

Image

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FOOD | RICK NICHOLS

Made-over meatball rolls back on the scene

Let us reconsider, then, the prodigal meatball, working its way back from the spaghetti circuit, offering itself in the boites of the city as a solo act, which is to say unhinged from the ball and chain of "and."

All right, not always: Noodles are still part of the family name, not easily denied.

But in the mystical churn that regularly presents us with encores of the iceberg wedge, the retro cupcake and the cocktail frank (in or out of the blanket), it is unmistakably, once again, the moment of the meatball.

Of the modified and restyled sort.

You'll find it recast for lunch in a trio of red-gravy sliders, each on its own clementine-sized brioche, surfing on a wooden cutting board at Di Bruno Bros., the cheesery at 18th

and Chestnut.

At Amada, the Spanish tapas room in Old City, it steps out as an *albondiga* (actually, seven of them), the moist, finely ground lamb balls bright with smoked paprika and mint, aswim in velvety foie gras-sherry cream sauce.

Bridgewater's Pub in 30th Street Station runs specials of "Peruvian meatballs," ground llama, cilantro and garlic-chile sauce with a dollop of mashed potatoes

(not the usual milk-soaked bread) as a binder. At Deuce, the Northern Liberties spot, I've wolfed down supremely tender veal balls steeped in cranberry juice, and served over a bed of grilled ratatouille.

This is not counting the old standbys, the Swedish meatball team at Ikea, and the skewers of grilled pork balls at Vietnam Restaurant.

London Grill

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London Grill's duck meatballs with potato gnocchi and dried cherries.



CHARLES FOX / Inquirer Staff Photographer
"Meatball Mondays."

Lamb-feta meatballs with Moroccan tomato sauce from London Grill, where the chef is doing "Meatball Mondays."

The Italian originals, still at large in South Philly. The superb falafel at Aya's Cafe, should you find it within yourself to grant the ground fava bean dispensation as the stuff of a meatless meatball.

All of which is to say it hardly came as a shock when — while jawing with the London Grill's lumbering chef-owner Michael McNally — he brought up his scheme for "Meatball Mondays" to pay homage to, well, what his customers can't seem to get enough of, which is his meatballs (informed by the teachings of his Italian sister-in-law).

Every time he'd run a special, with pasta or not, meatballs seemed to sell out. Then he read about A16, the estimable San Francisco pizzeria: It had the same experience, tweaked its meatballs (added a bit of prosciutto to the Italian standard grind, for instance), and has been selling them like hotcakes each

Monday.

The rest, as they say, is a current event. Already on London's menu (all week long) are thoroughly comforting, well-textured duck (leg meat) meatballs, served in a brown gravy with rustic potato gnocchi, sweet, dried cherries, and asiago cheese.

McNally's tender chicken-prosciutto meatballs have gotten two thumbs up from the staff. And plates of cumin-inflected mini-meatballs made by London's resident Moroccan cooks are on the happy-hour menu, three for \$3.

But anything you can grind up, of course, has meatball potential, and McNally has been busy doing R&D. The rotating list of Monday meatballs is spinning out of control — lamb and goat cheese with mint, veal and spinach with mozzarella and tomato, tuna with Moroccan tomato sauce, shrimp with red-curry

coconut sauce, turkey with mole sauce, white bean with roasted garlic sauce, salmon and bacon with dill sauce and horseradish (McNally found that salmon without added fat tended to dry out), and venison, and artichoke, and crab, and beef, and, certainly, pork with sage-brown butter sauce. To mention a few.

It's a cute gimmick, he says. Then again, he has been cooking for 30 years, and he wouldn't mind nailing a dish — as Wolfgang Puck did with pizza — that would make him a million.

Could be meatballs: "Or maybe a brownie."

The brownie must be ripe — again — for a comeback, no?

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