



Great balls of flavour

Variations on a classic

BY RON EADE, POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 16, 2012

Few other meaty morsels offer as much gastronomic variation as the meatball, a worldwide favourite that's oh-so-satisfying, yet oh-so-easy to make.

Whether they're fried with feta in Albania, steamed or boiled in China, or simmered in creamy sauce with lingonberry in Sweden, when it comes to meatballs the possibilities are limitless.

Which was exactly my thought as I tucked into more than a couple of variations of these spherical com-forts from the 2011 manifesto *The Meatball Shop Cookbook* by Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow, two lifelong friends who opened a modest 50-seat restaurant by the same name in Lower Manhattan. Two years and two more restaurants later, they haven't looked back.

This is the only meatball cookbook you will ever need, presenting such gastronomic gems as bouillabaisse balls, fightin' Irish balls, salmon balls, jambalaya balls, to say nothing of the usual suspects involving ground chicken, beef and pork (and interesting sides to go with them).

I was especially taken with the book's recipes for simple classics torqued just a little to elevate them to culinary stardom. There's a reason why, for example, Mini Buffalo Chicken Balls were voted the readers' favourite by *Bon Appétit* online in December: Think Buffalo-style chicken wings with rich, satisfying blue cheese dressing - minus those pesky chicken bones.

The Classic Beef Meatball is another runaway success at the restaurant. In this case, the secret ingredient in the meat mix is ricotta cheese, of all things, which adds fat and texture while paradoxically making the meatball lighter. I served the beef balls on a toasted sausage bun slathered with homemade tomato sauce, then sliced provolone cheese before finishing in the oven. It was sublime.

Bottom line: As with so many great, albeit simple comfort foods, savour the basic goodness of this unpretentious cuisine.

CLASSIC BEEF MEATBALLS

Makes: about 24 large meatballs

2 Tbsps. olive oil

2 lbs. 80-per-cent lean ground beef

1 cup ricotta cheese

2 large eggs

1/2 cup breadcrumbs

1/4 cup fresh parsley, chopped 1 Tbsp. fresh oregano leaves, chopped, or 1 tsp. dried

1 tsp. salt

1/4 tsp. crushed red pepper flakes

1/2 tsp. ground fennel

4 cups Classic Tomato Sauce (recipe here)

Preheat oven to 425 F. Drizzle oil into a 9-by 13-inch baking dish and use your hand to evenly coat the entire surface; set aside.

In a large mixing bowl, combine ground beef, ricotta, eggs, bread-crumbs, parsley, oregano, salt, red pepper flakes and fennel; mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated.

Roll mixture into round, golf ball-size meatballs (about 1 1/2 inches), making sure to pack the meat firmly. 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 20 minutes, or until meatballs are firm and cooked through. A meat thermometer inserted into the centre of a meatball should read 165 F.

While meatballs are roasting, heat tomato sauce in a small saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring often.

When meatballs are firm and fully cooked, remove from oven and drain excess fat from the pan. Pour tomato sauce over top and return meatballs to oven to roast another 15 minutes.

MINI-BUFFALO CHICKEN BALLS WITH BLUE-CHEESE DRESSING

Makes: about 40 balls, and 2 cups dressing

For the meatballs:

2 Tbsps. vegetable oil

4 Tbsps. unsalted butter

1/3 cup Frank's Redhot Sauce (or other favourite hot sauce)

1 lb. ground chicken, preferably thigh meat

1 large egg

1/2 celery stalk, minced

3/4 cup breadcrumbs

1/2 tsp. salt

For the blue cheese dipping sauce:

3/4 cup sour cream

1/3 cup crumbled blue cheese

1/3 cup whole milk

1/3 cup mayonnaise

1/2 tsp. salt

1 Tbsp. red wine vinegar Make the blue cheese dipping sauce up to a day ahead by combining all ingredients in a medium mixing bowl, whisking thoroughly until completely combined. Small blue cheese lumps are OK. Cover and refrigerate until needed.

For the meatballs, preheat oven to 425 F. Drizzle vegetable oil into a 9-by 13-inch baking dish and use you hand to coat the entire surface; set aside.

In a small saucepan, 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.

In a large mixing bowl, combine the hot sauce mixture, ground chicken, egg, celery, breadcrumbs and salt; mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated.

Roll the mixture into round, 3/4-inch balls, making sure to pack the meat firmly. Place balls on the oil baking dish, being careful to line them up snugly, in even rows vertically and horizontally to form a grid. The meatballs should be touching one another.

Bake 15 to 20 minutes, or until meat-balls are firm and cooked through. A meat thermometer inserted into the centre of a meatball should read 165 F (74 C). Allow meatballs to cool 5 minutes in the baking dish before serving.

STEAK 'N' BACON CHEDDAR BALLS

Makes: about 30-35 large meat-balls

3 Tbsps. olive oil

1 onion, diced fine

8 oz. bacon, diced (about 1-1/2 cups)

2 lbs. 80 per cent lean ground beef

6 oz. cheddar cheese, grated

3 large eggs

1/2 cup breadcrumbs 1 tsp. salt

Preheat oven to 425 F. Drizzle 2 Tbsps. of the oil into a 9-by 13-inch baking dish and use your hand to evenly coat the entire surface; set aside.

Heat remaining olive oil in a large frying pan over medium-high heat. Add onions, bacon and cook, stirring frequently, until bacon has browned and the onions are translucent, about 10 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer onions and bacon to a plate and refrigerate to cool.

In a large mixing bowl, combine cooled bacon/onion mixture, ground beef, cheddar, eggs, breadcrumbs and salt; mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated.

Roll mixture into round, golf ball-size meatballs (about 1-1/2 inches), making sure to pack the meat firmly. 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 20 minutes, or until meatballs are firm and cooked through. A meat thermometer inserted into the centre of a meatball should read 165 F.

Allow meatballs to cool 5 minutes in the baking dish before serving.