

The Heavenly Swedish Meatball



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Growing up in southern Minnesota, the holiday season for our family centered on the run up to Christmas Eve. Holiday baking began as soon as the Thanksgiving table was cleared, with a variety of cookies being stirred up from then until Christmas. Along with spritz, pepperkakor and cut out sugar cookies, we made julkaka, a candied fruit and raisin-studded bread we made each December. My dad was Swedish and my mom was German, so we blended both food cultures during the holidays.

Christmas Eve dinner, however, tilted decidedly toward the Swedish side of the family. Every year we had oyster soup, homemade rolls, lutefisk, Swedish meatballs, rice pudding with lingonberries, and peas. While I enjoy lutefisk once in a decade (being sure to smother it with melted butter and cream sauce), the star of Christmas Eve dinner was always Swedish meatballs. We've continued the tradition ever since, using the same recipe Mom used back then. There are many different recipes for these meatballs; our favorite is below.

It's interesting to note that Swedish meatballs apparently did not originate in Sweden. In the 18th century, King Charles XII spent five years in Turkey, bringing the recipe back with him where it quickly became absorbed into Swedish culture. Nevertheless, this delicious main course will forever be associated with Sweden. Some people serve lingonberries alongside the meatballs, adding a sweet and tart tang to the dish. We prefer to serve our lingonberries on top of rice pudding, or the following morning with Swedish pancakes.

While it might be tempting to make an IKEA run for their version, the recipe below is guaranteed to keep you at home, making them each winter and savoring the experience — and the meatballs.

SWEDISH MEATBALLS

Serves 2-4 — Feel free to double or triple.

- ½ pound each of ground beef, pork and veal, mixed together well
- 2 cups soft, whole wheat bread cubes, crusts removed
- ½ cup whole milk
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard
- ¼ teaspoon white pepper
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon poultry seasoning
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided
- ¼ cup flour
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 14-oz. can beef broth
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 cup sour cream

Soak bread cubes in milk, squeeze dry and add to meat mixture. Sauté onion in 2 tablespoons butter and add to meat together with salt, seasonings and eggs. Form into rounds approximately the size of golf balls. Fry in remaining butter until browned on all sides (may need to do this in batches). Remove meatballs as they are done and put into a separate bowl, keeping them warm.

Once the meatballs are done, stir flour into pan drippings and continue to stir for a minute or two. Blend in tomato paste. Add enough water to the beef broth to make 2¼ cups of liquid. Slowly add to pan drippings, stirring until thickened. Just before serving, add ¼ teaspoon soda (this keeps the sauce from curdling) and sour cream.

Return meatballs to sauce, heating through. Serve with or without a side of lingonberries.

JULKAKA

Bonus recipe: delicious toasted and slathered with unsalted butter.

- 1¼ cups whole milk
- ½ cup white sugar
- ½ cup unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 4½ to 5 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 packages yeast
- ¾ teaspoon cardamom

- 1 egg
- 1 cup raisins
- 1 cup chopped, candied fruit

Heat milk, sugar, butter and salt to lukewarm. Add 2½ cups flour, yeast, egg and cardamom. At this point, it smells divine and it only gets better! Beat with electric mixer to blend, then on high for three minutes. Stir in raisins, fruits and enough flour to make a soft dough. Turn out onto lightly floured surface and knead for about 10 minutes. Place back in bowl.

Cover and let rise for about 90 minutes, then punch down. This is a sturdier dough so it won't rise as much as a normal loaf of bread. Let dough rest for 10 minutes, then divide in two, form into loaves and place into greased bread pans. Cover and let rise about an hour. Beat one egg with a little water and brush top of loaves. Bake at 350 for 35-40 minutes.