

North Shore Book Notes: 'The Meatball Shop Cookbook'

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The Meatball Shop Cookbook By Daniel Holzman & Michael Chernow, with Lauren Deen. Photography by John Kernick. Ballantine Books, New York. 2011.

Authors/chefs/restaurateurs Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow have given the meatball a soul.

What was once a golf ball-sized hit of protein, usually hamburger, usually aswim in a red sauce, is now a luscious chameleon. Holzman and Chernow have explored the bounds of the meatball and determined it to be limitless. If there is a national cuisine — Greek, Spanish, Mexican — these young chefs have devised a savory meatball proclaiming its virtues.

The recipes in this new cookbook are the same ones the chefs developed and use in their three new and popular Meatball Shops in New York City. The shops offer a selection of different types of meatballs that are always on the menu, specials for the day, sauces, sides, vegetables and their signature dessert — homemade cookie and ice cream sandwiches. You mix and match, choosing what sauce, meatballs and sides appeal to you at that given moment. You use a marker to note your selections on a laminated menu that's easily wiped clean.

The cookbook is a generous gift to those who love meatballs and to the restaurateurs' legions of devoted patrons. Not only do they provide you with all the recipes they use, they take great pains to explain how to get the best possible results.

Holzman and Chernow first worked together when the best friends were 13. They were delivery boys for a vegan restaurant and shared a dream to open a restaurant together some day. Holzman went on to work at the highly acclaimed La Bernardin in NYC before moving to the West Coast to work in restaurants in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Chernow, who is a health-conscious marathon runner, also worked in restaurants. While at an Italian restaurant in the East Village, he made his nightly meal a bowl of meatballs without the pasta and added a side of vegetables. Holzman tried it and was hooked.

"It's all about the balls," they write in their cookbook. They call the meatball the great equalizer, appealing as it does to Wall Street executives and sanitation workers alike. And the meatballs range from basic to sophisticated. They offer a recipe for their most labor-intensive Bunny Balls, made of onion, fennel, fresh rosemary, garlic, white wine and rabbit. Or you can opt for the Classic Beef Meatball made with ground beef and, among other ingredients, ricotta cheese (for creaminess and light texture) and lots of spice.

The book is a delight. Recipes are simple and beautifully illustrated. It's not a book to read when you're hungry, however. You'll see recipes for "The Spaniard," with Spanish chorizo and Manchego cheese; "Fightin' Irish Balls" (made with chopped cabbage, mashed potatoes, pork, beef and, among other things, mustard); and savory "Thai Balls" made with pork, shrimp, lots of herbs and spices — dressed in a colorful garnish of basil, mint and cilantro, peanuts, sesame seeds, rice wine vinegar and soy sauce. There are many other "ball" recipes including a vegetarian ball made with lentils. Many of these recipes, the authors say, take only minutes to put together. They bake their meatballs for efficiency. There are instructions for warming, freezing, etc.

A sauce section follows. The chefs say they put a lot of effort into coming up with the perfect classic tomato sauce. There are lots of other sauces to try, as well, from a spicy meat sauce to spinach-basil pesto to mushroom to Parmesan cream sauce and much more.

After sauces come sides, including risottos, polenta, mashed potatoes, smashed turnips with horseradish, even candied yams to go with the Gobble Gobble Balls (made with turkey and stuffing and cranberries).

The Veg section includes a lot of roasted vegetable concoctions such as honey-roasted carrot with prunes, walnuts and mint, salads, vegetables that have been marinated, braised or grilled. The recipes conclude with cookies and ice cream.

The book itself ends on a very sweet note, with both young men writing acknowledgements to their mothers. This tribute, on page 147, is worth the price of the book all by itself. Here are two young men who note and comprehend the value of faith, loyalty and love.

A similar expression of nurturing — that of wanting to share and please — comes across in this book all about making and partaking of delicious food.

Rae Padilla Francoeur's memoir, "Free Fall: A Late-in-Life Love Affair," is available online or in bookstores. Write her at rae.francoeur@verizon.net. Or read her blog at <http://www.freefallrae.blogspot.com/> or follow her @RaeAF.