

Eli's Table Review: Taking Clichés and Making Them Delicious

Eli Zabar's new restaurant is super-expensive, but it also feels like a mini Gramercy Tavern

Tejal Rao
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They make good butter in Normandy, so the butter in front of you is from Normandy. Soft and shiny, it's spread out on the plate so you can drag a bunch of halved raw radishes right through, picking up as much as possible before popping these into your mouth. The thick, crusty bread, however, has not traveled far. It is made just next door, at the kosher bakery.



Eli's Table represents a well-done face lift for Eli Zabar's food empire on the Upper East Side.
Photographer: Zack DeZon/Bloomberg Business

That's because the Eli of Eli's Table on New York's Upper East Side is Eli Zabar, son of Louis Zabar, who founded the New York institution Zabar's on the Upper West Side. Eli Zabar left his family's business in the early 1970s and spent decades building his own empire across Central Park. Now he runs a set of shops, restaurants, and wine bars that stretches all the way to Amagansett, Long Island, where he owns a suitably posh and summery farm stand.

Eli's Table was once Taste, a white-tablecloth joint, but the space has been deeply renovated; it's now genuinely pretty and rustic in a way that doesn't feel *too* put on. The menu is concise and old-fashioned, immune to what's trending, easy to enjoy.

It may be cool to undercook your vegetables, to serve them super crunchy, mid-rare like a steak, but co-chefs John Carr and Monty Garcia of Eli's Table do not do this. Skinny purple carrots have their sheer, wrinkled skins still on, the hairy threads of their root tips still attached, and they're cooked until perfectly tender and sweet. For a bunch of carrots, they really are quite beautiful.



The restaurant serves such conventions as roast chicken with potatoes and ramps, but it makes them with care. Photographer: Zack DeZon/Bloomberg Business

They accompany a pork chop, which was unfortunately dry on a recent evening, though its crust was thick and sweet, and the meat was a touch pink at the bone, as it should be. This was one of the few mistakes I encountered at the restaurant, which takes its food seriously, maintains great taste, and offers warm, confident service.

There were more carrots, gently pickled, over thin slices of veal tongue, cooked until meltingly soft, dressed in a bit of salsa verde. And a textbook-perfect dish of fried sweetbreads, deep golden, well-seasoned, and served piping hot with a couple of caperberries and half a gigantic juicy lemon. One of my favorite concoctions involved a couple of thick slices of crusty bread, grilled with plenty of olive oil and served under a heap of morels cooked with cream and shallots, the king of spring toasts. Parts of the bread had soaked up the juice, others were still crunchy; it was exactly the right thing to snack on with a glass of saison beer, spiked with lemon juice, cider, and calvados.



All the most expensive harbingers of spring are on call, including French white asparagus.
Photographer: Zack DeZon/Bloomberg Business

These are not particularly complicated or creative dishes, but they are done with a lot of care, including that yawn-inducing roast chicken with fingerlings, and the occasional wilted tangle of ramps, which every other diner seems to order. It's a cliché, but it's delicious.



A wobbly panna cotta with poached rhubarb may not be exciting, but it's delicious.
Photographer: Zack DeZon/Bloomberg Business

Desserts can be great, as with the massive but very light banana cream pie, made with a crisp, flaky puff pastry base that's a pleasure to destroy. The pastries are made here, but the dough itself, along with the strudel dough, comes sheeted from Eli Zabar's commissary kitchen on 91st Street. There's the option to order fruit for dessert, which could be a few varieties of esoteric citrus, or just ripe cherries when those start to come in. This seems a great idea, though it does hurt a little to pay \$10 for a bowl of washed fruit, no matter how good.

A two-story market next door is an extension of Carr and Garcia's pantry. They are invited, daily, to raid Eli's Market for their fresh produce and meat (or internationally-sourced delights),

occasionally making requests on orders. You'll find the morels there—they come in from Oregon, though earlier in the season there was a batch from upstate.

I wandered through and allowed myself the luxury of a single flower stem that cost six dollars. I noticed there was no price at all on the white asparagus, wrapped in packs of four, just a note saying that they came from France. (I asked: These babies are currently \$20 a pound). You could just order them at the restaurant upstairs, already prepared for you: Two fat ones for \$20, with a drizzle of sharp, mustard-y vinaigrette and a grated hard-boiled egg.

It's lovely, but it's pricey. This stops no one who goes to dinner at Eli's Table. It made me wonder what people who'll happily pay \$20 for two pieces of asparagus must tell themselves in order to go on. I suppose that when the season ends in a few weeks, the white asparagus will be gone. Can a true cliché be that ephemeral?

Tejal Rao is the New York food critic for Bloomberg. Follow her on Twitter at @tejalrao and Instagram @tejalra or contact her at trao9@bloomberg.net.



Co-chefs John Carr and Monty Garcia run the show.
Photographer: Zack DeZon/Bloomberg Business

Eli's Table is at 1413 3rd Avenue (Upper East Side); +1 (212) 717-9798 or elistablenyc.com

Rating: 2/4 Stars (Very Good)

What to Order: Morels on toast (\$20), Asparagus with ricotta and egg (\$20); Fettucine with peas (\$28); Roast chicken with fingerlings and ramps (\$29); Banana cream pie (\$10); Chocolate tart with caramel ice cream (\$10)

Who's Next to You: A father-daughter duo catching up over oysters and wine; a chic, gray-haired couple, meticulously planning their kitchen renovations; a young Upper East Side couple taking turns pushing the stroller back and forth while they eat.

Need to Know: Eli Zabar started collecting wine seriously in 2002 and has a collection of over 16,000 bottles. This spring, look for crisp Domaine de la Citadelle rosé from Provence, which the restaurant will soon be pouring by the glass. (His new wine bar, Eli's Essentials, opens on Wednesday at 1270 Madison Avenue.)



The fresh pasta dishes change frequently. Recently, there was spring vegetables with crawfish in a simple butter sauce.

Photographer: Zack DeZon/Bloomberg Business