

Goodbye Meatballs

Serves 6–8

Hate to tell you, there isn't really a "secret" to the meatballs being great. "Secrets" aren't really my thing (unless it's using mayonnaise in cornbread, which was met with mixed results except by everyone who made it who said it was AMAZING), but I will say there are two important steps that I feel like make a huge difference:

1. Letting the ricotta/egg/bread crumb mixture soak for at least 10 minutes. This is essentially the "soak milk in bread" step you'll find in many meatball recipes, but I don't like soaking bread in milk. Soaking bread in CHEESE though, yeah, I am FOR that.

2. Searing the meatballs in the pot, *then* making the sauce. I have done them on a sheet pan, and they are fine. They are not bad at all. But they are not brown. I don't know who needs to hear this, but putting your meatballs on a sheet tray in the oven to "brown" them will steam and potentially overcook by the time they look anything close to "brown".

I have tested them in multiple ovens in different homes, and either coincidentally ALL the ovens absolutely suck, or this method isn't great (unless you're doing meatballs for a LOT of people). Doing them in a pot is more work, sure, but I do think you reap the rewards in the form of fat and juicy bits and browned, delicious meat that all flavor your tomato sauce as you finish gently cooking those meatballs.

FOR THE MEATBALLS

1 cup whole milk, full fat ricotta cheese (I have also used cottage cheese and it worked perfectly, surprise, because cottage cheese is perfect!)

½ cup finely chopped parsley

½ cup grated parmesan cheese

⅓ cup panko bread crumbs (I call for panko because this is what I always have on hand and I find them texturally closer to real bread crumbs, but fresh bread crumbs would of course work, too— just avoid the Italian style, too sandy IMO)

2 large eggs

2–3 garlic cloves, finely grated or chopped

½ medium yellow or red onion, very finely chopped (you'll use the other half of the onion for the sauce)

2 teaspoons kosher salt, plus more

Freshly ground black pepper and/or crushed red pepper flakes

1 pound ground beef

1 pound ground pork

2 tablespoons olive oil

FOR THE SAUCE

1 ½ medium yellow or red onions, finely chopped

6 garlic cloves, thinly sliced

Kosher salt, freshly ground black pepper

A few anchovies or couple of dashes of fish sauce, if you want

2–3 tablespoons tomato paste, if you've got it

1 22 ounce can whole, peeled tomatoes

12 ounces fresh tomatoes, whole if small, halved if medium, chopped if large (these can be cherry tomatoes, plum tomatoes, whatever tomatoes you have, really)

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FOR THE MEATBALLS

1. Mix ricotta, parsley, parmesan, bread crumbs, eggs, garlic and onion in a medium bowl. Season with salt, pepper and crushed red pepper flakes if you like and let sit for 10 minutes or so (this will hydrate your bread crumbs, which will make the meatballs v tender).
2. Add beef and pork and remaining 2 teaspoons salt. I have never had good luck with mixing this with a spoon, so I just get in there with my hands. Feels kind of good, IMO.
3. Once everything is well-mixed (it should look like...sausage or something), roll one tiny sacrificial meatball.
4. Heat olive oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add the sacrificial meatball and cook until it's well browned on all sides and is cooked through. Take it out of the pot and eat it. Does it taste amazing? Salty? Meaty? Tender and juicy without falling apart? Do you want it spicier? Go ahead and adjust seasoning as needed (occasionally I'll add more salt or decide this is when I want them spicy).
5. Roll the rest of the mixture into balls about 2-inches in diameter. This is my preference, so if you enjoy a LARGER meatball, then be my beautiful guest. I get roughly 24 meatballs from this mixture, more or less.
6. Working in batches, brown the meatballs on all sides. This is not a round meatball contest, it's a brown meatball contest. Nobody will say "damn, these taste good but I wish they were just...a little rounder?" This will take about 3–4 minutes per batch. They will not be cooked through, that's fine-- they will finish cooking in the sauce.
7. Once the meatballs become browned, transfer them to a large bowl and continue with the rest of the meat. Once they are all browned, congratulate yourself on a job well done and let them hang out while you make the sauce.

FOR THE SAUCE

8. Without wiping out the pot, add onions and garlic to the pot and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally until they're translucent and tender but not yet browned, 8–10 minutes. Add anchovies if you're using them and tomato paste if you have it and stir until the anchovies are melted and the tomato paste has begun to caramelize and turn a darker shade of red, 2–3 minutes.
9. Add the fresh tomatoes and season with salt and pepper. Cook until they're burst and jammy, 5 minutes or so. Add the canned tomatoes, fill the can halfway with water, swirl to get all the tomato bits and pour into the pot. Season with salt and pepper.
10. Bring to a simmer and adjust for salt, knowing the sauce will reduce a bit and become a bit saltier once you add the meatballs. Add your meatballs and all the juices that have collected at the bottom of the bowl.
11. Reduce the heat to low and simmer the meatballs in the sauce (uncovered) until the sauce is thickened and impossibly delicious and the meatballs are cooked through and perfectly tender, 30–40 minutes.