-B-A-L-L. At the entrance, in lieu of a welcome mat, there's a mosaic assembled by Holzman's mom which spells out the joint's name (she also painted in the cow mural in the bathroom).

The Meatball Shop has a vintage taproom style: a white-tiled bar with a reclaimed-wood top on the right, bare-brick walls decorated with black-and-white portraits on the left, and the shared table sandwiched in the middle. Gas lanterns and glass milk bottles sit on the tables and meat grinders leer from the corners. An open kitchen displays young chefs in bandanas, beards, and band t-shirts. Customers order by ticking off little boxes with a Dry-Erase marker on a laminated menu.

Beef meatballs with tomato sauce is the obvious menu hit; so is the spicy pork variety. But Holzman recommends the veggie meatballs with spicy sauce—he eats them every day for lunch.

"It's the only meatball I don't get sick of," he said.

He said "the idea was that it could compete with the Dollar Menu," but instead of taking your date to the fast food joint for EveryDay Value, you'd head to The Meatball Shop where there are local ingredients, high-quality meat from Heritage Foods, low-lit intimacy and a hip, diverse Lower East Side crowd—in a laid-back, Union-cafeteria atmosphere. Meatballs get messy, so it's ok to roll up your sleeves. "You can spend \$30 on a date and not feel cheap," Holzman said.

HOLZMAN AND CHERNOW'S "THE MEATBALL SHOP" HAS THE POTENTIAL to do for the humble meatball what Danny Meyer's Shake Shack did for the hamburger: elevating an American classic food to gourmet status and gathering a quasitoxic cult. Even the names—"shack" and "shop"—connote similarly: this is small-town simplicity in the Big City. Good food, hype, and no-frills service transformed Shake Shack from a hot dog cart to a foodie destination in the course of a decade. Now it's an international chain with spots in Miami and Sarasota Springs and slated openings in Washington D.C. and Kuwait.

Two smart guys, a not-too-gimmicky concept, a cheap ingredient list; a formula for success. Shake Shack is also, finally, making its own foray into Brooklyn, opening an outpost at the gateway of the Fulton Mall. That's the right place for them: Brooklynites, wishing, hoping to make it to Manhattan. The Meatball Shop guys are going to Williamsburg, whence few return to Manhattan, and don't care to.



Danny Holzman and Michael Chernow. Via CapitalBla.

On the afternoon of our first visit to the shop, Holzman was sitting at the corner of the bar clacking away on a white, Apple MacBook, finishing up the last four risotto recipes for The Meatball Shop cookbook, which will be published next October by Random House. With franchise opportunities come "brand" opportunities. He was also checking his phone a lot, since he runs the Meatball Shop's Facebook and Twitter feeds and fielding calls from his public relations girl. The modern chef is also a media mogul.

Both Chernow and Holzman have shaved heads and are fighters-in-training (Chernow, built like a melted candle with tattoos snaking across his biceps, is a Muay Thai fighter and has entered competitions before; Holzman, compact and fit, takes jiu-jitsu, the Brazilian combat sport, a few days a week.) But Holzman has that gentle guy thing going on. If he looks intimidating at first, you quickly come to the comforting realization that he's on your side, which is good for you. This is his signal charm.

Holzman is warm, even neurotically welcoming. Guests who approach the kitchen get plates of food shoved at them: roasted Brussels sprouts, meatballs, polenta.

Chef Jaffe was trying out foodstuffs from a bulk seller who'd laid out jellies, sauces, olives and roasted vegetables sitting in pools of oil. Holzman took a few bites, invited me to try some, then trailed me into the kitchen.

It's cramped and chaotic in there. In one corner, sous chefs bustle over a stove, roasting Brussels sprouts and side greens and piling creamy polenta onto small white plates. Next to the oven, a cartoonishly huge, witches-cauldron kind of pot holds meatballs soaking in velvety red sauce. A sous chef is preparing to grind chicken meatball materials—parsley, eggs, fennel seed, peppercorn. Once he sends the mix through the grinder, he'll take an ice cream scoop to dig out each meatball, hand-roll them into a golf-ball size and then place them on an oiled baking sheet, and roast them until they're firm.

Meatballs are simple to make, but 1,200 meatballs a day for the restaurant alone is a lot, and then there are the art shows and private parties and other catering jobs. Super Bowl season will be a busy one for the Meatball boys.

Holzman was in the walk-in freezer, where there are boxes of arugula and baby spinach, and beef in Tupperware stacked on silver racks.

He points out that the chicken is from Bell & Evans. The beef is from Creekstone Farms. "In California, I had personal relationships with all of the farmers," Holzman said. "When I first started I had this image of riding my bike down to the greenmarket and getting vegetables every day. I think I got some polenta once."

THIS PLACE IS SO HYPED UP YOU ALMOST DON'T WANT TO GO THERE. That Yogi Berra line: "It's so crowded nobody goes there anymore!" That's annoying to Holzman, who brushes off most of the sceney talk surrounding the shop. He doesn't feel settled yet. "All I care about is if the food is delicious," he said. "But let's get real here: We're actually two broke kids who were jobless a few months ago. I mean, I wasn't turning on the heat during the winter because I was afraid of spending a dollar. So, we're not all that successful yet."

Holzman started cooking at age 15 at Le Bernardin before attending the Culinary Institute of America with a full scholarship from the James Beard Foundation. He zipped off to the West Coast for a while, with stops in Las Vegas, Los Angeles and San Francisco, where in 2007 he opened the critically acclaimed Italian restaurant SPQR.

Chernow started off in nightlife, working behind the bar of Lower East Side clubs before eventually opening his own wine spot, Punch & Judy on Clinton Street. In 2002, he took a job managing Frank on Second Avenue and stayed there for seven years before enrolling in the French Culinary Institute.

Chernow and Holzman were childhood friends. Their mothers were friendly and they were bandmates at LaGuardia High School, of Fame fame. (Holzman played the flute, Chernow played the tuba). They also worked as delivery boys at The Candle Cafe, the vegan restaurant in the mid-70s on 3rd Avenue. Holzman describes Chernow as a brother: they lived together in Los Angeles and returned to New York together.

Holzman said he and Chernow had talked idly about opening a restaurant for years. "The whole thing is hazy to me now," Holzman said. Last summer, they hosted casual Sunday dinners with their friends on Chernow's rooftop in Brooklyn—instead of hamburger BBQs, they had meatball slider feasts. "We knew we were on to something because of just how happy everyone was. Everyone was smiling," he said. "We were getting more and more confident because the food was getting better and better."

It became clear that the food would be good enough to gather regulars. And there is, of course, the obvious appeal of meatballs for two dudes: "Balls are fucking hilarious. They're funny. They make people laugh," Holzman said. "So many jokes."

A recent issue of *Maxim* featured the shop's meatballs as "the latest in retro-cool man-food" and included a list of rejected headlines at the bottom of the page including: "Straight Ballin'" "The Magic Ate Ball" "Play Ballz" "Feel Deez Nuts," etc. The phrases pop up in the kitchen all the time.

We're standing next to the pastry chef, now: Devon Mercado, a young graduate with olive skin and long dark hair pulled back behind a bandana, has just baked high-fructose sugar cookies to top a maple ice cream for the Thanksgiving menu. Holzman chatted with her about cinnamon and nutmeg ratios, and picked up the cookies from the baking sheet, slipping me halves from the side.

Holzman insisted that I eat a dish, over a protest. I don't review restaurants, I told him. Plus, I am perhaps not the best person to review The Meatball Shop. I don't eat meat. Holzman wasn't worried though. He ordered me veggie meatballs with spicy sauce over polenta.

The meatballs come in a simple white plate, steaming. They are savory, nutty little things, made with lentils, mushrooms, nuts, tiny bits of vegetables and spices. The texture is somehow fluffy and firm at the same time—as "meaty" as any fake meatball could possibly get. Bewitched, I asked Holzman how to make them. He gave me the recipe and a hug good-bye. A few days later, I returned for the same meal, but there was an hour-long wait.