

Sicilian Meatball Soup

For the Stock

4-5 pounds beef bones
1 pound piece of beef chuck
2 halved, peeled onions
4 carrots, peeled and quartered
1 quart commercial beef stock
2 celery stalks cut in chunks
8 sprigs parsley
2 unpeeled garlic cloves
2 bay leaves
8 sprigs fresh thyme
4 peppercorns
2 whole cloves
1 tablespoon salt

For the Meatballs

2 pounds ground beef chuck
3 medium shallots minced
1 small garlic clove minced
4 large eggs
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup grated Parmigiano
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup bread crumbs
 $\frac{1}{4}$ minced parsley
2 tablespoons chopped fresh oregano
Salt and pepper

For the Soup

2 tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and juiced
 $\frac{3}{4}$ pound any *pastina* (tiny pasta)

To make the stock, preheat oven to 450 degrees. In a large shallow roasting pan, arrange the chuck, the bones, the carrots, and the onions. Place at the middle level of the oven and roast, turning the ingredients several times so, they brown evenly. This should take about 40 minutes.

Remove from the oven and transfer the ingredients to a large kettle, about 8-10 quarts. Drain the fat from the roasting pan. Set the roasting pan over the flame, and add 2 cups of water, scraping up any browned particles with a wooden spoon. Pour that liquid into the soup kettle. Add the commercial beef stock and enough water to cover the ingredients. Then add the celery, the parsley, garlic, bay leaves, thyme, peppercorns, cloves, and salt.

Bring to the simmer. Skim off any scum that accumulates. Once the stock looks clear of the scum, partially cover and simmer for at least 4-5 hours. Do not fully cover the pot. Keep the stock at a slow simmer. Do not let it boil or the fat will incorporate into the stock. If the liquid is evaporating too much, add extra water as needed. When you believe you've extracted all you can from the ingredients, remove from the heat.

With a ladle strain the liquid into a smaller kettle, pressing down on the vegetables to extract as much flavor as possible. Discard the bones and the vegetables. The piece of chuck may be served separately.

If you have time, once the stock has cooled, refrigerate it until the fat congeals at the top. The fat can then be removed easily with a spoon. If you don't have time, let the stock cool, then spoon off the accumulated fat. To remove the last elements of fat, skim paper towels over the stock.

To make the meatballs, place the ground chuck in a bowl with the shallots, the garlic, the eggs, the Parmigiano, the bread crumbs, the parsley, the oregano, and salt and pepper to taste. Mix gently with your fingertips then knead a bit until smooth. Take a small piece of the mixture, flatten it, and fry it in a little oil to taste for seasoning. Correct the seasoning.

Roll the meatballs between your hands to the size of a hazelnut. Dip the tomatoes in boiling water for 10 to 15 seconds. Core them, and strip off the peels. Cut them in half. Take each half and gently squeeze out the juice and seeds. You want only the pulp, which should then be chopped.

Bring the stock to a boil. and add the chopped tomato. When it returns to a boil, add all of the meatballs. Again skim off the scum that accumulates. In about 7-10 minutes the meatballs should be floating to the top and fully cooked. Add the *pastina* (tiny pasta) to the soup and cook just until tender.

If you are not serving all the soup at one meal, cook the *pastina* separately in boiling salted water, just until tender. (You don't want leftover pasta in the soup or it will turn to mush.) With a slotted spoon, place some *pastina* in each soup bowl, then add the meatball soup. Serve Parmigiano on the side for those who want extra on their soup.