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The Chef's Take: Vegan Meatballs at the Meatball Shop

by [Alia Akkam](#) in [Dining Out](#), October 17, 2015

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At any one of the Meatball Shop's six New York outposts, patrons relish, say, orbs of spicy pork over a bed of sauteed broccoli, or pesto-dressed chicken atop freshly milled polenta. And while a vegetable version of the meatball has long graced the menu, now Meatball Shop owner and Chef Daniel Holzman has dreamed up a vegan recipe.

"Vegan food can be difficult to make for traditionally trained chefs, because we often rely on animal fats and proteins for moisture, flavor and to help bind ingredients together," he explained. But Holzman, who launched his cooking career at New York's acclaimed vegan restaurant Candle Café, isn't perturbed by the challenge. "I love vegetables and don't find cooking with only them to be constraining," he added.

After myriad requests from customers for a vegan iteration of the meatball, Holzman decided it was time to experiment. By melding the likes of lentils, mushrooms and walnuts with carrots, tomato paste and breadcrumbs, he found success, yielding these fresh thyme- and parsley-flecked balls. "They aren't made with any strange meat substitutes," he pointed out. "The lentils and mushrooms are very 'meaty,' and the walnuts lend great texture and richness." They're just begging to be heightened by an indulgent jolt of pesto sopped up by focaccia.

Vegan Meatballs

Yield: About two dozen 1 1/2-inch meatballs

2 cups lentils

1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons olive oil

1 1/2 large onion, chopped

3 carrots, chopped

3 celery stalks, chopped

1 garlic clove, minced

2 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme

2 teaspoons salt

5 tablespoons tomato paste

10 ounces button mushrooms, wiped clean and sliced

1/2 cup breadcrumbs

1/2 cup chopped fresh parsley

1/4 cup finely chopped walnuts

Combine the lentils and two quarts water in a medium stockpot and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer until the lentils are soft (but not falling apart), about 25 minutes. Drain the lentils and allow to cool. Add 1/4 cup olive oil to a large frying pan and saute the onions, carrots, celery, garlic, thyme and salt over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, for about 10 minutes, until the vegetables are tender and just beginning to brown. Add the tomato paste and continue to cook, stirring constantly, for 3 minutes. Add the mushrooms and cook, stirring frequently, for 15 more minutes, or until all the liquid is absorbed. Transfer the mixture to a large bowl and allow to cool to room temperature.

When cool, add the lentils to the vegetable mixture. Add breadcrumbs, parsley and walnuts to the cooled vegetable mixture and mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated. Place in the refrigerator for 25 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. Drizzle the remaining two tablespoons olive oil into a 9-by-13-inch baking dish and use your hand to evenly coat the entire surface. Set aside. Roll the mixture into round, golf ball-sized meatballs (about 1 1/2 inches), making sure to pack the vegetable mixture firmly. Place the balls in the prepared baking dish, allowing 1/4 inch of space between the balls and place in even rows vertically and horizontally to form a grid.

Roast for 30 minutes, or until the meatballs are firm and cooked through. Allow the meatballs to cool for five minutes on the baking dish before serving.

Per serving (3 balls): Calories 353; Fat 14 g (Saturated 2 g); Sodium 687 mg; Carbohydrate 46 g; Fiber 17 g; Sugars 6 g; Protein 16 g