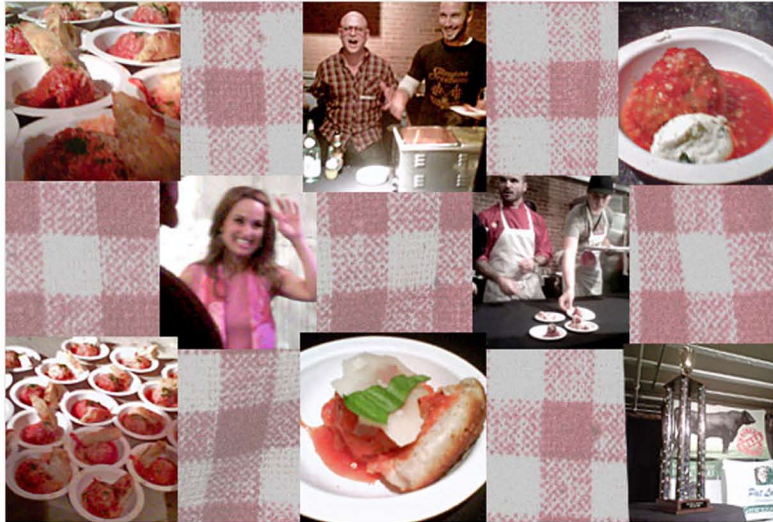


Nate Appleman, Jim Lahey Get Hypercompetitive at Meatball Madness

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Photos: William Cavallaro

The New York Wine and Food Festival kicked off last night with Meatball Madness, an event so popular on Saturday night last year that they moved it up to open this year's event. For diners, it's a chance to meet and sample the food from some of the best chefs in the city (and seriously, who doesn't like a meatball?), but Nate Appelman of Pulino's explained its appeal from the chef's perspective. "I don't do that many [food events], which is something I'm really adamant about. If I really care about the organization, or if it's something that I really think I'll have a lot of fun with, I'll do it. But this, different story. This is a competition. This is for the meatballs."

Meatball Shop's Daniel Holzman (a recent [New York Diet alum](#)) was in his element. He worked the crowd with whoops and cheers, saying to us "This is like my favorite thing in the world. To be able to hang out with my best friend, sling balls, and talk shit ... it's pretty awesome." Almost all the chefs spent most of their time hawking their wares for the all-important popular vote and taking photos with fans — last year's winner Andrew Carmellini was seriously in demand, but no one was as bombarded with flashbulbs as the event's host, Giada DeLaurentis.

For all the event's festivity, the mood was undeniably competitive. Even Jim Lahey, who waxed poetic about the simplicity of his veal and potato meatball on a potato bun with fresh parm, engaged in some smack talking. "I have the tenderest meatball of every meatball here, and I don't even have to taste anyone else's to know," he said. "If it were based on the veal flavor, the flavor of my meat taking precedence over the ego of my seasoning, I certainly would win." But in the end, Donatella Arpaia won the evening, with Mia Dona taking home this year's prize with braised veal meatballs with cacciocavallo cheese on homemade focaccia, a recipe Arpaia attributes to her mother. The victory celebration was short and sweet: Arpaia turned to us and said "Right after this, I'm going right back to the restaurant."