

# NEW YORK

## How Eli Zabar Transformed an Upper East Side Diner Into an Elegant Wine Bar

By Wendy Goodman



Longtime restaurateur and wine collector Eli Zabar told me that when the Upper East Side Jackson Hole space became available, “I knew that this was the place I wanted to open the wine bar.” The décor of [Eli’s Essentials Wine Bar](#) is inspired by the history of the 1890 building, which houses his cozy café by day, boîte by night. Zabar’s ever-dogged approach to bringing his businesses to life in this case involved hiring the former *New York Times* “Streetscapes” columnist Christopher Gray to research the building’s history. Hence the charm of a wrought-iron railing, repurposed from an old Park Avenue townhouse, that embellishes the new steel staircase on the main floor leading to mezzanine dining and separating the takeout-food counters from the seating area shown here.



Zabar says that he and his wife, Devon Fredericks, trolled French flea markets for the décor and that Fredericks found the Holophane globe lights at a Parisian Porte de Clignancourt market. “I packed them into my plane and flew them over,” Zabar says. “Each one took up a passenger seat.” He enlisted architect [Richard H. Lewis](#) for the renovation and designer David McMurray of [Punch Designer Services](#) for the interiors.



The custom-designed bar downstairs is made of salvaged wood from [Build It Green NYC](#) with a zinc top from France. Gray’s research unearthed the original floor plans from 1920, when the first commercial space went in, and then from 1929, when it was renovated. “This neighborhood was all residential up until around 1920,” Zabar says.



One of the many treasures Zabar and Fredericks found: a bronze, croissant-shaped door pull. The parquet de Versailles floor of the wine bar was made in France from vintage wood.



*Photo: Gabi Porter*

Upstairs, the mezzanine dining area features wrought-iron railings, a painted tin ceiling inspired by the original, and wall panels by artist Steve Keene, who etched his drawings into the wood, then poured in black sand for an inky effect.



*Photo: Gabi Porter*

Along with the wine selection, which includes Zabar's favorites — Domaine de la Citadelle (from Ménerbes in the Luberon, where the Zabars have a house) and Marco de Grazia, a wine that comes from the Mount Etna region of Sicily — there are seasonal small plates including roasted cauliflower, as seen here, as well as soft-shell crabs, local-sweet-corn ravioli, and, for a few more weeks, Jim Pike's Long Island Corn on the Cob.