

NICHOLAS RIZZO'S SPAGHETTI AND MEATBALLS

Spaghetti and meatballs is not served in Italy. It developed through the ages in America with several factors influencing its evolution including generational changes and economic times as an “Italian-American” dish. When Italian immigrants first came to the United States in the 19th century they had very little money for meat – so a small amount of meat placed on top of the pasta meant it was a celebration. Over the generations this grew to become our modern meatball. If you see “spaghetti and meatballs” on a menu in Italy chances are you are in a tourist trap. Of note, pasta in Italy is not considered a main course but a starter.



And while we’re at it, let’s settle this ongoing argument among Italian Americans about whether to call it “sauce” or “gravy”. According to the Epicurious.com Dictionary which is based on the Food Lover's Companion all gravy is a sauce but not all sauces are classified as a gravy.

In Italian cuisine a “ragù” is a meat-based sauce commonly served with pasta. In Italy ragùs are many and varied. Characteristically, a ragù is a sauce of braised or stewed meat that may be flavored with tomato, distinguishing it from a tomato sauce flavored with the addition of meat.

The word "gravy" is an Italian-American regional term originating in New York and parts of New England, dating to when older Sicilians arrived on Ellis Island. It is a colloquial term for a kind of “ragù” – a long cooked, meat based tomato sauce extremely rich in flavor. Often, grandma would start to cook the gravy day before, and serve it on Sundays or special occasions. For this reason it is often referred to as “Sunday Gravy”.

Marinara on the other hand is a quick tomato sauce that contains seafood. “Marinara” means “of the sea” – it is not the plain tomato sauce popularized by American restaurants trying to cut corners by eliminating the cost of seafood. Historically it was made when the fishermen signaled the women on shore with raised flags on their boats that they had a catch and were coming in. So, one could call a plain tomato sauce simply “sauce”. That is typically served over ice with vodka and a celery stalk and called a “Bloody Mary”.

And while we’re discussing the sauce’s history, let’s address the controversial idea of adding sugar to tomato sauce. Adding sugar to tomato sauce to cut the acidity and sweetening it remains a source of controversy among Italian cooks, with some adding none, some insisting on adding white sugar, and some insisting that only brown sugar be used. Some chefs cook tomato paste in the bottom of a pan to develop flavor by reducing some of the moisture and bringing out its sugars, caramelizing it a bit (called pincé). But, other chefs feel this alters the fruitiness of the tomato flavor which is desired in Italian tomato sauces as opposed to other types of sauces.

An excellent discussion about the “how and why” of sugars in tomato sauce is below, adapted from an article on www.epicurious.com.*

The truth is sometimes tomato sauce needs a bit of sugar because great sauce relies on a tomato's inherent sweetness, which is released when they're cooked down and concentrated. But sometimes the tomatoes just aren't sweet enough.

Chef Michael Chiarello explains: “A pinch of sugar is a Southern Italian trick that was used when the sauce was made with end-of-season tomatoes [especially true for tomatoes harvested or purchased during the winter months] that did not get ripe, or the tomatoes were so tart they needed to be balanced.”

That phrase—“if needed”—is key. “Today, commercial tomatoes often have no need for the sugar, because they are bred to be more of a fruit—back in the day, the pH (or acidity level) of tomatoes was 25 to 35 percent higher than today.” Still, if you're using subpar tomatoes—whether they're out of season, straight from a can, or just simply under ripe—they might be more acidic than sweet.

Of course, you won't know until the sauce is almost done whether the long cooking has coaxed enough of the tomatoes' sweetness out. “Taste your sauce at the very end of cooking,” advises Epicurious Food Editor Rhoda Boone. “If it tastes a little too acidic, that's when you add a pinch of sugar.” Add it just like you would add salt: a little bit at a time, until you get the flavor you want—and without any shame. [After adding sugar cook five minutes more and re-taste.]

The recipe below contains classic Italian components with the addition of some French and contemporary influences. So historically it would not be technically a “ragù”, but could be considered “gravy”. This is especially true if you are serving it on Sunday. Also, in this recipe, pincé and added sugar are not used as the sautéed vegetables provide a natural and mild sweetness from their natural sugars. Additionally, there are only a few foods that the majority of chefs view as good or better when canned or packaged as opposed to fresh. One of those very few is canned tomato sauce – but this comes with the caveat that some brands are better than others. This recipe recommends Hunt’s® brand as it’s readily available, is of a good and consistent quality, and lye is not used in its processing. All of these factors help in recreating a quality recipe consistently.

*“The Secret Ingredient Your Tomato Sauce May Be Missing”, Sheela Prakash, April 16,2015, <http://www.epicurious.com/ingredients/sugar-tomato-sauce-secret-article>

Start by making the roasted garlic to be used in the sauce and the meatballs. (Roasting the garlic is optional, as below.)

Roasted Garlic

Ingredients

One head of garlic (about 8 medium garlic cloves)

1 to 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Kosher salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1. Pre-heat the oven to 350°. Slice the heads of garlic in half through the “equator” (cutting the cloves in the middle). Place them in a square of aluminum foil and drizzle with olive oil, a pinch of salt, and a few turns of black pepper. Wrap the foil up over the garlic and place it directly on the oven rack. Roast the garlic until it's brown and tender, about 25 to 40 minutes depending on your oven.
2. Let cool, and then squeeze out from the peels. Set aside.

Note: alternatively, if you don't want to roast the garlic, coarsely chop four to five cloves and sauté with the celery, onion and carrot in the sauce recipe below. This will result in a sauce with less sweetness and a slightly sharper garlic flavor.

While the garlic is roasting start making the meatballs.

Meatballs

Ingredients

1 pound ground beef (not lean ground, but preferably 10% to 15% fat)

½ pound ground pork

½ pound ground veal

2 eggs

3 cloves roasted garlic

1 cup grated Romano or Parmesan cheese (Recommended brands include Boar's Head®, Il Villaggio®, and Belgioso® if you want to grate your own, otherwise any will do.)

1 tablespoon finely chopped Italian flat leaf parsley

1 tablespoon basil, finely chopped

½ teaspoon ground black pepper

2 cups Italian or French bread, crusts removed, and broken up

1 cup whole milk

Few dashes Tabasco® sauce

Note: there is usually not a need for much, if any, added salt in the meatballs as the Romano/Parmesan cheeses are already high in salt.

Directions

1. In a large bowl soak the bread in the milk. After a few minutes break it up into a mixture being sure all the pieces are broken up finely. Let this continue to soak during the next steps.

Note: This bread and milk paste, called a panade, binds the meatballs and adds moisture and richness. Using fresh bread instead of bread crumbs makes them moister and less grainy. Also, substituting half and half or even cream for the milk will make the meatballs richer and softer, but be careful and experiment here to be sure they are to your liking and not too rich or soft.

2. In a second bowl mix together the eggs, cheese, pepper and Tabasco® sauce. Run three cloves of the roasted garlic through a garlic press straight into this mixture.
3. In third bowl mix the beef, pork and veal. Do not squeeze the meat between your fingers. Rather, work the mixtures together with your fingertips by pulling the different meats apart into smaller pieces and then gently mixing.

Note: Pulling the meat apart prevents over kneading which causes the meatballs to lose texture.

4. Drain any excess milk from the milk/bread mixture (gently pressing on the bread if needed). Combine the milk/bread mixture, egg/cheese mixture, parsley and basil and mix together.

Note: Combining the other ingredients before adding them to the meat also prevents over-kneading.

5. Add this combined mixture to the meat by gently folding it in using your fingertips. The mixture should be very moist but still hold its shape when rolled into meatballs. (Alternatively, you can put the mixtures into a food processor and pulse it just a few times – but no more than a few times just to mix.)

Note: You can add a bit more milk if you find it too dry or some bread crumbs if it's too runny. Be very careful when adding either – less is more here.

6. If you have the extra time, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least one hour and up to 24 hours to let the flavors come together.

Note: It's recommended to roll a small one-inch meatball and quickly fry it in some olive oil. Let it cool a bit and taste it for seasoning, moisture, etc. Make any needed corrections at this point.

7. Roll the meatball mixture between your hands and shape into meatballs about 2 inches in diameter. Measure the first one accurately and use it as a guide for the rest. Alternatively, use a small ice cream scoop or meatball tongs to achieve a uniform size.



8. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil and place a flat wire rack on top. Place the meatballs on the wire rack and bake at 375° for about 20 to 25 minutes so they set.

Note: Oven cooking does not give as much of a crust as pan frying but it's easier, neater and allows some of the grease to drain from the meatballs – an important thing here. But don't cook them too long or they will dry out.



9. Set the meatballs aside until after the sauce is done, and then gently drop the meatballs into the tomato sauce while it simmers as directed below.

While the meatballs are in the oven start the sauce.

Sauce

Ingredients

5 cloves roasted garlic
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 to 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 medium onion, diced
1 small to medium carrot, peeled and diced
1 medium stalk celery, diced
1 cup low-sodium chicken stock
¼ cup red wine
2 twenty eight oz. cans tomato sauce (preferably Hunts®)
1 six oz. can tomato paste (preferably Hunts®)
¼ to ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 dried bay leaf*
½ cup fresh basil, finely chopped
2 tablespoons fresh parsley, finely chopped
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
Freshly ground black pepper and kosher salt to taste

*There are two types of bay leaves available. The more common traditional one is from Turkey. The newcomer to the scene is from California, and is twice as strong as the Turkish. Recipes traditionally refer to the Turkish variety, so if a recipe calls for one leaf, it is asking for one Turkish bay leaf or one half of a California bay leaf.

Directions

1. In a large, heavy-bottomed pot sauté the onions, celery and carrots in the olive oil until all the vegetables are soft, about 10 minutes.
2. Place the sautéed vegetables, the roasted garlic and the chicken stock in a blender and puree. Be sure to puree the vegetables very well otherwise the sauce will not have the desired consistency and not distribute on the noodles properly.
3. While the vegetables are pureeing add the red wine to the pot and reduce it a bit to cook out the alcohol.
4. Return the vegetable puree to the pot and add the red pepper, bay leaf, tomato sauce and tomato paste. Bring to a boil then simmer uncovered over low heat until the sauce thickens, about 30 to 45 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Add the parsley, basil and butter.

Note: fresh butter added near the end of cooking a sauce adds a fresh butter taste, as opposed to a cooked butter taste when cooked with the sauce. (That is why sauces are often “finished” with additional butter near the end.)

6. Remove and discard the bay leaf.
7. Season with salt and pepper, if needed, to taste.

Note: there should not be a need for added salt in the sauce as the chicken stock has some salt – so be careful if or when adding any salt. Season accordingly with freshly ground black pepper.

8. By this time the meatballs should be done. Add the meatballs to the sauce and simmer about 30 minutes to an hour more.
9. If the sauce is too thick, add a bit of water the pasta was cooked in just before finishing the noodles as below. This adds a bit of starch from the pasta water which aids in the sauce adhering to the noodles. (One good tip is to place a measuring cup in the strainer before draining the pasta – this will remind you to save a cup of pasta water for the sauce if needed.) Alternatively, especially if using whole grain pasta (which lets off less starch) or if the sauce is too thin, make a slurry of one tablespoon of corn starch and one tablespoon of cold water and then add that to the sauce – it will thicken it a bit, help the sauce have a more silken texture, and adhere to the noodles better. Corn starch is not traditionally used in tomato sauces but works quite well here.

Note: If not making meatballs and a heartier meat-flavored sauce is desired, cook a piece of bacon or salt pork when sautéing the vegetables, remove when pureeing the vegetables, add back when simmering and remove with the bay leaf. For a

quick “marinara” flavored sauce, eliminate the bacon and add three anchovies to the sauce in step 5 (the anchovies will break down with cooking).

10. If desired, finish the sauce with ½ a cup of grated (not shredded) Parmesan cheese – just stir it in prior to serving. This step is not necessary and is only recommended if you really like a “cheesy” sauce. Some chefs feel that this adulterates the flavor of a classic tomato sauce and reserve it for cream-containing sauces.

While the meatballs are simmering in the sauce, make the noodles.

Spaghetti Noodles

Recommended: Barilla® Thick Spaghetti Noodles or Barilla® Whole Grain Spaghetti Noodles

1. Bring the water to a rolling boil in a large pot. Use 8 quarts of water to 2 pounds of dried pasta (to feed eight to twelve people).

Note: The larger the pot the less chance of a boil over.

2. Add 1 tablespoon of table salt per 4 quarts of water.

Note: DO NOT add olive oil or butter to the water or the noodles – if the water is heated and salted properly the noodles will not stick together, especially if you give them a stir when they hit the water. Additionally, adding these oils to the pasta water or cooked pasta will prevent the sauce from coating the noodles properly.

3. Add the spaghetti to the salted, boiling water and stir immediately. Return to a boil, stirring every few minutes. Cook the pasta, semi-covered, until done, usually about 8 minutes. Regarding cooking time, though, trust yourself and not the package directions. Test for doneness by fishing out a noodle and biting into it. Cool it under cold running water for a few seconds if it’s too hot to taste.

Note: Whole grain noodles may require a bit more cooking time than regular noodles. They are healthier than regular noodles. More so than with regular noodles, the better quality ones taste better.

4. Drain the pasta and return it to the pot, reserving one to two cups of the pasta water in case it’s needed for the sauce, as mentioned above.

Note: DO NOT rinse pasta with water as that will wash away the pasta’s starch that helps the sauce cling to it.

5. Spoon in about 2 cups of the tomato sauce, tossing well until the pasta is coated with sauce.

Note: One very good way of finishing the noodles is to cook them in salted water as above, according to the package directions, but NOT to al dente... rather, to just before they are al dente. Finish them in a sauté pan with some sauce – this finishes the noodles well, creates a nice hot dish for serving, and allows the noodles to absorb some sauce making it a wonderful combination

Serving

Serve the spaghetti and meatballs in warm bowls (single serving sizes) or piled high on a large warm platter (family style). If opting for single servings, one nice option is creating nests of pasta (“nidi” in Italian) by twirling noodles with a fork in a ladle as pictured.

Spoon a little more of the sauce over the pasta and pass the remaining sauce separately. Add some finely chopped parsley leaves or chiffonade basil as garnish and added color if desired. Dress with some shredded Parmesan or Romano cheese or pass the cheese in a bowl on the table. Also serve good quality fresh bread. (Garlic bread is optional as there is already a complete flavor profile here.) Cabernet or Chianti are typically good pairings.



Storing

Grandma had the right idea – this sauce is even better the next day. If at all possible, make it ahead and refrigerate. Sauce can be made 5 days ahead and cooled while uncovered, then chilled, and refrigerated covered. It can be frozen in an airtight container for 3 months.