

## DAN HOLZMAN & MICHAEL CHERNOW: "THE MEATBALLERS"

Meatballs. A culinary creation so simple and delicious they can only be regarded as a staple comfort food. Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow saw the potential in these little morsels and have since created a small empire built around the meaty treat. The two childhood friends have always been involved in the restaurant business. "I grew up on 87th and 2nd and Dan on 83rd and 1st. We were neighbors. "We were bros" Dan adds. "I was 15 and Dan was 14 when we met on the Met Steps-very Gossip Girl like." Michael



laughs. "I had a Tuba- I used to play the Tuba! I went to public school and I was the smallest kid in the class so they gave me the biggest instrument... Anyways, we started working in restaurants together when we were literally 14 years old. We were delivering food for a Vegan restaurant on the Upper East Side- Dan's mom got him the job. We were both from families that were not well off, so in order to make money, we had to work for it. We worked in a lot of different restaurants. Dan jumped into the kitchen and after the vegan restaurant, I got a job as a bus boy at the Mustang Bar and Grill. Dan worked at Le Bernardin. We used to go to our friend Mike's house to hang out and do teenager, high school kid things" He winks. "And Dan would come in with these huge bags of fish and oysters and we would do these big barbeques."

During their teenage years, they began establishing clearly defined roles. "I was working front of the house-I like the money and I like the people" Michael notes. "I was always in the kitchen-away from the people" Dan jokes. "We would always talk about opening a restaurant together, but Meatballs weren't always part of the dream." But they were a familiar food to nosh on when Michael worked at Frank's. Prior to opening The Meatball Shop, in an effort to stay healthy, Mike would eat meatballs with vegetables on their own, eliminating the pasta when he had meals at work. This practice made its way to the drawing board when the two chefs were deciding upon the concept and menu for the shop. "We wanted to do something different and the truth is, at the time the meatball thing was different. You have to be authentic and that is what we do at the restaurant. There is a lot of passion involved and we have a lot of great people that work with us. I don't know how circumstances could be better. We are partners and best friends and I think we do a pretty damn good job as far as restaurants are concerned because we listen to what people want. I think that is the number one thing for us-we actually care about what people want. A lot of places are geared around the chef. Our restaurant is very customizable, very user friendly." "We are like that brand Fubu. For the people by the people." Dan jokingly points out, referencing the popular 90's urban clothing line.



I myself witnessed their customer driven attitude a year or so ago, when I was the first person to try their Meatball BBLT-the ball, bacon, lettuce, and tomato. I was asked how I liked it, and while it was expectedly delicious, I suggested they may want to lighten up on the mayo. Immediately, Dan went back to the kitchen to tell his staff to lighten up on the condiment, and as Dan recalls "At the end of the day we ended up with a lot less mayo!" While the days of cooking and interacting with customers has become less romantic than when their spot first opened, the two are both at the restaurant at one point every day- less upfront, but still very present. "We spend some time in the kitchen, some time in the front, but the job description is no longer to wait on tables. For months, Dan never left the kitchen, and for months, no one got seated without talking to me."

Today, we have joined the two "meatballers" as they refer to themselves at Michael's Williamsburg abode to sample fare outside

of the meatball realm. The guys have just returned back from a trip to the Union Square Farmer's market. "Would you guys mind if we put on some music?" Michael addresses the room. He opts for Santana's Abraxas album. When the first chord is struck, the two begin to navigate the kitchen in an almost choreographed manner. Dan pours everyone a glass of crisp white wine and the prep work begins. Carrots are chopped, apples are soaked, cheese is cubed. Unlike their roles at the restaurant, Michael initiates the conversation while Dan artfully prepares the food. Meandering beside them is Michael's dog Riley- a Catahoula Leopard Dog. "He is the coolest dog in the world" Mike says as he pats the pup's head.

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BY LAUREN LEVINGER

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 TWEET



I ask what Dan's culinary claim to fame is. "Well I think the meatballs are pretty awesome. The ideas for the combinations come from everyone and in that sense it is collaborative. The waitresses, the waiters, the cooks, the dishwashers give me their ideas and I execute. If someone says I want a cheese and apple ball, I say that sounds great. Lets make it!



But not all the meatball suggestions have ended up on the menu. "There are a bunch of balls that I am still fighting for." says Mike "When we were in Jackson hole, Wyoming I walk into this lodge at the bottom of the mountain. Daniel is sitting there with our buddy and this huge plate of nachos-pork, jalapeños, cheese...you look at it and its absolutely disgusting, but then you take a bite and oh my god-so good. So I want to do a "Nachos Supreme" ball with steak bacon and cheddar, but i'm still waiting on that one. Right Dan?" He shoots a playful stare at his buddy.

Dan is more interested in developing what he calls the "funny balls". "I'm a big fan of the funny balls. Like the "Bunny Balls" for Easter-because the chocolate eggs are not the only part of the bunny that taste good. We didn't do it this year, but I really wanted to do the "Jingle Balls" Because Santa's little helpers are delicious too."

Perhaps all of these balls will make their big debut with the opening of the duo's two new locations. "We are opening two more restaurants. It's the hardest thing in the world to think about trying to step away from this thing that is our baby, give it to a nanny and then try to have another baby." Dan explains. But we are "meatballers" and we are doing it!" The two laugh. Both spots will stick to the Meatball tradition and are sure to be successes with the manifesto the chefs live by. "Hospitality is being able to take care of people and make them feel special." and between the meatballs, fresh sides, and irresistible peanut butter cookie ice cream sandwiches, you are sure to leave feeling exactly that way.



#### **Dan & Michael's Favorites:**

##### **Dan:**

**Roberta's** – While they are known for their pizza, I love the brunch. The fried eggs with pork hash is special

**Kuma Inn**- Tita Em's adobong PAL, chicken wings, rice vinegar, garlic and soy

**Congee Village**- Filet of Flounder fish in two tastes

**Opa Souclaki of Astoria**- Spaniakopita, the best spinach pie

**Barrio Chino**- Calamari Salad

##### **Mike:**

**Tomoe Sushi**- I am a sushi freak, as far as sushi goes in NY, Tomoe holds the "best of" trophy. One of my favorite places in the city to chow hands down

**Spotted Pig**- The Roquefort cheese burger and shoe string fries with fried garlic and rosemary

**Eleven Madison Park**- My "go to" for ANY special occasion. My wife and I go every year for our anniversary.

**Peasant**- The fact that Franky is in the kitchen 5 nights a week is very special

**Motorino Pizza**- From growing up in NYC, I like to think of myself as a guy who knows good pizza. Go to Motorino if you want good pizza