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Joe Curcio's Mother's Meatballs. Photo: Joe Curcio

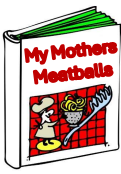
EAT & DRINK

COMMUNITY COOKBOOK: JOE CURCIO'S MOTHER'S MEATBALLS



by Jennifer Rosini-Gentile
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My Mother's Meatballs...

...are Better than your Mother's Meatballs:

by Joe 'Kirsch' Curcio
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There once was a TV commercial featuring an Italian woman hanging out of the window of an old tenement house in Boston's Italian North End calling out "Ant-toe-Nee". It was a Wednesday - and it was Prince spaghetti day.

Well today if there was any summoning to be done right here in Williamsburg's East end of Brooklyn it would be from the window of a new condominium. It would be on a Sunday - and it would be the real local Italians Luigi Vitelli MACARONI day.

OK, so these days as I stroll past where my Grandma's house used to be on Withers street near old Woodpoint Road I really don't smell the garlic frying on Sunday morning anymore. The air on these few square blocks on a Sunday was once infused with the aroma of sausage, braciole, and meatballs simmering in a family size pot of gravy sitting on top of the white porcelain stove. Right next door was the site of our family-owned luncheonette called The Red Rose, named after Grandma Rosina Carlo.



Grandma's house on Old Woodpoint Road



Grandma Rosina

Almost a cliché of an old Italian woman with a gray bun in her hair, and tissues stuffed up the end of the sleeve of her flowered smock. But under it still dressed in black, long after her husband had passed. Her dark stockings rolled down mid-shin as she walked into her kitchen wielding a wooden spoon in hand. Well past 90 she referred to me only as "eh boy" - my name probably escaping her since I was the last grandchild of the many others born to her nineteen children! Yep - nineteen!

But we're not here to reminisce about my grandmother's bloomers or to calculate how many years that she spent pregnant. We're here to present possibly the ultimate argumentative stalemates since pineapple on pizza:

"My mother's meatballs are better than your mother's meatballs"

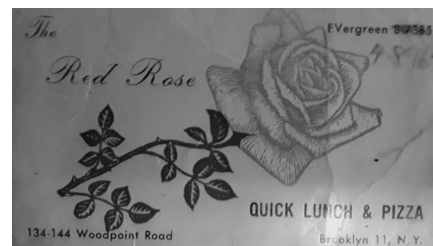
Sure, there's still the debate over gravy vs sauce and pasta vs macaroni but they're wearing thin as the new generation of young chefs begin to "take the range". However - there is still a very passionate, arms flaring and hand gesturing argument over what's in the meatballs: a combination of beef, veal, and pork - or a good roll in the oil with a few pounds of plain old Graham Avenue Ferandino brothers butcher shop ground beef or chuck-chop?

Now before we get to the actual handing down of my family multigenerational recipe which makes my mother's meatballs better than your mother's meatballs, I do have some hard data for you (well, kind of).



The Red Rose Luncheonette

In an informal Facebook survey taken in three different groups of neighborhood people - nearly 70% of the respondents said that they are straight up beef meatball making folks - although I will say that if some of them actually refer to themselves as "folks" then it's my guess that their meatballs suck. But hold on, there is a caveat here. Two of the groups who responded high in the 70% beef range, like myself are from Greenpoint/Williamsburg meaning that they are more likely, like myself to be of a southern Italian background.



The third group was from more of a mixed section of Brooklyn. They responded almost 50/50 down the middle between plain beef versus three-meat. Most likely because they're a mix of people from both northern and southern Italy. And by the way, I'm assuming that a few Irish "folks" got into the mix on this - but these are people who put fennel and raisins in everything - so their meatballs probably suck too.

Other than that, the survey does track with the actual culinary traditions of northern versus southern Italian meatballs.

Because of the regions climate and geography Northern Italians had an abundance of veal and pork. They often made their meatballs with a variety of meats and with greater emphasis on the actual meatball itself and not so much on the pasta or tomato sauce that may or may not have even been served with the meatballs.

Southern Italians focused more on a lighter fare such as seafood, beans and lentils and incorporated more vegetables, fresh herbs and olive oil in their dishes. The region's terrain and pasture quality were not as viable for the variety of livestock farming as they were in the north.



Poverty also played a significant role in their cuisine as well, but the difference in the climate and terrain between the northern and southern regions mostly dictated what quantity and variety of livestock was available in the South. These days Italian-American meatballs whether from the north or south are almost always served in sauce with pasta on the side. We just love our macaroni's! But this wasn't always the case in Italy.

So, to sum it up you pretty much had these highfalutin Venetians from the north and a few windbags from Milan sporting around with their fancy 3-meat meatballs spreading butter and cream all over their panettone, and pandoro sweet breads - meanwhile the poor Calabrese and "burnt feet Sanzis" from Sanza and Teggiano in the south were shoveling down dishes of "pasta-va-zool" (macaroni's and beans in gravy) and sucking out capuzzelle brains (lambs head) probably while doing shots of olive oil! They even had a name for what they were eating - "cucina povera" (peasant food).

Is there any wonder why this meatball argument is so passionate? This may be worse than the metaphorical question asking whether or not Irish Spring soap irritates Italian asses. Ma-Don with those fennel people again - and admittedly I even married an Irish girl myself.

OK, so now for the big reveal. The recipe.

But before I leave you to your own culinary indecision I do want to say that I am thankful when I see an occasional open window on one of those Xennial dweller condominiums - and people like my own niece, maybe not hanging out of the window calling down to her daughter, but still embracing her Italian roots and heritage - and although they're just turkey rolled meatballs steaming up in an air fryer in her kitchen next to her stainless steel stove I'm grateful that I can sometimes still smell the garlic in the air where Grandma's house used to be on old Woodpoint Road - and that I can now say that "my niece's meatballs are better than your niece's meatballs"



My great niece's meatballs...as her great, great Grandma Rosina watches over



Recipe

My Mother's Meatballs... ...are Better than your Mother's Meatballs:

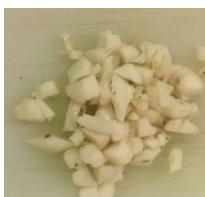
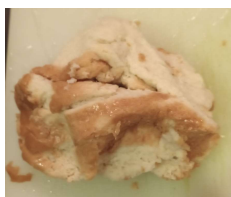
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My Mama

I gotta warn you that you're going to have to adjust as you go. It all depends on the meat, and the effect of the ingredients as you add them. In other words, it's all in the hands. The key is to mix with your hands until it doesn't stick to your hands – got it? This recipe yields about 15 meatballs per pound.

- **MEAT:** 2 lbs ground-beef, chuck-chop (forget about that 80/20, 70/30 stuff)
- **BREAD:** 3 slices of white bread! Squish it into a ball and give it a quick "3-second" rinse in the sink.
- **PARSLEY:** Chopped fresh parsley: more than a nice large palm full (maybe 1/2+ cup) of leaves only. No stems!
- **CHEESE:** Start with about 1/2 cup - maybe 3/4 garlic, Locatelli Pecorino Romano grating cheese. Don't use that supermarket junk!
- **GARLIC:** 5 or more garlic cloves. Chop it as fine or big as you like it. Sometimes my mother would chop it larger so that if people didn't like garlic they could remove it. But usually then my father would throw those people out.
- **EGGS:** 3 large eggs.
- **BREADCRUMBS:** Plain breadcrumbs (not flavored). Start with about 1 cup. This is what you'll have to adjust as you mix the meat. If it sticks to your hands as you roll then add more breadcrumbs.
- **ODDS & ENDS:** Once in a while I'd see my mother give the mixture about a tablespoon of good olive oil and a few small shakes of garlic and onion powders, and a little salt to taste.



Sometimes I put the mix in the fridge to "tighten it up a little". Roll them into about 1.5"-2" balls. To test the oil, roll a small pea-ball and toss it in. If it sizzles with bubbles around it the oil is ready.

Fry them in canola or vegetable oil - either is fine. Olive oil is tricky because of its smoke point. The meatballs have to be submerged about halfway into the oil.

Don't play around with them, just wait until they're a nice dark brown (a little more than golden) and then give them a single turn with a fork.

When they're done, toss a couple right out of the pan and into (trust me) a slice of fresh, folded Wonder bread. Squeeze the bread, take a bite and just think about the many families who enjoyed these very same meatballs since the turn of the century. ...and by the way, that would be the 20th century!



The Carlo Boys & Girls: Grandma & Grandpa Carlo had 19 children but only 12 survived over the years

