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Holzman relaxing outside the Meatball Shop.
Photo: Melissa Han

Chef Daniel Holzman Trusts His Mom on What Makes a Good Meatball

Daniel Holzman isn't sure how he'll do at next Thursday's *Meatball Madness* competition, part of the New York Wine and Food Festival. "I'm feeling very pessimistic in general," says the *Meatball Shop* chef. "I have a very negative outlook on life. But you know, at the same time, I think we have a fucking damn good meatball, and whoever competes against us is going to have a run for their money." Holzman and his partners have been toying with the idea of expanding their single restaurant into a mini-empire, but they're stuck on finding the best location for their second shop. "The question is whether we should open in a cool, expensive neighborhood or be a more regular, hard-hat lunch spot," he explains. "I don't want to shack up in a shed and hang out by Walden Pond or anything, but I like the idea of not really being in the middle of everything." Find out what he had to eat this week — including, yes, lots of meatballs — in our latest New York Diet.

Friday, September 24

I met my mom at the Greenmarket in the morning, where I had an apple and some Concord grapes. I had a mango from the lady that stands across from the Bank of America and makes the mango with the spicy sauce. If I see a street stand that has spicy, salty, lime, and fruit, I'm known to stop off there. I'm a real slut for a piece of fruit with some spice on it. We went to *Grey Dog* for a cup of coffee, and I had a latte, of all things. It seemed a little late in the day for a latte; I guess I have a European mentality when it comes to breakfast. I don't have ham and eggs; I prefer to have toast or a piece of fruit, and then have my eggs in the afternoon.

I went to *Soba-Ya* for lunch. They have spectacularly delicious soba noodles, the best in the city. I had an iced green tea, and a tartare don, which is pretty awesome, and a gomae tofu, which is tofu made out of sesame seeds. I had zaru soba, which is a cold soba noodles with seaweed that you dip in a hot sauce, and they bring over the broth at the end and make a soup out of that. I had burdock, which I'm really into. They do it pretty traditionally Japanese, julienned with carrot and braised in soy sauce and some sort of sweet element. It's super-crunchy; it's like a pickle, but it's cooked forever.

Then I went to *Meatball Shop* with my mom. There was a Yelp review that was talking smack about the beef meatballs, saying they weren't "beefy" enough, so I brought my mother to taste them. She's the only honest person I know; she would tear me apart if I deserved it. The review said they weren't "beefy" enough, and the verdict was that the reviewer must have had an off meatball because my mother said they were delicious. I know she means it, because she's been known to tell me something is really horrible. She doesn't mince words, she borders on downright rude about it sometimes. I could tell that she was ready to dig into me, too, but she said they were really good. We also had a fennel thing — I'm really into fennel right now — that's roasted with walnuts, raisins, lemon, and parsley.

For dinner, I went to *STK*; it was a rehearsal dinner for a wedding I was going to the next day. I had roasted chicken with creamed spinach, and some sort of weird green bean with soy sauce thing that was crunchy and strange. I didn't get it. I had way too much to drink, for sure — I mean, it was a rehearsal dinner. There were just bottles and bottles of wine and beer. I skipped dessert that day. I came back to the shop and had a BLT with my brother, because he had just gotten in to town that day. We had a couple of beers and hang out.

Saturday, September 25

I don't usually eat before noon, but had jujitsu that morning, and I always have a Vitaminwater and a Clif bar before I go. After that, I met my family at the *Meatball Shop* and we had a whole big lunch at the restaurant. I had my favorite meal there: the veggie balls with spicy meat sauce, with steamed spinach. There's something about the veggie balls, they're the ones that I never get bored of. We just put Concord-grape lemonade on the menu — I'm pretty stoked about that — and we had that as well.

I biked my ass home to Carroll Gardens, where we all met up and drove out to this wedding at *Alder Manor* in Yonkers. It's crazy, it's such a cool spot. There was a great appetizer and cheese-and-meat plate selection that was awesome, though the actual sit-down food was pretty terrible. We didn't eat much of that, though, because there was so much appetizer food that was really delicious, and we were all satisfied and so drunk at that point that it didn't matter — we were doing shots of tequila, whiskey sours, it was a party. There were little roasted lamb chops with this mustard sauce, there were some salty empanadas, that huge platter of cheese and salami and bread, and some strange dipping sauces that freaked me out a little when I ate one and it tasted like fish. I definitely had, like, a quarter-wheel of a bri-e-queese. And then obviously there was a selection of dessert, cakes and cupcakes, and they had a whole room filled with cigars. It was fun except for the part where I woke up in the morning and was like, *Jesus, my mouth tastes like an ashtray.*

I wasn't going to go back to the shop, but this chef Melissa Perillo was in town from San Francisco doing that thing at *Le Fooding*, and someone called me and said "She's coming over here! You should come down!" I really should not have come because I was way too drunk to be at work, but I guess I pulled it off because everyone was like, "You seemed completely lucid and sober." I don't know if they were just being nice, though, because I woke up the next morning with my lights on, in my underwear, with my door open and one sock on, on top of the sheets. But I'm a good drunk, apparently.

Sunday, September 26

I went uptown, again with my brother and mom and everyone, and we had breakfast at *H&H* on 83rd and First. They have some of the best bagels, I think. Not the best, that's *Eas-a-Bagel*, but definitely pretty delicious. I had a cinnamon-raisin bagel with salmon salad, and an everything bagel with cream cheese. Cinnamon-raisin and salmon salad sounds disgusting, but apparently my closed-minded attitude has been holding me back: It was incredibly delicious. I had a light and sweet coffee, which was because my brother screwed up when I asked him to get me black. It was amazing; it tasted like melted coffee ice cream.

I went down to the *Cake Shop* on Orchard Street later. We don't really have an office at the restaurant, so that's our go-to meeting place. One of the kitchen managers at the restaurant is a chess master, so I went there to play a game with him. I had a piece of banana bread and a cup of English Breakfast tea.

I went to the restaurant and worked on the balls for *Meatball Madness* for a while. I've been tweaking the spicy-pork balls, and this was a good excuse to get back into it.

Then I went home early because I had a lot of writing to do on our cookbook. We're pretty stoked about it and it's taking a huge amount of time; we're at the halfway point where you have to put together some initial something or other, so we had to get it all together. I ordered in to my house from the *WingBar*. Honestly, I'm not convinced whether I've ever ordered shitty food to my house from a restaurant because I'm like, *I'm a New Yorker, I go out to eat*. But I'd had this incredibly intense craving for hot wings that was going on for weeks and weeks and weeks, and I finally broke down and was like, *I need to get some hot wings in me*. I ate them and had some Budweiser, and then I slept better than I have in a long time because I finally had my hot wings.

Monday, September 27

I spent the entire first half of the day at the restaurant, because we have a new recipe we're developing for Jamaican-jerk-chicken balls. I was catering my friend's art show, and he's been asking me to do Jamaican-jerk-chicken balls forever, and I thought it would be a fun surprise to put the Rasta Balls on his catering menu. One of our sous-chefs is Jamaican, and he came in and worked on these balls with mango chutney. They were the special that day, and we're going to have them all weekend as the Daily Ball.

I had a Clif bar and a Vitaminwater and went to jujitsu.

I went to *Balthazar* with the friend whose art show was the next day, and we had the *Grand Balthazar Plateau*. That's usually a thing I would get for a date, and we were really the talk of the bar area when it showed up. We had a bottle of Champagne with it, we did it right. Plus we had some French onion soup, because my friend was like, you can't go to *Balthazar* without having the French onion soup, and I agree. It might be the best version anywhere.

We had profiteroles for dessert, and one of those ricotta banana tarts that are so fabulous. I had just drunk through a bottle of Champagne and at one point I was like, "Let's get a bottle of Marsala!" They didn't have it, luckily, because I finished my dessert and was like, *No, good, I should not have had a bottle of Marsala*. I checked back in on the shop and then headed straight home for bed.

Tuesday, September 28

I had a meeting with my partner in the West Village, so we went to *Café Grumpy*. I had a ham and cheese omelette with *fines herbes*, a salad, and a cup of joe. The way the menu read I was worried the restaurant would be fairly generic, but the food was really well put together and delicious. It was filled with ladies who lunch and hot West Village folks, which was a fun thing to check out.

Back at the restaurant, we were doing recipe testing for the cookbook. I was doing this weird rutabaga-turnip thing that didn't work at all. I don't think it's going to work, it probably won't be in the book. It's not a mash, but a smashed rutabaga with horseradish and sour cream. It sounds really good, but I might just skip it. For lunch, I had pasta: rigatoni with spicy meat sauce, and I like to wilt some arugula in there, plus tons of Parmesan cheese. I'm not a big fan of soda, which is very sweet, but I like the flavor, so I'll do three-quarters seltzer with a splash of cream soda.

My friend had his art opening that night. He had Budweiser for the opening, but he ran out. I had to go to the gas station in Chelsea to buy more beer, and I bought beef jerky for myself. I'm stoked on beef jerky, I only eat it on a road trip, and I was wondering recently why that is. And I had this epiphany while I was in the gas station: I realized I don't have a car, I ride my bike everywhere, so the only time I'm in a gas station is on a road trip, and whenever you're in a gas station they have beef jerky. I was like *Wow, that's why it is how it is*. And you know, when you get one of those bags of jerky there's like a 98 percent chance it'll be inedibly disgusting, but this was pretty good.

Wednesday, September 29

I don't drink a lot of coffee, but I had an iced coffee. Our pastry chef is doing our new fall menu, and she was testing some new ice creams. She had cinnamon and butter pecan for me to taste; the cinnamon was great, I loved it.

I went to *Eataly* for lunch. I was actually going there to pick up some polenta — we had run out at the restaurant, so I'd called them to see if we could borrow some. It was a busy lunch hour and completely crazy in there, and I couldn't communicate with anyone because they spoke Italian. I was like, *Wow, this is really like being in Italy!* I went to the lady at the front counter and she was like, in a thick Italian accent, "Our polenta is on order and we will have polenta in December." I was like, you have 2,800 items here, I'm pretty sure you have polenta. So I gave up and ate lunch: I had a focaccia de genova, and then I sat down at the fish counter and Dave Pasternak was there, which was cool — I had lunch cooked by the boss. I had a trio of crudo, calamari alla piastra with a parsley and arugula salad, and some braised Brussels sprouts. And then of course when I got back to the restaurant the chef from *Eataly* was like, "Your polenta is here if you want to come get it." So we sent someone to go pick it up.

T. Edwards has this German wine lineup, so I'm going to check that out this afternoon; we're working on the wine list for the whole fall thing, and then I'll have Clif bars and Vitaminwater for jujitsu at six. And I'm going to *Hakata Tonton* for dinner, and I'm totally stoked.