A Whole Lotta Meatballs!

Natale Grande and his crew from The Flying Meatballs roll into the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton, where they make 5,000 meatballs a week. They hope to expand that to 20,000 weekly.

That's a lot of meat.

Clockwise from top left: Grande pours tomato sauce into the industrial cooking pot they'll use to simmer the meatballs; an industrial stirrer, known informally as an oar, stirs the pot filled with around 200 meatballs made of 50 percent beef and 50 percent veal; Grande poses with his twin sons, Jack, left, and Simon, who are already immersed in the family business; Sal La Rose, Grande's cousin, stirs onions in an industrial cooker without shedding a tear; the Classic 50/50 Meatballs are vacuum sealed and ready to be sent out to meatball lovers everywhere. The other varieties of Flying Meatballs include Wagyu beef and grass-fed beef. For our full story on The Flying Meatballs, see Page 64.
These Meatballs Are Cleared for Takeoff

The Flying Meatballs
theflyingmeatballs.com
Il Capriccio
633 Route 10 East, Whippany
La Famiglia Gourmet
7 West Main St, Mendham

By KAREN PRAGER
Photos by STEVE HOCKSTEIN

in the kitchen at Il Capriccio in Whippany, chef Natale Grande beckons me and holds a paper bag to my nose. I inhale deeply, drawing in the intoxicating unmistakable funk of truffles. He opens the bag and delicately extracts a massive white specimen. Beaming he cradles the glorious, insanely expensive fungus in his cupped hands, a proud papa and his fragile newborn.

Natale is used to using luxury ingredients at Il Capriccio, founded by his father, Tony in 1984. On the morning of my visit, I find prep chefs in the orderly kitchen slicing alabaster fillets of Chilean sea bass, turning Sicilian pistachios into gelato and ensnaring dozens of bright red lobsters into an icebath. And that’s just for a weekday lunch.

Still, despite the restaurant’s high-end foodstuffs and elegant dining room, I’ve come to discuss a humble dish: the meatball. Specifically, The Flying Meatballs, Natale’s newest venture.

Like most stories about good Italian food, this one starts with an Italian nonna, Clara Grande, Natale’s mother, who came to America from the Campania region of Southern Italy, at the age of 13. In June 2008, the Grandes opened La Famiglia Gourmet shop in Mendham, and soon Clara made a simple request of her son: “Make me something you think might sell.”

“What could be better than a meatball?” Natale remembers thinking. So, he started making 30 pounds a week, then 60, then 120. He got up to selling about 300 pounds of meatballs a week from the shop in Mendham and the restaurant in Whippany. At that point, it was only natural that the former engineering student would ask himself: “Why can’t I engineer this for large-scale production?”

So, two years ago he began working with the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton, to do exactly that. “I’ve never met such a talented group of folks,” he says of the center’s staff. Their expertise in everything from food safety and manufacturing processes to business plans and marketing strategy enabled Natale to take his meatballs to the masses.

“The thing that distinguishes my product is that we stay true to the original — my grandmother’s tradition.” Natale, now 56, recalls waking up as a child in his grandparents’ house on Sundays to the smell of bracioli and meatballs simmering in his grandmother’s sauce. In their house, he remembers: “Forget about the TV. You sit, and you eat, and you talk.”
But Natale knows firsthand how labor-intensive traditional Italian cooking can be. “I wanted to free people from having to destroy their kitchen” in order to eat good, old-fashioned meatballs, he says. “I wanted to sell something that not only is wholesome and delicious but also gives a little bit of help” to home cooks. “Everybody’s on the run these days, but I want them to have the same food I provide to my sons.”

So, other than tradition and engineering, what exactly goes into the five types of Flying Meatballs?

“It all starts with the meat,” Natale says, noting that all varieties he offers are antibiotic- and hormone-free. Some are made from 100 percent grass-fed beef, and the other varieties include three-meat (beef, veal and pork), the 50-50 classic (beef and veal), turkey and all-beef.

Golden-yolked eggs from Simply Grazin’ Organic Farm in Skillman, fresh parsley, grana padano, minced garlic, salt, pepper and bread crumbs from bread baked according to the Grandes’ specifications by Calandra’s Bakery in Caldwell, complete the roster of ingredients.

The facility churns out an average of 5,335 meatballs (1,000 pounds) a week.

“We’re the Italian grandmother you wish you had,” says Natale as he hoists a 55-gallon pot of sauce filled with some 200 grass-fed beauties.

“We’re not just selling a meatball, we’re selling people trust, a way of life.”

Buon appetito!

**Eating Well**

**Meatball Madness**

**Just Say No to High Fat**

By Jessica Wisniewski

In a sub or atop spaghetti, spicy, Swedish or classic Italian meatballs are inexpensive, easy-to-make comfort food. They’re composed, for the most part, of a mixture of ground meat and spices, sometimes with other ingredients, such as eggs and bread crumbs.

However, depending on the meat you use and the preparation you prefer, most meatballs pack a considerable amount of fat and calories. The pork and beef variety that’s typically fried and served with Sunday sauce can run up to 500 calories and 19 grams of fat depending on the size and how many you’re eating.

Deborah Aznar, a private chef and caterer in Morristown, shared some tips for how to lighten meatballs without sacrificing flavor.

- **Beef it Up (Without the Beef)**
  Start by choosing the leanest ground meat you can find. Then reduce by half the amount you would normally use, and replace it with minced vegetables. The results will render a juicy, never dry or tasteless meatball while sneaking a serving of veggies into the mix. Mushrooms and eggplant are great choices because of their meaty texture. Cauliflower, zucchini, carrots, bell peppers and spinach also are good add-ins.

  **Crumbly Advice**
  Try making your own bread crumbs rather than using the store-bought variety. Toast some whole wheat bread and toss it into a food processor with herbs and grated Parmesan. Panko-style bread crumbs are a good substitute. They’re lower in calories and sodium with no saturated fat. You also could forget the bread crumbs all together and use a whole grain, such as cooked brown rice, quick-cook oatmeal or quinoa, as a binder but without a lot of calories or fat. Egg substitutes or egg whites will bind the mixture just as well as a whole egg and with fewer calories and less cholesterol.

- **Mimic the Meat**
  Nowhere in the meatball handbook does it state you must use pork, veal or sausage. Lean ground chicken or turkey can create a delicious healthier version of the real deal. These meats have very little fat, so adding a bit of olive oil will keep them succulent. “Regardless of what you’re cooking, fat equals flavor,” says Aznar. Incorporating plenty of fresh herbs, minced onion, shallots and garlic also is essential because chicken and turkey will take on the flavors of whatever you’re adding. The bonus: A turkey meatball is half the calories of the beef version, with 60 percent less fat.

- **Fordo the Fry**
  Traditional Italian recipes call for pan-frying the meatballs before adding them to the gravy pot. However, putting your meatballs in the oven can produce almost identical results. You’ll still get a crispy brown exterior, but you’ll reduce the saturated fat. Bake on a pan with a raised wire rack, which will allow the outside to brown nicely and the excess fat to drain off. Cook all the way through, or remove from the oven 10 to 15 minutes before done and finish cooking in a pot of tomato sauce if using a lower fat product. Aznar suggests cooking at a lower temperature until they are cooked through.

- **A Final Reminder**
  Even when using a healthier preparation, keep portion control in check. This way you won’t look and feel like a meatball when dinner’s done.

*If you have a question for Jessica Wisniewski, e-mail her at jessiea@verizon.net.*