

VENISON (or another meat!) MEATBALLS with SLOW-COOKED TOMATO SAUCE

serves 6-8

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This is an easy and straightforward recipe for spaghetti + meatballs, except for the time spent on the stovetop, gently coaxing out the best flavor and dreamiest texture. the magic happens with the long slow cooking of the lusty red sauce, while poaching the meatballs (WITHOUT browning beforehand !) in the sauce for longer than seems necessary makes them meltingly tender. make this dish for someone you love (or think you just might ;-).

For the tomato sauce:

1 1/2 T olive oil
1 1/2 cups chopped onion
5 cloves chopped garlic (trust me, will be so sweet by the time the sauce is finished !)
2 T tomato paste
2 T fresh oregano or 1 T dried
2 28-oz cans peeled plum tomatoes (see note!) *
1 1/2 cups chicken stock
1 teaspoon kosher sea salt

(* when i can, i make my own roasted tomato sauce and store it in the freezer, but that's not the kind of tomato sauce i want here. as i do not can tomatoes otherwise, when i want preserved local organic tomatoes, i love the jars of organic tomato puree from my friends at Riverbank Farm in CT. hopefully, where you are, you can find some from a local farmer as well. in this case, because i don't have any of those on hand, i am using good quality canned organic tomatoes.)

Procedure:

heat a heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium heat, swirl in the olive oil and add the onions, cooking until they begin to brown, about 7 minutes. add the garlic and cook another minute, then add the tomato paste and oregano, cooking the mixture for 3 minutes.

add the canned peeled plum tomatoes, using a wooden spoon to break them up a bit. add the salt and the chicken stock and bring to a boil. reduce to a simmer, stir, and cover the pot.

continue cooking for 4-5 hours (!), stirring occasionally until the sauce is deeply colored and has reduced. taste for seasoning, adding a bit more salt if needed.

you want to end up with a smooth rich luxurious sauce, so use an immersion blender, regular blender or food processor to achieve the desired results.

For the meatballs:

1 1/2 lbs ground venison (see note!) *
1/4 lb. ground pork *
1/4 lb uncooked bacon, minced *
1/2 cup fresh breadcrumbs
1 cup whole milk
2 teaspoons kosher salt
2 cloves minced garlic, or 2 teaspoons garlic powder
1/2 a finely minced onion
1/3 cup grated pecorino romano cheese or parmesan

*venison is very lean, so it's crucial that you add extra fat (in this case, i add pork and bacon) to these meatballs. also you may absolutely use other ground meat for the meatballs! if you are not a red meat eater, this is delicious with ground turkey or ground chicken. i recommend using dark meat vs. white if possible, and rather than pork or bacon, add an equivalent amount of very finely chopped mushrooms to add needed moisture. and by all means include the panade (bread + milk) to increase the moisture ratio.

Procedure:

to make the *panade*, mix the breadcrumbs into the milk and let sit for 10 minutes. in a large bowl, place the meat (s), *panade*, salt, garlic, onion + cheese and mix with your hands, just until combined. do not overwork! (take a small piece of the mixture and sauté thoroughly in a skillet to taste for seasoning)

form the mixture into 2-inch (loosely formed, not packed!) balls. transfer the red sauce to a dutch oven or a high-sided skillet with a lid, then drop the meatballs into the sauce.

adjust heat to a simmer and continue to cook gently for at least an hour, possibly an hour and a half until meatballs are tantalizingly tender. if at any time during the cooking the sauce seems dry, add chicken stock or water, a little at a time. taste for seasoning just before serving.

To serve:

cook the dried spaghetti of your choice (we love *Martelli* brand) in boiling salted water until barely al dente. heat a large skillet over medium-high heat, swirl in enough good olive oil to coat the bottom of the skillet and add a couple of minced garlic cloves, stirring constantly until they are JUST golden. (add a pinch or two of dried red chile flakes, optional.)

using tongs or a pasta spoon, carefully dump the pasta into the hot garlicky oil, stirring to coat all the strands. add a couple of ladlefuls of the starchy pasta cooking water, and simmer a minute or two until reduced and pasta is cooked but still al dente.

plate individual servings of the *spaghetti aglio e olio*, ladle a healthy amount of the red sauce on top, add 2-3 meatballs, grate the pecorino or parmigiana over the top and an additional splash of very good olive oil.

now, THAT'S AMORE !!! BUON APPETITO!!

