In any case, making a tender meatball relies on a few basic principles: First there's *ratio,* and about 20 percent of the meat mix should be fat. In my restaurant — and this is a huge benefit of being a pizzeria — I can grind the end nubs of cured meats like prosciutto or sopressata to get fat and flavor at the same time. But at home, I use pancetta or nice smoky bacon. Quality matters because during the low, slow oven cooking, the fat flows out of the meatballs and goes right into the tomato sauce.

Then there's *shape,* and here you want to make sure to get all the air out as you form the meatball. For that I use an old-fashioned trigger ice-cream scoop. Firmly pack the meat into the scoop, pressing down on the flat side with your palm. Then use the spring trigger to release it, and roll it between your flattened palms into a ball. Of course, in between the mix and the shaping comes the *filler,* added for texture and to help retain shape. I go really easy — bread crumbs, salt, and pepper. A meatball should taste like meat.

* Meat mix: 1 lb ground beef (80 percent lean/20 percent fat), 1 lb ground pork, 1 lb ground veal
* 1 lb pancetta or thick-sliced smoky bacon, finely minced
* 2 whole eggs
* ⅓ cup finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
* ½ cup finely diced yellow onion
* 8 garlic cloves, minced
* Herb mix: ¼ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley, 2 tbsp chopped oregano, 2 tbsp chopped rosemary

**Combine above ingredients** and mix well, kneading the mixture with your hands like dough.

* ⅓ cup fine, dry unseasoned bread crumbs
* about 4 oz (½ cup) whole milk
* about 1 tsp coarse salt
* about 1 ½ tsp ground black pepper

**Slowly add milk** to bread crumbs, stirring until the mixture has the consistency of wet sand. Immediately add to the meat mixture, season with the salt and pepper, and mix well. To taste for seasoning: Heat a small amount of canola oil in a small pan. When it's hot — it will ripple in the pan — pinch off a bit of meat and fry in the oil. Remove with a spoon, taste, and correct seasoning, adding more salt if necessary. Refrigerate the meat mixture for about 30 minutes.

* canola oil for browning
* about 12 cups good-quality tomato sauce, kept warm over low heat
* finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, for serving

**Preheat oven to 350 degrees.** Shape meatballs, preferably using an ice-cream scoop (see introduction). In a large skillet, heat about a quarter-inch canola oil until very hot. Working in batches, brown all sides of each meatball.

**As they finish,** transfer browned meatballs to a deep, ovenproof casserole. Cover meatballs with tomato sauce. (Don't skimp — they must be totally submerged.) Place in oven and bake until well done, about 1 ¾ to 2 hours. When done, they should feel firm to the touch, or an instant-read meat thermometer should read 160 degrees.

**To serve:** Spoon sauce over meatballs (2 or 3 per person), top with grated cheese, and pass crusty bread. Makes 25 to 30 meatballs. Serves 8 to 10 as an entrée, with leftovers.

*Photo Credit: Philip Friedman/Studio D*