

The humble meatball gets dressed up for dinner

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John Kenrick
 Mini Buffalo Chicken Balls with Blue Cheese Dressing & Celery come from "The Meatball Shop Cookbook."

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What goes around comes around. Now it's the humble meatball's time again.

What's that you say? You never knew it left?

True enough. Certainly, it's a mainstay on Italian-American menus. Immigrant groups old and new meatball have their own style of meatball - Germans have their Koenigsberger Kloesse, as found at Karl Ratzsch's, and Vietnamese pho often is served with springy bo vien bobbing among the noodles and broth.

But meatballs of late have been venturing out of their usual contexts in Milwaukee, showing up as appetizers at a bistro here, an upscale bar there.

The trend solidified nationally back in 2010, when a restaurant dedicated to meatballs opened on New York's lower east side. Its success prompted the owners, Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow, to open two more restaurants in New York and led to publication of "The Meatball Shop Cookbook" in November.

Last year, fine-dining Chicago chef (and Milwaukee native) Phillip Foss made a food-truck detour, dishing up meatballs stress-free after he left the Lockwood restaurant. (He's out operating the truck as his new restaurant, El Ideas, has taken off.) In the fall, a meatball-oriented shop opened in Washington, D.C., and by year's end the meatball had secured its place on 2011 food-trend lists across the country.

While meatball mania hasn't reached quite the same proportions in Milwaukee as nationally, the little orbs have been showing up on menus beyond traditional ethnic restaurants.

A year ago, the downtown craft-cocktail bar Distil was serving lamb meatballs with silky cauliflower puree. It's now presenting meatballs as a play on a dish a lot of Americans (chef Justin Carlisle included) grew up with - meatballs in cream of mushroom soup - but amplifies the sophistication. This version serves meatballs that blend beef and heirloom breeds of pork with aged cheeses; its creamy sauce is based on veal stock, and the garnish is fried shitake mushrooms.

At Meritage on the west side, chef Jan Kelly in the past has served meatballs made from bison and from pork. Currently on the menu, little meatballs of beef and pork are stuffed with cheese and served with tomato sauce and super-creamy polenta and sprinkled with lemon-horseradish gremolata, a counterpoint to the richness.

"I wanted to do something that was a comfort food - familiar, yet present it in a different way, so that's why we did the polenta underneath," Kelly said. She thought it would appeal to most people, "kind of going back to when you were a kid and your mom made spaghetti and meatballs."

At HoneyPie Café in Bay View, chef Bryan Phillips prepared lamb sausage meatballs in the fall as an appetizer, served with apricot chutney and sprouts from Growing Power. It's now an occasional special. Chefs are channeling their creativity when it comes to meatballs, but let's not forget tradition.

It's not forgotten at Trinity Lutheran Church on 5th Ave. in South Milwaukee, a church founded by Norwegians.

The congregation there has been holding a yearly meatball supper open to the community continuously since 1978 (the first time, in 1959). The torch has been passed to a younger generation of meatball makers, said committee member Susan Zyka, but the dinner still feeds Scandinavian meatballs made from the same recipe to around 500 hungry souls who come to the church between 4 and 7 p.m.

"It takes a lot of planning by a lot of people," Zyka said. Once congregants have picked up 200 pounds of meat with their spice blend and breadcrumbs added for them by Potter's Piggy Wiggy in Oak Creek, a battalion of some 20 cooks forms to roll the meatballs. Congregants also prepare 225 pounds of potatoes for the boiled parsley potatoes, scrape carrots and slice cabbage for 125 pounds of coleslaw, and prepare 10 gallons of cranberry-orange relish. The meatballs are made a day in advance, but the gravy is made from drippings the day of the dinner. They also serve lefse, corn and homemade pils and other desserts at the dinner.

Certainly, meatballs may be a little fussy to make, even if you don't have to make 200 pounds of them, but they're far from difficult. Carlisle's tips for making meatballs include using a light touch when combining the ingredients - overworking the mix could leave you with a tough meatball. He also recommends rolling the meat into a ball just until it's firmly packed (you don't want it to come undone) but not compressed (so it's tender instead of dense).

Meatballs' beauty is twofold: First, they're versatile, a perfect blank slate for a cook's imagination. You can change up the meats (stand-in), the seasonings and the sauces. Thai, Caribbean, Greek and Cajun are some of the accents that meatballs take on in "The Meatball Shop Cookbook," for example.

Second, they're an ideal party food - in case anyone is planning a gathering while a certain football team plays, say, as HoneyPie's chef Phillips says, "Everybody likes a good meatball . . . if you like meat."

And hosts like them because they can be made in advance, up to three days if kept in the fridge, several weeks if need be in the freezer. Just a quick reheating before serving, and you're on the way to getting the party rolling.

Mini Buffalo Chicken Balls Makes about 40 (¾-inch) balls

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter
- 1/3 cup Frank's Red Hot Sauce or any other favorite hot sauce
- 1 pound ground chicken, preferably thigh meat
- 1 large egg
- ½ celery stalk, minced
- ½ cup dry bread crumbs
- 1 teaspoon salt

Drizzle the oil into a 13-by-9-inch baking dish and use your hand to evenly coat the entire surface.

In a small saucpan, combine butter and hot sauce and cook over low heat, whisking until butter is melted and fully incorporated. Remove from heat and allow mixture to cool 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, preheat oven to 450 degrees. In a large bowl, combine hot sauce mixture, ground chicken, egg, celery, bread crumbs and salt until thoroughly incorporated. Roll into ¾-inch balls. Place the balls in prepared baking dish, being careful to line them up snugly and in even rows vertically and horizontally to form a grid. The meatballs should be touching one another.

Bake in preheated oven 15 to 20 minutes, or until meatballs are firm and cooked through. Let cool 5 minutes in the dish before serving.

Blue cheese dressing: Makes about 2 cups

- ½ cup sour cream
- 1/3 cup crumbled blue cheese
- 1/3 cup whole milk
- 1/3 cup mayonnaise
- 1 teaspoon salt or to taste
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

Place all ingredients in a medium bowl and whisk until thoroughly combined. Keeps five days in the refrigerator.

Now, here's a spicy meatball, from "The Meatball Shop Cookbook." Serve it with the restaurant's Cilantro Yogurt Sauce (recipe follows) to relieve the heat, or simply reduce the amount of cayenne in the spice mix if you like your meatballs mild. To turn this from party food into supper, serve the meatballs with rice and a salad.

Tandoori Lamb Balls Makes about 4 dozen (1 ¼-inch) meatballs

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 pounds ground lamb
- ½ cup dry bread crumbs
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup chopped fresh cilantro (stems included)
- Juice from 1 lemon (about ¼ cup)
- ¼ cup tandoori spice mix (see recipe)
- 2 teaspoons salt
- Cilantro Yogurt Sauce (see recipe)

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Drizzle olive oil into a 13-by-9-inch baking dish and use your hand to evenly coat the entire surface.

In a large bowl, combine lamb, bread crumbs, eggs, cilantro, lemon juice, tandoori spice mix and salt and mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated.

Roll mixture into 1 ¼-inch balls and place in prepared dish, lining them up snugly and in even rows.

Bake in preheated oven 20 minutes, or until meatballs are firm and cooked through. Let cool 5 minutes in the dish before serving with cilantro yogurt sauce.

Tandoori spice mix:

- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons ground coriander
- 2 teaspoons sweet paprika
- 2 teaspoons ground turmeric
- 2 teaspoons cayenne pepper

Combine all ingredients in a small bowl. Mix will keep in an airtight container for up to 6 months.

Cilantro yogurt sauce: Makes 3 cups

- 2 cups whole-milk yogurt
- ½ red onion, diced fine
- 1 cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- Salt to taste

Place all ingredients in a medium bowl and whisk to combine. Taste and adjust seasoning if desired. Sauce keeps up to four days in the refrigerator.

 This vegetarian version, liberally adapted from "The Meatball Shop Cookbook," goes well with the restaurant's spinach-basil pesto.

Veggie Balls Makes about 70 (1 ¼-inch) balls

- 2 cups green or brown lentils
- ½ cup plus 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 carrots, chopped
- 2 celery ribs, chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme
- 1 teaspoon salt plus more for water
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper or to taste
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 8 ounces button mushrooms, chopped
- 1 cup spinach, chopped coarsely
- 3 large eggs
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ cup bread crumbs
- ½ cup milk
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley
- ½ cup finely chopped walnuts

Combine lentils and 2 quarts salted water in a medium stockpot and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until lentils are soft (but not falling apart), about 25 minutes. Drain lentils and let cool.

Add ½ cup of the olive oil to a large frying pan and sauté onion, carrots, celery, garlic, thyme, salt and pepper over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, about 10 minutes, until vegetables are tender and just beginning to brown. Add tomato paste and continue to cook, stirring constantly, 3 minutes. Deglaze pan with the vinegar. Reduce heat to medium; add mushrooms and cook, stirring frequently, 10 more minutes, or until mushrooms are tender and any of their liquid is absorbed. Mixture should be moist, but not wet. If it's too dry, add 1 or 2 tablespoons water and stir to moisten. Stir in chopped, raw spinach. Transfer mixture to a large bowl and let cool to room temperature.

Meanwhile, combine bread crumbs and milk in a small bowl.

When vegetable mixture is cool, add lentils.

Add eggs, Parmesan, bread crumbs, parsley and walnuts to cooled vegetable mixture and mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated. Place in refrigerator 1 hour.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Divide remaining 3 tablespoons olive oil onto 2 rimmed baking sheets and use your hand to evenly coat the surfaces.

Form mixture into 1 ¼-inch balls and place in rows on baking sheets, keeping balls ½ inch apart.

Bake in preheated oven 15 minutes, or until balls are crispy, firm and cooked through, switching position of sheets midway through. Let veggie balls cool 3 minutes on the pans before serving.

Spinach-basil pesto: Makes 4 cups

- ½ cup roughly chopped walnuts
- 4 cups baby spinach leaves
- 2 cups fresh basil
- Salt to taste
- ½ cup olive oil
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

Fill a stockpot three-quarters full with water and bring to a boil over high heat. Place walnuts in a skillet over medium heat and toast until fragrant, shaking pan occasionally, about 3 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool completely.

Fill a large bowl halfway with ice and water, and set close to the sink.

Dump spinach and basil into boiling water and stir. After 1 minute, strain the greens and plunge them into the bowl with ice water. Drain again and squeeze greens tightly to get as much water out as possible. Chop greens roughly.

Combine greens and walnuts with the salt, olive oil and Parmesan in a food processor and process until smooth. Taste for seasoning.

Here's a recipe for a retro classic, straight from the era when everyone was making Swedish meatballs at home. This appropriately homey dish is from the 1976 "Cooking in Minnesota" by Twin City Home Economists in Hometown.