



Baked Turkey-Spinach Meatballs

By Susan Spungen

Serves 6 to 8

While it definitely takes a little time to put this dish together, the beauty is that it can all be done ahead of time. It can be made up to two days in advance, so all that's left to do before serving dinner is turn on the oven, make some pasta or polenta, and a simple green salad. And just about everybody likes meatballs, making this a perfectly cozy dish for a chilly evening. Feel free to use any ground meat here — I've come to like the lightness of turkey, and the pancetta adds fat and flavor, but beef, pork, or veal, or any combination is fine too.

For the meatballs:

- 8 ounces baby spinach
- 1 ¼ teaspoons plus a pinch of salt
- 1 cup fresh white breadcrumbs (made from 3 slices of crustless white sandwich bread)
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 garlic clove, grated on a Microplane
- 1 medium yellow onion, very finely chopped
- 1 ounce (1 fluffy cup) grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh rosemary
- 1/2 cup finely chopped fresh Italian parsley
- Big pinch of crushed red pepper flakes, or to taste
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/4 cup pre-diced or sliced pancetta, finely minced
- 2 pounds 93% lean ground turkey
- 4 tablespoons olive oil

For the sauce:

- 4 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup red wine
- Half of a 26.5-ounce box or 28-ounce can strained tomatoes (reserve remaining tomatoes for a later use)
- Half of a 26.5-ounce box or 28-ounce can chopped tomatoes (reserve remaining tomatoes for a later use)
- 6 large fresh basil leaves, torn
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes, or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

To finish:

- 8 ounces fresh mozzarella cheese
 - 1 ounce (1 fluffy cup) grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
 - Fresh basil leaves, torn
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1. To make the meatballs: Pour 1 inch of water into a large saucepan. Add the spinach and a pinch of salt, cover, and cook over medium-high heat. After 2 to 3 minutes, toss with tongs and replace the cover. Repeat as needed until the spinach is completely wilted, about 5 minutes. Drain and rinse with cold water. Squeeze as much water out as you can with your hands, and then squeeze really dry with a clean tea towel (you can line it with a paper towel to keep the tea towel cleaner) by twisting the ends. Finely chop the spinach.
2. In a large bowl, combine the spinach, breadcrumbs, eggs, garlic, onion, Parmigiano cheese, rosemary, parsley, red pepper flakes, oregano, the remaining 1 ¼ teaspoons salt, and the pancetta. Mix well using a large fork. Add the turkey and mix really, really well using your hands. If this makes you squeamish, wear plastic gloves or use a stand mixer with the paddle attached to combine the breadcrumb mixture with the meat (just don't overmix, and put the bowl and paddle in the dishwasher afterward).
3. Form into about twenty-eight 2- to 2 ½-ounce meatballs, putting them on a parchment paper-lined baking sheet as you form them. Heat 2 large (12-inch) skillets over medium-high heat and add 2 tablespoons of the oil to each. Divide the meatballs between the pans and cook until browned on all sides, turning as they brown, for a total of 10 to 12 minutes (or you can cook in consecutive batches if you have only one pan).
4. Transfer the meatballs to a large, deep baking dish or shallow Dutch oven with a lid. Blot the grease from one of the pans and deglaze with the wine. Cook over high heat, scraping up all the browned bits and letting the wine reduce by half, 1 to 2 minutes. Set aside.
5. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
6. To make the sauce: Add the garlic to the empty pan and cook over medium heat until the garlic is golden, 5 to 6 minutes. Add the wine from the other pan and reduce the wine until it is almost evaporated. Add the tomatoes, basil, oregano, red pepper flakes, salt, and pepper to taste and bring to a simmer. Simmer for 10 minutes, then ladle the sauce over the meatballs. Cover the baking dish (if it doesn't have a lid, crimp tightly with heavy-duty foil), set it on a parchment paper- or foil-lined baking sheet (you'll thank me later for this), and bake for 1 hour.
7. Remove from the oven and turn the heat up to 425°F.
8. Tear or chop the mozzarella cheese and layer it over the top, sprinkle with the Parmigiano cheese, and return to the oven uncovered until the cheese is melted and spotted with brown and the sauce is thickened, about 12 minutes. Run under the broiler if you want to get it more browned on top.
9. Sprinkle with torn basil leaves and serve immediately with polenta or, of course, pasta.

Timing Tips

- **Up to 3 days ahead:** Make the meat mixture for the meatballs and refrigerate.
- **Up to 2 days ahead:** Form the meatballs; cover and refrigerate until ready to cook.
- **Up to 1 day ahead:** Cook the meatballs and make the sauce. If making ahead, remove from the oven after baking the meatballs in the sauce for 1 hour.
- **2 hours ahead:** Remove the meatballs from the fridge to warm up a bit.
- **1 hour ahead:** Return to a 350°F oven until heated through, then add the cheeses and continue with the last step of the recipe.