



THE GROCERY GOD OF THE UPPER EAST SIDE

Photography by Lucia Bell-Epstein
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Is there a last name more synonymous with New York than Zabar? Most associate it with the grocery institution on the Upper West Side, but there's a second and now third generation of the family operating their own empire, this time on the other side of the park. In the past fifty or so odd years, Eli Zabar, the youngest son of Louis and Lillian Zabar, who founded the original eponymous emporium, has become just as notable. He'd been in love with the grocery business since he was a child where he often retreated to his family's shop after school and at lunch to relish in its tastes, smells and to eat behind the counter. *"I loved the way it smelled, and I loved the way the food tasted. It was a very interesting store in those days. There were all kinds of smoked fish, barrels of herring, butter by the block and pieces of Swiss cheese wrapped in wax paper"*, states Zabar. Knowing from that young age that he wanted to go into the family business, but knew that with two older brothers who were also eager, there wasn't room for him so in 1973, he went out on his own to open a green grocer.

He had recently graduated from college and amassed some savings, combining inspiration culled from recent European travels, he opened his shop on 81st and Madison. It was a small grocer that carried produce and little else. Zabar fell for the markets of France, where items were merchandised with care and produce was carefully sourced. On his travels back and forth he would discover new products, like cheeses and vinegars that he would import to sell alongside his vegetables. Now, five decades later, Zabar has ten locations of his own namesake business that range from grocery markets to wine bars and is a notable Upper East Side fixture. He works closely with his two sons, Sasha and Oliver, the former who owns the much beloved and highly viral ice cream and hot chocolate shop, Glace, and the latter running his father's business's operations as well as the bar Eli's Night Shift.

The evolution from market to café was organic. He saw a life for his ingredients beyond the grocery store's four walls and wanted to bring that to his customers. *"There was more than you could do with just plain raw string beans than sell just a pound of them*





and wine has also always been a love of mine. I wanted to put it all together and that became a café. It was an evolution instead of a decision from day one”, he explains. When inspiration for a new concept strikes, he acts on it and often quickly sees success. His barometer for what the neighborhood wants and needs is painfully accurate.

When he opened that first café inside his market in 1973, the Upper East Side was home to some of the city’s hottest art galleries, places like Leo Catstelli and Sonnabend. It quickly became a hub for artists and their dealers to grab a bite or linger over lunch. “*They all ended up at E.A.T and they could have gone elsewhere, but they were attracted to what I was doing.*” says Zabar. When asked why this was the case, he attributed it to simplicity. They enjoyed and understood his precise approach to deli staples like matzah ball soup and pastrami on rye, but with what has become his signature French twist, with other additions like quiches, ratatouille and omelets.

Although many of the major galleries have now moved further downtown, his clientele has shifted to reflect a cross section of the current elite and affluent Upper East Side. His establishments appeal to the bourgeois and the bohemian. When asked what percentage of his current customers are regulars he stated, “*All of them*”, which anyone who is familiar would only say is slight hyperbole. “*I have people that come in everyday, every week and then another crowd that I might only see once, twice or three times a year. They are the ones who come in for the holidays, Thanksgiving, maybe Passover. They want it to be right, they want it to be the best and they find that here.*” says Zabar.

Whether they are of the daily or biannual visiting variety, much like the artists before them they appreciate Zabar’s exacting simplicity. The type where the egg salad has a higher percentage of yolks for added richness and the shrimp salad is made from the best, never frozen shrimp he can find. “*I don’t know how to do things that are complicated, even though they are complicated to make them simple,*” he explains. He lets the ingredients shine, which works when one cares about sourcing as much as he does. If one thing is important to Zabar it is provenance and quality. Even now in his eighties, he’s a physical presence in his stores doing daily walk-throughs of as many as he can. He’ll inspect the produce, check-in at the butcher counter to make



sure the steak is cut to his liking and he’ll merchandise to make sure it stays at his standard.

When it comes to menu development, its constantly in flux to reflect not necessarily just the current season, but what he wants to eat at that moment. His latest idea for an addition came from his wife Devon Fredericks, who at one point was a caterer and proprietor of beloved Hamptons grocer Loaves and Fishes, for a socca, a chickpea based pancake popular in Provence. The idea was for it to be served in wedges and accompanied by an aioli. He’s done the same with a green bean salad topped with foie gras that was a favorite of his at Le Voltaire in Paris. By serving what he wants to eat, he’s created hubs of the neighborhood that people want to return to. The food is filled with heart,

satisfying and not cerebral or chef driven. On any given day, they house cross sections of New York life, having everyone from ladies lunching to school children to young couples who count themselves as regulars. “*My name is on the door. There's a human being, a real person behind all of this and I think people like that*”. He’s also continually looking to improve upon the platonic ideal and put his meticulous Eli Zabar spin on it. Sure it’s just a sandwich, apple or loaf of bread, but to him it has to be exactly the way he wants it.

As he’s one of the preeminent grocers and restaurateurs in a city filled with iconic foods, what was his ultimate New York food? True to form, something of his own creation, “*I love my chopped liver on my raisin nut bread. I think that might be the single most delicious, but also most surprisingly delicious.*” Something simple, but also exacting. His menus are filled with iconic New York staples like brisket, bagels and babka, that no doubt many of his regulars would say are their favorites.

In this notorious fast moving and fickle town where people’s tastes seem to move with the wind, how does he stay relevant after being in business for over fifty years? It’s that human connection, his attention to detail and unwavering commitment to quality that has cultivated a community of regulars that span generations. On a recent daily walk through of his flagship, he checked in at the butcher to modify the cut of the rib eye. He wanted it to be thicker and shared an anecdote from the previous night. “*I bought one of these rib eyes and brought it up to the wine bar on 91st street for them to make it for me. I couldn’t finish it and I saw a regular come in who was about to order the hanger steak. I offered him what was left of mine.*” The regular enjoyed the upgrade and it is stories like these that will keep the last name Zabar as a fixture of the city, on both sides of the park. Hospitality and quality above all else.

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