



Sausage Meatballs and Spaghetti

From *America's Test Kitchen* Season 16: Pass the Pasta

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:

We wanted to use commercial Italian sausage to create meatballs that were full of sausage flavor but still fork-tender. To temper the springy texture that sausage can have, we add a combination of ground pork, brined with baking soda and salt to help the meat retain juices and appear more tender, and a panade made with heavy cream instead of milk; the extra fat helps ensure moist and tender meat. Pulsing the meat mixture in a food processor, rather than mixing it by hand, ensures that it is thoroughly mixed without being overworked. To really make the flavors of Italian sausage shine, we add a hefty dose of the spices already present in the meat. Baking the meatballs in a hot oven lets you quickly brown them in a single batch, and a simple, bright tomato sauce pairs well with the richness of the meatballs.

Serves 4 to 6

The fennel seeds can be coarsely ground in a spice grinder or using the bottom of a heavy skillet. Use a light touch when rolling the meatballs to prevent them from being dense. To portion the meatballs, use 2 tablespoons or a #30 scoop, loosely filled, of the pork mixture. Our preferred brands of crushed tomatoes are Tuttorosso and Muir Glen.

INGREDIENTS

Meatballs

- 1/2** teaspoon salt
- 1/4** teaspoon baking soda
- 4** teaspoons water
- 12** ounces ground pork
- 2** slices hearty white sandwich bread, crusts removed, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1/3** cup heavy cream
- 1/3** cup grated Parmesan cheese, plus extra for serving
- 2** large egg yolks
- 2** garlic cloves, minced
- 1** teaspoon fennel seeds, coarsely ground
- 1** teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/2** teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 12** ounces sweet Italian sausage, casings removed and broken into 1-inch pieces

Tomato Sauce

- 2** tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1** garlic clove, minced

- 1** (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- 1** (15-ounce) can tomato sauce
- Salt
- 1** tablespoon minced fresh basil
- 1** pound spaghetti

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. FOR THE MEATBALLS:** Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 500 degrees. Set wire rack in aluminum foil-lined rimmed baking sheet and spray with vegetable oil spray.
- 2.** Dissolve salt and baking soda in water in large bowl. Add pork, fold gently to combine, and let stand for 10 minutes.
- 3.** Pulse bread, cream, Parmesan, egg yolks, garlic, fennel seeds, oregano, pepper, and pepper flakes in food processor until smooth paste forms, about 10 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add pork mixture (do not wash out bowl) and pulse until mixture is well combined, about 5 pulses.
- 4.** Transfer half of pork mixture to now-empty large bowl. Add sausage to processor and pulse until just combined, 4 to 5 pulses. Transfer sausage-pork mixture to bowl with pork mixture. Using your hands, gently fold together until mixture is just combined.
- 5.** With your wet hands, lightly shape mixture into 1 3/4-inch round meatballs (about 1 ounce each); you should have about 24 meatballs. Arrange meatballs, evenly spaced, on prepared wire rack and bake until browned, about 15 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through baking.
- 6. FOR THE TOMATO SAUCE:** While meatballs bake, heat oil in Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add garlic and cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in crushed tomatoes, tomato sauce, and 1/4 teaspoon salt and bring to boil. Reduce heat and simmer gently until slightly thickened, about 10 minutes. Stir in basil and season with salt to taste.
- 7.** Add meatballs to sauce and gently simmer, turning them occasionally, for 10 minutes. Cover and keep warm over low heat.
- 8.** Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring often, until al dente. Reserve 1/2 cup cooking water, then drain pasta and return it to pot.
- 9.** Add 1/2 cup sauce and 1/4 cup reserved cooking water to pasta and toss to combine, adjusting consistency with remaining reserved cooking water as needed. Transfer pasta to large serving platter and top with meatballs and remaining sauce. Serve, passing extra Parmesan separately.

TECHNIQUE

DISCOVERY: DON'T MIX IN PANADE BY HAND; PROCESS IT

To ensure that meatballs hold their shape, retain moisture, and stay tender during cooking, we typically combine the ground meat with a panade, a paste made of milk and bread. The starches and liquid form a gel that coats and lubricates the meat proteins, preventing them from linking together into a tough matrix.

The problem: It's hard to thoroughly incorporate a panade into the meat when blending by hand, so we use a food processor. Its sharp blade literally cuts the paste into the meat so that the mixture is homogeneous.

CLUMPY: Blended by hand.



HOMOGENEOUS: Blended in a food processor.



TECHNIQUE

400 MEATBALLS TO PERFECTION

When we started testing, our sausage meatballs were dense and springy. We made close to 400 meatballs before landing on just the right combination of ingredients and mixing methods that produced the savory, juicy, fork-tender meatballs we wanted.

1. FIRST WE TRIED: Hand-mixing sausage with standard panade (bread-milk mixture).

BUT: Meatballs were dense, with mushy pockets of bread.

2. THEN WE TRIED: Subbing less-dense ground pork for sausage.

GOOD: Meatballs were less dense.

BUT: They were lacking sausage's rich juiciness.

3. NEXT WE TRIED: Combining sausage and ground pork.

GOOD: Richer meatballs.

BUT: The meat and panade were not homogeneous.

4. SO WE TRIED: Mixing with a food processor.

GOOD: Smooth, homogeneous.

BUT: Meatballs not truly tender and juicy.

5. AFTER THAT WE TRIED: Mixing in portion of pork mixture by hand.

GOOD: More tenderness.

BUT: Still not juicy.

6. SO WE TRIED: Soaking pork in baking soda.

GOOD: Juicier meatballs.

BUT: Meat still a little sticky.

7. FINALLY WE TRIED: Subbing heavy cream for milk.

GOOD: Extra fat = less sticky meat.

SUCCESS: Rich, savory, tender meatballs.

