

Italian wedding soup marries flavors

I've written about the satisfaction of bowl food at this time of year, but there's another style of food that's equally comforting in the winter: meatballs. After all, who doesn't like a good meatball?

Meatballs come in all sizes — small, large, patties — with different types of protein (beef, pork, lamb, turkey, chicken, even fish), while variations effortlessly veer away from “meat” to other star ingredients, such as pulses, beans and grains.

In other words, meatballs are versatile and universally pleasing to eat, appealing to most diets and preferences. They are also efficiently economical, a great way to stretch inexpensive ingredients, and they can be frozen or refrigerated for later use, which is ideal for an easy weeknight meal.

This soup recipe is a two-fer. It's a steaming bowl of comforting soup packed with turkey meatballs floating in a nourishing chicken broth. The recipe takes inspiration from an Italian wedding soup, a classic Italian-American vegetable and meatball soup (and to be clear, the term “wedding” refers to the marriage of its ingredients, not the celebration of a romantic union).

There are numerous iterations of an Italian wedding soup. The meatballs can be made of chicken, turkey, beef or pork, which mingle with diced aromatics, such as onion, carrot and celery. For extra substance, the soup sometimes includes pasta. In other words, how you make it is open to your interpretation, taste and the contents of your refrigerator.

In this recipe, I've omitted the pasta and amped up the flavor of the broth and meatballs with copious amounts of cheese. While Parmesan is a popular go-to, I find that the salty sharpness of pecorino Romano adds more oomph and flavor to the meatballs. A hunk of cheese rind is added to the broth (a humble and effective no-waste technique to build flavor and body), which accentuates a cheesy-umami richness in an otherwise simple soup.

Feel free to use this recipe as a template and make your own modifications depending on what you have on hand. For instance, if you have some post-Thanksgiving frozen turkey stock, use that for the base of the soup. Or switch out the ground turkey for ground chicken to make the meatballs.

If you would like to add some pasta, try orzo or a small tubular pasta, such as ditalini — and note that you may need to add more stock, since the pasta will absorb some as it cooks. If you don't have homemade stock on hand, a good-quality store-bought chicken stock will easily stand in for a quick weeknight dinner.



LYNDA BALSLEV/TASTEFOOD

Cheesy turkey meatball soup weds ingredients for flavor.

Cheesy Turkey Meatball Soup

Active time: 45 minutes
Total time: 45 minutes, plus chilling time
Yield: Serves: 4 to 5, makes about 16 meatballs

Meatball Ingredients:
1 pound ground turkey (or chicken)
1/3 cup panko breadcrumbs
1/4 cup packed finely grated pecorino Romano cheese
2 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley leaves
1 large garlic clove, minced
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
Vegetable oil

Soup Ingredients:
1 medium onion, chopped
1 large carrot, sliced
1 celery stalk, diced
Kosher salt
5 to 6 cups chicken stock
1 (2-inch) chunk Parmesan rind
1 bay leaf
1 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 cups spinach leaves or coarsely chopped kale leaves
Grated Romano or Parmesan cheese

Steps:

Combine the meatball ingredients (excluding oil) in a bowl and mix to blend. Form into 1-inch meatballs, flatten slightly, and place on a plate. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in a deep skillet or soup pot. Add the meatballs in one layer without overcrowding, in batches if necessary. Brown on both sides, turning when they release easily from the pan, about 6 minutes. Transfer to a plate lined with a paper towel. (They will finish cooking in the soup.)

Add 1 tablespoon oil to the pan. Add the onion, carrots, celery and a pinch of salt to the skillet and saute until the vegetables are bright and tender, 3 to 4 minutes, stirring up any brown bits. Add the stock, cheese, bay leaf, thyme, 1/2 teaspoon salt and the black pepper. Partially cover the pot and simmer over medium heat for about 15 minutes. Add the meatballs and continue to cook until the meatballs are fully cooked, 8 to 10 minutes more. Stir in the greens and cook until wilted, 1 to 2 minutes. Taste for seasoning and add more salt and pepper if desired. Ladle into bowls and serve with the cheese for sprinkling.

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Omicron variant spreads faster

Q Can you please talk about the omicron variant? I keep hearing different information about whether or not it's worse than the delta variant and how sick it's going to make you. Why has there been so much panic about this new variant?

A We're hearing from many readers regarding the omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, which is the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. We're happy to address what is known thus far, and fully expect to be writing updates as research and data reveal more.

Omicron was first reported to the World Health Organization from South Africa in late November. Its appearance coincided with a marked surge of new infections in the region, which put researchers on high alert. Testing showed that this new variant was spreading faster than previous forms of the coronavirus. When analysis of the virus revealed a significantly higher number of mutations than have previously been observed, omicron was classified as a “variant of concern.” One month after it was identified, the variant was confirmed to have spread to 38 countries on six continents. The surprisingly rapid spread of a new variant, along with the dozens of mutations that it exhibits, have likely helped drive public concern.

As we've discussed here before, the job of a virus is to replicate. In the course of making multiple copies of itself, genetic mistakes occur. Most of the time, these errors have no effect on the virus and are not repeated. But sometimes, the genetic changes that occur during replication help the virus to become more successful. The end result is that particular version of the virus will get replicated more often, which gives rise to what is known as a variant. That's the mechanism that resulted in the delta variant, and it is now in play with the omicron variant.

What remains to be seen is what omicron's

ASK THE DOCTORS



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changes to the viral structure of SARS-CoV-2 mean to those who become infected with the virus. It appears that the omicron variant spreads faster than the delta variant, but it's

too soon to know for sure. Also unclear at this time is whether or not omicron is more severe than other variants. Thus far, COVID vaccines continue to protect against severe disease and death. However, as with the delta variant and original coronavirus, breakthrough infections are expected. Unfortunately, it will take more real-world data to learn more about how the omicron variant behaves.

What remains certain is that you can lower your risk of infection through the vigilant use of high-quality masks. While the virus particles themselves are microscopic, they can't move on their own. They hitch a ride on the droplets of a cough, sneeze or exhalation, and those can be physically stopped by the fabric of a good mask. N95 masks, which offer the highest protection, are once again widely available.

If you haven't yet been vaccinated, we urge you to do so. And if you're six months or more beyond the second dose of a two-dose vaccine, or two months beyond the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, it's important to get a booster.

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Stop wasting food and money by safely storing leftovers

Don't be discouraged. Stay the course. Wear your masks, physically distance, wash your hands, eat healthy, be active and work toward being at a healthy weight. If you aren't vaccinated or boosted, do so when eligible. I thank you for taking care of yourself and others.



KATHY KOLASA

is what she wants you to know.

We are glad to know that you want to eat healthy and safely while reducing

food waste and saving money. Leftovers are a great way to do this. To keep leftovers safe, the food must be handled and stored properly. This reduces foodborne illness, also called food poisoning, which is caused by harmful bacteria contaminating the food. Although foodborne illness is preventable, approximately 56,000 people in the United States become ill each year.

The most common site of foodborne outbreaks is in the home, even though many consumers do not believe their home is a dangerous environment. Since many consumers do not believe they or someone in their family is at

risk of foodborne illness, they do not follow all recommended food safety procedures. In one study, people who prepared meals less frequently and had less food preparation knowledge had a higher likelihood of mishandling food. Taking time to learn about safe food handling does improve your own food safety. Here are a few recommendations.

Since bacteria grow quickly in the temperature danger zone from 40-140 degrees Fahrenheit, maintain hot food at an internal temperature of 140 or above. I remember growing up my great-grandmother kept her stew out on the stove for hours and did not re-heat it to a safe temperature before serving it again. That may have worked then, but it doesn't work now.

It is best if you refrigerate the food within two hours of cooking. This ensures enough time for the food to cool before being in the temperature danger zone for too long.

It really is important to use a food thermometer when re-heating food to ensure it reaches an internal temperature of 165 degrees. I know Dr. Kolasa gives food thermometers to lots of friends and family as presents and encourages them to use them. It is especially important for those with conditions like diabetes and cancer whose immune systems are compromised to follow that advice.

Experts tell us to cool the food by dividing large amounts of food into smaller, shallow containers allowing the food to reach a safe refrigerator-storage temperature of 40 degrees or lower quickly. If you have, for example, a large amount of roast beef, split the roast beef into small containers to speed cooling. Then store in the refrigerator (three-four days) or freezer (two-three months). Don't let the food get lost in the fridge or freezer; plan to serve again or make a stew or soup to

use it up and still have good flavor and texture.

Another way to cool leftovers is by chilling — cut large amounts of food into smaller parts and quickly cool in an ice or cold-water bath before refrigerating. You can store most leftovers using plastic wrap, airtight packing, or storage containers safely for up to four days in the refrigerator or frozen for three to four months. Use freezer wrap or bags if storing in the freezer. We do not recommend storing food in a take-out container as they usually are not airtight, may leak or spill and more likely to become contaminated.

There are some dishes that are safe to eat after being frozen but do not freeze well including guacamole, raw and cooked eggs, some fried dishes, cooked pasta and rice. Plan to keep them in the refrigerator and use soon. I keep a list of what's in the freezer and try to keep the oldest in clear view so I use it up.

The safe methods to thaw frozen leftovers include putting them in the refrigerator, in cold water or in the microwave oven. Using the refrigerator takes time, thawing in cold water takes more attention and a leak proof bag or container. Consume within three to four days of thawing and reheat to an internal temperature of 165 degrees.

Following these handling and storage requirements will reduce the risk of foodborne illness and allow the leftover food to retain the best quality. For more information search “leftovers and food safety” or <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/leftovers-and-food-safety>.

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