

FEATURE

Meet 16 Unsung Culinary Heroes Behind Your Favorite Restaurants

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Credit: Whitney Tressel

What would a top-rated pasta restaurant be without perfectly rolled cavatelli? Or an award-winning Mexican joint without hundreds of freshly made tortillas? When it comes to culinary success, executive chefs and general managers usually get all the attention (and awards). But today we're turning the spotlight on the unsung, behind-the-scenes heroes that truly make restaurants a success: the meatball rollers, tortilla makers, porters, food runners and prep cooks. Read on to hear their stories.

Name: Juan Cusco

Title: Prep cook/meatball roller, [The Meatball Shop](#) in NYC

Stats: The wildly popular Italian mini-chain, founded by Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow has grown from one small LES shop to six locations across NYC in six short years and the duo have even become national celebrities, starring on shows like CNBC's *Consumed* and FYI's *Food Porn*. But behind their massive success is this man: Juan Cusco, one of several prep cooks (including brother Wilson) who has been rolling meatballs for the restaurant since the very beginning. Still employed at the original Lower East Side location, Cusco rolls hundreds of meatballs a day, sometimes as many as 1,200, depending on catering needs. Having immigrated to the U.S. from Ecuador seven years ago, Cusco began working here almost immediately upon arriving.

Secrets to success: "Follow the recipe," Cusco says half-jokingly. When asked if he needs the scoop to measure each ball Cusco admits: "I can tell by looking at it," [if it's the perfect size and shape]. Also, don't wet your hands before rolling, he advises.

Future plans: Cusco aspires to be a manager or chef and to improve his English. "Daniel has given me so many great opportunities here and I've learned so much, I want to keep getting better."