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Catalan Meatballs ***Albóndigas con Manzanas y Setas***

Meatballs, *albóndigas*, have been elevated to an art form in Spain, served at tapas bars in earthenware *cazuelas*, passed around at cocktail parties, and enjoyed at home. While I'm pretty addicted to the robust Madrid-style meatballs, I'd be the first to admit that the Catalans are the true *albóndiga* masters. Take these, for example. They are juicy and light, with the veal and pork mixture rendered extra special by the addition of applesauce, wild mushrooms, and some pancetta for juiciness. They are compulsively edible on their own as a tapa, perhaps with *allioli* or *romesco* sauce on the side, or finished in the Almond and Saffron Sauce that follows. If you're serving the meatballs in the sauce, have plenty of crusty bread on hand for mopping it up.

FOR THE MEATBALLS:

3 tablespoons olive oil
3/4 cup finely chopped white onion
1 very large Portobello mushroom (about 4 ounces),
wiped clean with a damp paper towel and finely chopped
2 slices white sandwich bread, crusts removed
1/3 cup milk
10 ounces ground veal
10 ounces ground pork
2 to 3 ounces sliced pancetta, minced (see note)
1 large egg, beaten
3 tablespoons unsweetened applesauce
3 tablespoons minced fresh flat-leaf parsley, plus chopped parsley for garnish
1-1/2 teaspoons sweet (not smoked) paprika
2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper
1-1/2 teaspoons coarse salt (kosher or sea), or more to taste
All-purpose flour, for dusting the meatballs
Crusty bread, for serving

FOR THE ALMOND AND SAFFRON SAUCE: (OPTIONAL)

3 tablespoons olive oil
1/2 cup finely chopped white onion
Reserved chopped Portobello mushroom
1 medium-size ripe tomato, cut in half, peeled, and seeded

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2 tablespoons medium-sweet sherry, or 1 large pinch of sugar
1/4 cup dry white wine
1/2 cup chicken stock or broth
1 slice (about 3 inches round and 1/2-inch thick), baguette, cubed
2 medium-size garlic cloves, coarsely chopped
8 toasted almonds, coarsely chopped
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
1 small pinch of saffron, pulverized in a mortar and steeped in a 2 tablespoons very hot water

1. Make the meatballs: Heat 1 tablespoon of the olive oil in a medium-size skillet over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until translucent, about 4 minutes. Add 2 cups of the chopped mushroom, reserving the rest for the sauce, if making. If not making the sauce, add all the chopped mushroom here. Cook, stirring, until it releases and reabsorbs some of its liquid, about 5 minutes. Let the mushroom mixture cool.

2. Place the bread and milk in a small bowl and let soak for 5 minutes. Drain, squeeze out the excess liquid, and finely crumble the bread.

3. Place the crumbled bread and the veal, pork, pancetta, egg, applesauce, parsley, paprika, pepper, salt, and the mushroom mixture in a large bowl. Gently knead the meatball mixture with your hands just until all the ingredients are thoroughly combined; do not overknead.

4. Spread a thin layer of flour on a large plate. Wet your hands, then break off a piece of the meatball mixture and shape it into a 1-inch ball. Dust the meatball in the flour, shaking off any excess, then gently toss it between cupped hands to give it shape. Repeat with the remaining meatball mixture, placing the floured meatballs on a small baking sheet.

5. Heat 1 tablespoon of the olive oil in a very large skillet, preferably nonstick, over medium-high heat. Add half of the meatballs and brown all over, shaking the skillet so that the meatballs brown evenly. If you plan to serve the meatballs in the sauce, cook them for 3 to 4 minutes. If serving without sauce, cook them until cooked through, about 7 minutes, adjusting the heat so that the meatballs don't burn. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the meatballs to a bowl. Add the remaining 1 tablespoon of olive oil to the skillet and cook the remaining meatballs in the same fashion. If serving the meatballs without the sauce, let them cool for 5 to 10 minutes, then sprinkle with the chopped parsley and serve with crusty bread. If you are making the sauce, don't clean out the skillet.

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6. Prepare the sauce: Heat 1 tablespoon of the olive oil in the skillet over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until translucent, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the reserved chopped mushroom and cook for 2 minutes. Add the tomato and cook, stirring, until it begins to caramelize, 6 to 7 minutes. Add the sherry and wine, increase the heat to high, and cook for 1 to 2 minutes. Add the chicken stock, stir, then stir in the meatballs. Reduce the heat to very low, cover the skillet, and cook for 10 minutes.

7. Meanwhile make the *picada*: Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil in a small skillet over medium heat. Add the bread cubes and cook until they begin to brown, about 2 minutes. Add the garlic and almonds and cook until fragrant and just beginning to brown, about 1-1/2 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the bread, garlic, and nuts to a mini food processor. Add the parsley and saffron and pulse until the mixture is ground.

8. Gently stir the *picada* into the skillet with the sauce. Cook until the sauce is flavorful, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove the skillet from the heat and let cool, 5 to 10 minutes. Garnish with additional parsley, if desired, and serve with crusty bread.

Serves 8 to 10 as a tapa, 4 to 6 as a light main course.

Note: Freezing the pancetta for 20 minutes will make it easier to mince.