

Spaghetti with Meatballs

How hard can spaghetti be? Just dump a can of SpaghettiOs on a plate and microwave. A buck sixty-nine. If you're feeling really adventurous, just boil some dried pasta for ten minutes, microwave a jar of any one of the fifty or so sauces from the supermarket shelf, pour the sauce all over the pasta and serve. I did that for years but was never happy with the result. Somehow, spaghetti always tasted better in a restaurant. Now that you are a seasoned Lodi food and wine host, your guests will not be happy with sauce from a jar either. But why would you serve your sophisticated wine enthusiast foodie guests something so simple and mundane as spaghetti? When you taste this authentic Italian spaghetti with meatballs, you'll find out.

In Italy, every chef and home cook makes their own marinara sauce for spaghetti pasta--a simple mix of tomatoes, aromatics (onion and garlic), red wine, and a seasoning or two. For something with so few ingredients, the depth of flavor and richness of a scratch-made marinara sauce will knock you out. These days, it's common for dinner guests to be vegetarians. You can make this into a great meal for vegetarians or mixed groups of vegetarians and meat eaters. You can make your marinara sauce entirely meat free and still get the true Italian cooking experience--four hours in the kitchen surrounded by magnificent aromas. The meatballs on the side will satisfy the most hearty meat lovers. Either way, just be sure to start early. A great marinara sauce takes two to three hours to simmer down to the right thickness.

My meatballs are definitely not traditional. I use ground chicken breast instead of ground veal. I'm one of a growing number of chefs who aren't comfortable with the early separation, confinement, malnutrition, and antibiotic use required of baby cows to create veal. I know we eat all these creatures, but at least in California we have pretty strict animal welfare standards for chicken that seem to be catching on around the nation. I don't really notice much difference in taste and texture, especially when I add my secret ingredient (see Tips and Tricks).

You can use any red wine to make marinara sauce, but I've found that a good Lodi Barbera gives the best flavor. It has vibrant juicy fruit flavors like cherry and strawberry with soft tannins that don't overwhelm sweetness of the tomatoes. It also pairs great with this dish.



Ingredients

Meatballs:

1/4 cup Lodi olive oil
1 yellow onion, cut small dice
2 tsp salt
2 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
1/4 tsp crushed red pepper
1 pound ground round
1 pound ground chicken breast
2 large eggs
1 cup grated Parmesan cheese (or 6 ounce package shredded)
1 bunch fresh flat Italian parsley, cut fine brunoise
1-1/2 cup breadcrumbs (plain, not seasoned)
1/2 cup water

Marinara Sauce:

4 28-ounce cans Cento whole peeled San Marzano tomatoes
1 TBS Lodi olive oil
2 yellow onions, cut small dice
2 tsp salt
8 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
1/4 tsp crushed red pepper
1 cup Lodi Barbera wine
2 cups water

Pasta

1 pound (dry) spaghetti pasta, bronze cut
1 TBS salt
1/2 cup grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

Making the Meatballs

I usually make the meatballs a few hours ahead of time so that all I have to do before serving is bake them.

Heat a large sauté or sauteuse pan to medium heat. Coat the pan with a tablespoon of olive oil, add the onions and a teaspoon of salt and cook the onions, stirring frequently, until they become soft and aromatic (about 5 to 7 minutes, but don't brown them). Add the garlic and crushed red pepper and cook until fragrant (about 30 seconds) then stir. Turn off the heat, remove the pan from the stove, pour the mixture in a small bowl, and allow it to cool. Save the pan--don't wash it.

Put the eggs in a cup and scramble them. In a large mixing bowl combine the meats, eggs, Parmesan cheese, parsley, and breadcrumbs. Add the onion mixture and a teaspoon of salt. Gently mix the ingredients with your hands only enough to give it a uniform consistency with no pockets of one single ingredient. Add the 1/2 cup of water, a few ounces at a time, and mix just a little more until the water is absorbed. You don't want to over mix. Too much mixing will make the meatballs tough. The mixture should be just wet enough that you can easily form a spherical meatball with a smooth outer surface.

Wet your hands and take a small amount of mixture and gently roll it into a ball of the size that you want. Roll it lightly in the palms of your hands putting just enough pressure to make it round. Do NOT compress it to make it more compact. Different people prefer different sizes of meatballs. I prefer them to be a little larger than a golf ball, so I can cut one in half and have two bite-sized pieces. Do that for the rest of the meatball mix, wetting your hands about every four meatballs.

Preheat your oven to 450 degrees. Heat the pan that you cooked the onions in to medium heat. Coat the pan with olive oil as it warms up, let the oil get hot, and gently put the meatballs into the pan. Keep at least as much of the pan's surface open as there are meatballs. You don't want to crowd the pan. You will probably have to cook them in two or three batches, depending on the size of the pan. Using tongs, roll the meatballs around about every 10 to 15 seconds to make sure they don't stick to the pan and get too browned on any one side. Use a spatula or stainless steel turner if any meatballs stick to the pan.



A nice medium brown crust takes about 5 minutes total. After each batch, use a steel turner or spatula to scrape any excess solids from the bottom of the pan. You want some brown "crud" or fond on the pan for extra flavor, but you don't want to burn anything as you cook more meatballs. Lay the browned meatballs in a casserole dish or on a baking pan (with edges to catch the juices) and be sure to have some space between them. Put the meatballs in the oven and cook for 15 minutes. Allow them to cool. At this point, you can put the meatballs in the refrigerator for a couple of hours until the marinara sauce is in its last hour.

Making the Sauce

Run the tomatoes through a food mill to squeeze out the juices from the tomato carcasses (see photo to the right). Discard the tomato carcasses and seeds left behind in the food mill.



Heat a 7-quart Dutch oven or large sauteuse pan to just above medium heat. Coat the bottom of the pot or pan with olive oil. Add the onions and season with a teaspoon of salt. Stir to coat the onions with olive oil. Cook the onions, stirring frequently, until they become soft and aromatic but don't brown them (about 5 to 7 minutes). Add the garlic and crushed red pepper and cook until fragrant (about 30 seconds).

Add the wine to the pot and stir. Scrape the bottom to remove any crud. Add the tomato juice and a teaspoon of salt. Add 2 cups of water (you can use this to rinse out the tomato cans). Reduce the heat to medium low and simmer the sauce, uncovered, for 2 to 3 hours, stirring occasionally and scraping the bottom and sides of the pot to make sure nothing builds up. In a simmer, you will see a little steam and a few bubbles gently popping on the surface but not blobs shooting out all over the stove. After about 2 hours, you will start adjusting the thickness of the sauce to your liking. If you are not serving vegetarians, put all the cooked meatballs in the sauce for 15 minutes, then remove them back to their casserole dishes to keep them warm. This will help thicken the sauce. You may want to do this in two batches to leave plenty of room between meatballs. Continue to simmer the sauce. The sauce is done when you stir it and it only sloshes back and forth once and it coats your spoon rather than running off it (see figure to the right). If the sauce is too thick, add water about 1/2 cup at a time. If the sauce is too runny, simmer longer. Put the meatballs back in the oven at 450 degrees for 15 minutes then cover them to keep them warm.



Making the Pasta

When the sauce starts its third hour, start boiling the pasta water. It can take several minutes for a large pot of water to reach a boil. You are going to cook the pasta and sauce together for a short time, so you want the pasta for this dish to be slightly undercooked--one minute less than what the package says. The best way to cook pasta is to use a stainless steel pot with a pasta insert. Fill the pot with water, add a tablespoon of salt, bring it to a boil. When your sauce is close to the desired thickness, drop the pasta into the insert, cook according to the instructions on the package (minus one minute), then lift the insert out to drain the water back into the pot. This instantly stops the cooking process, and you don't have to touch the large pot of extremely hot water until it cools. If you don't have a pasta insert, just fill a regular pot with water, add the salt, cook the pasta, then pour the water and pasta into a colander. If you are using a pot and colander instead of a pasta insert, spoon out about 1 cup of pasta water into a cup before dumping everything into the colander. Set the cup aside (this is your "reserve" pasta water).



Finishing and Serving

Remove about half of the finished marinara sauce (about 4 pints) to a container and set it aside (I use pint-sized canning jars so I can preserve the excess sauce for another meal). Add the cooked pasta to the sauce in the pot and increase heat to just below medium. When you first add the pasta to the pot, you want about the same volume of sauce as the volume of pasta. Add some of the reserved sauce, if needed. Cook the pasta in the simmering sauce and stir continuously with tongs for 5 minutes. If you use bronze die pasta, it should absorb the sauce almost entirely.

When ready to serve, pick up a lump of spaghetti with your tongs and make a pile of pasta in the center of the plate, twisting the tongs to pile up the spaghetti in a tall mound. Put a couple of meatballs around it, pour a little of the reserved sauce on top of the pasta and sprinkle with grated Parmigiana Reggiano cheese.

Tips and Tricks

Timing can make or break a successful presentation. If you plan to eat at 6 p.m., you don't want your guests sitting around hungry until 8. I start my *mise en place* about five hours before I want to serve. I make the meatballs first then put them in the refrigerator. I start the sauce about three hours before I want to serve. If the sauce gets done too early, turn the heat off, move the pan off the burner, and let it set covered until you are ready to cook the meatballs in it. If it thickens too much, add some of the reserved pasta water, 1/4 cup at a time.

Use disposable nitrile gloves when you mix the meatball ingredients and form the meatballs. Even though you wash your hands, you may not get everything out from under your fingernails. This keeps microscopic things out of the meatballs and prevents cross contamination of other parts of your kitchen from the raw meat.

A typical restaurant chef's Italian meatball is made from equal amounts of ground beef, ground veal, and ground pork (from the shoulder or "butt"). I prefer a mix of equal amounts of ground round and ground chicken (to avoid using veal). I personally don't like the funky aroma that pork adds to the meatball. Ground round comes from a particular part of the cow (the hind leg). With ground beef, you don't know what you're getting. It could come from anywhere on the cow, and they add fat from many parts. You can experiment with different meat mixes to get the one that tastes best to you. Don't be afraid to go with only ground beef if you are in a pinch and can't get round, veal, or pork in time for your dinner. It will still taste good.

Most chefs will tell you to soak the breadcrumbs in water (or milk) to make a *panade* before adding them to the meat mix. You can certainly do that. Just make sure that you reduce the amount of water you add later by the amount of liquid you add to the *panade*. However, I just throw the breadcrumbs and water into the meat mix with all the other ingredients. The water and fats from the meats, combined with setting in the refrigerator a couple of hours after browning, will hydrate the bread crumbs.

A lot of the flavor in the meatballs comes from the Maillard reaction when you brown them in a pan. If you don't feel comfortable doing this, or if you have problems keeping your meatballs together during browning, you could instead just stick them in the oven under a broiler for a few minutes, turning them a couple of times.

Even perfect meatballs, by themselves, can be a little dry. If you are not cooking for vegetarians, dropping the meatballs in the marinara sauce for about 15 minutes gives them some extra moisture and richer flavor. This will also help thicken the sauce faster.

I use Cento Certified San Marzano Whole Peeled Plum Tomatoes for this recipe. After running them through the food mill, the resulting tomato juice is a little thicker than what you get from milling many canned whole plum tomatoes. Don't be afraid to add a little extra water while you are cooking down the sauce to keep it on the lighter side. There will still be plenty of flavor! Cento San Marzanos are the real deal flavor from the best farms in Italy. However, when you go to the store to buy four large cans, you might get sticker shock. They aren't cheap. One trick, if you have Amazon Prime, is to order a six pack on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), and you can get them delivered to your door for half the price of the grocery store. They last at least a year in the can, so the extra two cans won't go to waste (Use them in my [Simple Roasted Tomato Soup](#) recipe).

A classic marinara sauce is normally made with pancetta (pork belly meat that is salt-cured but not smoked). I don't use it, because I want my sauce to be lighter and more on the vegetal side. If you want a thicker, richer sauce, you can add a couple of ounces of pancetta with some olive oil to the Dutch oven or the sauteuse pan before adding the onions. Cook the pancetta for about 5 minutes until browned.

You will notice that I only add a total of two teaspoons of salt to the sauce and the same to the meatballs. This is probably less than half of the amount of salt you would find in this dish in a restaurant. I prefer to let the vegetables and herbs flavor the dish. However, Americans are used to having a lot of salt in their “Italian” food, so you can always increase the amount of salt you add to the sauce or meatball mix if you find either one too bland for your taste.

If you want to go totally vegetarian, that's easy. Just skip the pancetta and meatballs. If you have a mixed group of vegetarians and meat eaters, clean up the stove and the pots after you finish cooking the meatballs. The fried meat smell should be gone before your guests arrive. Do not put the meatballs in the sauce. Cook the marinara sauce completely meat free.

There are a few kitchen tools that make the difference between a pleasant cooking experience and a mess. The tool that makes this dish (and many others) a *lot* easier is a 6-quart All-Clad D5 stainless steel Essential Pan. I use it for both the meatballs and sauce. I know it's pricey, but I use it all the time, and it will last the rest of my life. [Williams Sonoma](#) often runs a 30% to 40% off sale on All-Clad cookware. Another tool I use a lot is a [stainless steel food mill](#). These don't cost much, but be sure to get one with hooks that rest the food mill on the rim of the mixing bowl. A stainless steel pot with a pasta insert is a must for making anything with pasta. These can be a little pricey, but again, I use mine all the time and it's at least 20 years old.

Like any Italian cook (though I'm not Italian), I have a few secrets. I hate to give them up, but you bought my book so I guess it's the least I can do. These extra steps give this dish my signature flavor. First, I add about 1/3 pound of mortadella to my meatball mix, which is a thing they do in Rome. I get a thick slab of mortadella from the deli, rough cut it into 1/2-inch cubes, then pulse it in a food processor with the S-blade to get finely ground meat. Another thing I do when I brown the meatballs in the sauté pan and use my stainless steel turner to scrape the excess solids from the pan, I save the scrapings in a 6 ounce sauce cup. After I pour the tomato juice in the pan or pot to start simmering the sauce, I add the meatball scrapings to the sauce and stir them in. Of course, you would only do this if you have no vegetarian guests. Another thing I do when making the sauce is cut a red bell pepper brunoise and sauté it with my onions. This adds a little vegetable richness and a special flavor to the marinara. Finally, I blend the sauce with an immersion blender before its last hour of cooking. With the onion and bell pepper chunks, this sauce is considered "rustic." Blending it gives the sauce a smooth consistency, if you don't like a chunky mouth feel. One thing that takes this dish to a new level: I use [Corto Agrumato Method Calabrian Chile](#) olive oil rather than plain extra virgin olive oil to sauté the onions for both the meatballs and the sauce. This adds subtle authentic Southern Italian aromas to the dish.