

# Sorry, Grandma, I'm tweaking your spaghetti and meatballs

By Melissa D'Arabian

Spaghetti and meatballs was the classic dish I ate at Grandma's house growing up: She had her all-day recipe that filled her creaky house with heady aromas that built anticipation as meatballs simmered in sauce on the stove. The fact that she was 100 percent first-generation German - she emigrated at the age of 6 - never stopped me from making her recipe the benchmark by which every other meatball would be judged.

Tweaking her recipe to lighten it up a bit, and make it weekday-friendly by shortening the cook time, was a task I didn't take lightly. And truth to be told: There is a special place in this rush-to-eat food world for the leisurely simmer of small orbs of meat in thick, tangy tomato sauce covered in a fine slick of co-mingled pork and beef fat that has gently floated to the top. But life is busy, and we need to get a healthy dinner on the table and move on. I get it. These meatballs are for those nights.

First to change: The fatty mix of pork and beef became simply lean (93 percent) beef. Feel free to mix in turkey, but our family preferred the beef. The next tweak: I added a half pound of mushrooms for every pound of beef to stretch the meat out and add in nutrients. I pulsed the mushrooms in a food processor, and then cooked them with another healthy meat stretcher - onions. (Here, you could add other veggies too: shredded zucchini, carrot, and chopped spinach work great.)

I added the mushroom and onion mixture right in with the ground beef, and they added flavor, moisture and bulk, with nary an added calorie (nor a suspicious eye from any of my four kids). I used one egg white (no yolk), and used oats pulsed into a coarse flour instead of breadcrumbs. Simmer these meatballs directly in a pot of a high-quality jarred marinara sauce (check for no added sugar), and in 20 minutes, they will be succulent, tender, and juicy. Almost like Grandma's.

## LIGHTENED ITALIAN MEATBALLS

### Ingredients

Servings: 6

Start to finish: 40 minutes

- 8 ounces white mushrooms, sliced (about 2 cups)
- 1 small yellow onion, finely chopped, about 3/4 cup
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 4 cloves of garlic, minced
- 2 teaspoons dried Italian herb blend
- 1 egg white, lightly beaten
- 1 pound 93 percent lean ground beef
- 2 tablespoons grated parmesan
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- 1/3 cup oats, pulsed or blended into a coarse powder
- 1/2 teaspoon Kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 4 cups jarred marinara sauce, with no sugar added

### Preparation

Place the sliced mushrooms in a food processor and pulse 4 or 5 times, until the mushrooms are the texture of coarse couscous. Do not over-process or it will become pasty. Heat a large nonstick saute pan over medium heat and add the olive oil, onion, and mushrooms to the pan. Cook, stirring often, until onion and mushrooms are softened, and most of the liquid has evaporated, about 12 minutes.

Add the garlic, Italian herb blend, salt and pepper, give it a quick stir, and then remove from heat and allow to cool a few minutes. In a large bowl, mix together the egg white and the cooled mushroom mixture. Add the ground beef and mix together, using hands if necessary. Add the parmesan cheese, fresh parsley, fresh basil and ground oats and mix together, just until blended.

Use a small ice cream scoop to portion out uniform meatballs, and roll them gently together in your hands. (You will have approximately 26 meatballs 1.5 inch in diameter.) Pour the marinara sauce into a heavy sauce pan or small Dutch oven. Gently place the meatballs in the sauce. Cover and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Reduce heat to low, and let simmer gently for 20 minutes, removing the cover about halfway through the cook time. Serve. — AP

