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DIVAS ON A DIME

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PHOTO CAPTION: Turkey meatballs in sweet and smoky sauce stare out from a tangle of fettuccini “worms.”



Dinner Is Watching You This Halloween

Halloween dinner has a tricky job. It needs to be fun, ready when everyone is hungry, patient when the costumes take longer than expected and appealing to people who would rather be eating candy. I think I've found the answer: monster eyeball turkey meatballs.

You can make the meatballs ahead, reheat them in a sweet and smoky sauce, and keep them warm in a slow cooker while the evening unfolds. They're satisfying, rich in protein and willing to dress for almost any occasion. Serve them over fettuccine “worms,” on hoagie rolls or as little party bites. The mozzarella-and-olive eyes supply the Halloween mischief; the meatballs do the practical work.

Sweet potato adds moisture and autumnal sweetness. The sauce keeps it a delightful secret from anyone who considers vegetables suspicious.

Dinner before the candy parade won't guarantee a meltdown-free night. But everyone gets something more substantial than a miniature candy bar. That's progress.

MONSTER EYEBALL TURKEY MEATBALLS

Yield: 60 meatballs
Total Time: 40 mins.

2 large eggs
3/4 cup milk
1 (6 ounce) box turkey stuffing mix
2 pounds ground turkey

2/3 cup cooked, cooled, mashed sweet potato
1/4 cup onion, finely minced or grated
1 tablespoon dried parsley
1/4 cup Parmesan cheese, grated
2 tablespoons maple syrup
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
1/4 teaspoon pepper

Preheat oven to 400 F. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a large bowl combine eggs and milk, then add the stuffing mix. Let this sit for about 5 minutes to allow the stuffing to absorb the milk mixture. Add turkey, sweet potato, onion, parsley, Parmesan, maple syrup, garlic and pepper. Mix gently with your hands until well combined. Use a spoon or scoop to measure heaping tablespoons of the mixture and roll into balls. Place on prepared baking sheet and bake for 18-20 minutes or until they reach 165 F in the center.



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To make the eyeballs:

Make the eyeballs with thin rounds of mozzarella string cheese or small fresh mozzarella pearls (cut in half so they don't roll), topped with black olives sliced crosswise into rounds. Once the meatballs are hot, turn off the heat and place a mozzarella circle and an olive round on each meatball

visible above the sauce. Let the cheese soften slightly, then serve before the eyeballs slide off into the fettuccine worms. (Add that to the “sentences I never thought I'd write” file.)

SWEET AND SMOKY TOMATO SAUCE

Yield: 4 1/2 cups

Total Time: 20 mins.

1 tablespoon olive oil
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
1 cup barbecue sauce

Warm the olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook briefly, just until fragrant. Stir in the crushed tomatoes, Italian seasoning and barbecue sauce. Simmer gently for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Taste and add more barbecue sauce, a little at a time, if you'd like a sweeter, smokier sauce.

Add the cooked meatballs and warm them gently in the sauce. For a make-ahead dinner, reheat meatballs and sauce on the stovetop to 165 F. Transfer to a preheated slow cooker; keep at 140 F or above.

Halloween shortcut: Use fully cooked store-bought meatballs and your favorite jarred marinara. Combine about 3/4 cup barbecue sauce with a 24-ounce jar of marinara, taste and adjust. Heat the meatballs according to the package directions, then let the kids add mozzarella-and-olive eyeballs to the meatballs on their plates.

Lifestyle expert Patti Diamond is the penny-pinching, party-planning, recipe developer and content creator of the website *Divas On A Dime* — *Where Frugal, Meets Fabulous!* Visit Patti at www.divasonadime.com and join the conversation on Facebook at *DivasOnADimeDotCom*. Email Patti at divapatti@divasonadime.com