

FOOD

Eli Zabar's Wine Cellar: It's Not Chopped Liver

The Pour

By ERIC ASIMOV MARCH 10, 2016

Many New Yorkers know at least something about Eli Zabar. They can probably guess that his family opened the Upper West Side emporium that stands for classic New York eating. They may know that he left that business decades ago to open his own store on the Upper East Side, E.A.T., followed by Eli's at the Vinegar Factory, and that his markets and takeout shops now dominate the neighborhood above 79th Street.

They can assume that Eli's Bread, sold in restaurants and shops all over New York, comes from his bakeries. They may even be aware of Mr. Zabar's reputation for treating his customers arrogantly and charging high prices.



Eli Zabar's markets and takeout shops dominate the Upper East Side.
Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Not so many know that Mr. Zabar is a longtime wine lover, with an extraordinary collection of Burgundy and a deep interest in Barolo, Barbaresco and the northern Rhône. Mr. Zabar owns an excellent under-the-radar, typically quirky wine shop on the Upper East Side called Eli's List, right next door to his restaurant Eli's Table, which offers a terrific wine list with many bottles 10 to 25 years old.

Many people would be astonished to find great values on this list, and not just in expensive bottles. And they may be pleased to know that a branch of Eli's Essentials, his takeout shop and cafe at Madison Avenue and 91st Street, turns into a charming wine bar after 5 p.m.

Mr. Zabar said he never intended to go into the wine business. He opened his wine shop in 2002, he said, as a convenience to his wine-drinking customers at Eli's Market on Third Avenue, so he could offer one-stop shopping.

That was, he now concedes, a rationalization for doing what he wanted: to accumulate a lot of wine.

"It was antithetical to the rest of my businesses, which are based on buying fresh and selling fast," he said at the wine shop, preternaturally blue eyes peering over the top of his glasses. "You're not going to save a carrot for two months."

Mr. Zabar, 72, exudes the nervous energy of a teenager. Words tumble out on top of one another, disparate thoughts that, in his eagerness to discuss wine, can seem at first to lack an organizing principle, until they finally align and fall into place. One dress shirt is not enough; he wears two at once, with khakis and a down vest.

The layers come in handy in the cramped, mazelike wine cellar under Eli's Market, where, stacked at a cool 55 degrees, lie cases upon cases of bottles that would stir the imagination of any Burgundy lover.

Sure, he has some superstar names: Roumier of Chambolle-Musigny and Rousseau of Gevrey-Chambertin among the reds; Raveneau of Chablis, Roulot of Meursault and Leflaive of Puligny-Montrachet among the whites.

But even more evident is his exquisite taste. His cellar is replete with the work of producers who have not been sanctified as superstars and are not known for their grand crus, but who simply make beautiful, expressive wines whatever their terroirs. These include names like Domaine Arlaud Père et Fils, Domaine Trapet, Alain Burguet, Sylvain Cathiard, Mugneret-Gibourg, Denis Bachelet and Michel Lafarge.

"These are not trophy wines," Mr. Zabar said. "That's not my point of view."

This cellar is practically all Burgundy, except for some Champagne. Mr. Zabar has another cellar for his Rhône and Barolos under Eli's Night Shift on East 79th Street, a grab-and-go store that turns into a beer bar by night, run by his son Oliver.

As a young merchant setting out in the 1970s, Mr. Zabar said, he allowed his imperiousness to define his business. He was obsessive about the quality of every piece of cheese and each bottle of oil. He learned to cook and bake so that all the prepared foods he sold were made either by his own hand or from his recipes.

"I only sold what I liked, and if you were offended, too bad," he said. "I was offensive to many customers. I can't even believe some of the things I said."

He has mellowed somewhat. He can't quite exert the control he desires over his markets, except in his wine shop.

"I've gotten away from that; it didn't work in groceries," he said. "But this wine store is a continuation of that attitude."



Eli's Essentials, Mr. Zabar's takeout shop and cafe on Madison Avenue and 91st Street that turns into a wine bar at night. Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times



“I think margins on wine should be reasonable,” Mr. Zabar said. “We’ll make the money on the food we sell.”

Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times

then meets up with a small group that currently includes Mr. Simond; Mr. Restiano; Dan Feldman, the sales director at the importer Skurnik Wines; and Johanne Killeen, a chef and owner at Al Forno in Providence, R.I., whom Mr. Zabar calls “my wine wife.” He also tries to visit a new wine region each year with Mr. Simond.

“Eli is now being perceived by most top producers we visit not just as a collector, but as someone genuinely passionate, curious to learn every detail about their work and also their lives,” Mr. Simond wrote in an email. “And as someone who is doing something that very few people are still trying to achieve today in the wine world, aging the wines in his cellar for sometimes more than a decade before releasing them.”

Aging wine properly is an obsession for Mr. Zabar. It’s one of the reasons he stocks few grand cru Burgundies in his shop, because they need too much time. “I want to sell village wines,” he said. “Others need time, and most people aren’t going to age them.”

The grand crus remain in his cellar until he feels they are ready for his restaurant list, often to be snapped up by the Burgundy lovers who monitor his offerings.

Mr. Zabar came by his obsession with Burgundy in the early 1970s, when he owned a sandwich shop on Nantucket. After a summer season, he took a trip to France, with visits set up by a family friend, Michael Aaron, the proprietor at the time of the Sherry-Lehmann wine shop. He stopped in to see Louis Latour, the head of a venerable négociant house, who took him to a restaurant, Mr. Zabar recalled, redolent of truffles and veal stock.

“I’ve always responded to smells,” he said. “I thought, ‘This is the only place I want to be.’”

Indeed, he sells only wines he likes. He does not stock Bordeaux.

“I’ve never liked Bordeaux — I never liked the cabernet grape,” he said. He said he doesn’t know enough about German wines to sell them, and carries wine from only one American producer, Hermann J. Wiemer of the Finger Lakes, because he loves the riesling.

His attachment to Burgundy, though, runs deep. He sees in the Burgundian vigneron the same obsessive concern with craft and quality that he felt as a young man. “There was a part of me in each bread, each chicken salad I sold,” he said. “In Burgundy, they are invested in a way only somebody who works with their hands can be.”

Though he knows what he likes, Mr. Zabar does not pretend to be a wine connoisseur. He often defers to his associates: Randall Restiano, his wine director, who handles buying wine for the restaurant and shop, and Jean-Emmanuel Simond, a wine importer and consultant in Paris, whom Mr. Zabar credits with a pivotal role in developing his taste.

Every autumn since 2002, Mr. Zabar has traveled to Burgundy and the Piedmont with Mr. Simond, visiting producers and tasting obsessively. A longtime pilot, he flies his own jet, a Cessna Citation CJ4, to Europe and

And so it was with the wine. “I found Burgundy so difficult, so curious,” he said, “and I loved the smells.”

Back in New York, he worked part time at Morrell & Company, a wine shop where another employee introduced him to his personal collection of grand cru Burgundies and impressed upon him the importance of proper aging.

Mr. Zabar began to acquire a lot of wine but said he didn’t start buying in earnest until 2002, when he opened the store and knew that he eventually wanted to open a restaurant. He buys directly from importers, and never from auctions.

“I’m making a living in the food business,” he said. “I didn’t make the wine. It doesn’t have the same value to me as the food we make. I think margins on wine should be reasonable. We’ll make the money on the food we sell.”

Mr. Zabar offers an ample supply of less expensive wines on his list, often hard-to-find bottles from the Loire and the Jura. And he sticks to his ideals: no wines from Bordeaux, Germany or the United States, not even the Wiemer.

“Philosophy gets beaten up by reality,” he said. “But I’m going to do what I want, and there are enough people out there who will appreciate it.”

A Few Good Years, at a Not-Bad Price

The wine list at Eli Zabar’s restaurant Eli’s Table offers many great values; not just expensive older bottles, but moderately priced wines as well. Here are six examples of sparkling, white and red.

Jacques Selosse Champagne Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Brut Initial NV (disgorged Jan. 15, 2013) \$195

A rare cult Champagne producer at a retail price.

Domaine Pierre Morey Meursault Perrières 2001 \$190

Terrific price for a top Meursault from a fine producer.

Domaine André-Michel Brégeon Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie Réserve 2004 \$60

Muscadet ages beautifully; here’s a chance to drink a rare old bottle.

Hubert de Montille Pommard 1er Cru Rugiens 1995 \$295

Exquisitely aged Burgundy from a master.

Castell’in Villa Chianti Classico Riserva 1995 \$250

An object lesson in the beauty of older Chianti.

Patrick Corbineau Touraine Croix Fouchet 2007 \$60

A deliciously old-school Loire red.



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Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times