



With Over 42 Years in the Business, Eli Zabar Isn't Slowing Down

by [Beth Landman](#) May 29, 2015



In the past year he's revamped a restaurant and opened a wine bar, and that's not the end of it.

Eli Zabar is dressed in his usual uniform – a pair of khakis and a perfectly pressed white oxford from his shirt maker in Paris, over another perfectly pressed blue oxford shirt – sitting in the balcony of his latest project Eli's Essentials Wine Bar, on upper Madison Avenue. It opened on the bones of a former Jackson Hole outpost, and the transformation is remarkable. The space has been designed and restored to feel like it naturally belongs in the 1890s building. Zabar found a piece of the original tin ceiling and duplicated it, then put in a zinc bar, and little couches to serve as banquettes. The floor is Parquet de Versailles restored outside of Paris. "Those lamps aren't from Restoration Hardware; they are also from France," notes Zabar, who worked with architect Richard Lewis, the same man who helped bring authenticity to many of Keith McNally's places.

"Richard and I have met every single day since 1986 unless one of us is not in town," says Zabar, who also maintained a long friendship with McNally. "I love Keith; we spent a lot of time together. I rented his apartment in Paris once," he recalls. "It was on a tiny street called Rue Coetlogon that intersects with Cherche Midi."

Zabar, who began his career working at his family's legendary market while he was in college, and went out on his own to open his first phenomenally successful EAT in 1973, took the

grocery concept and expanded it to restaurant settings like [Eli's Table](#). "I interpreted tradition, I'm not running a Jewish deli," he explains.

His latest, Eli's Essentials, [opened as a café](#) in February and [expanded to a wine bar](#) in late April. Like McNally, he's a Francophile, and all wine on his list is old world.

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"This place took a year to build. It's been my dream and is the culmination of everything I love," he says. "We practiced first on friends and neighbors," among whom were actor couple Kevin Kline and Phoebe Cates. The response was so good, that he is already at work on a space at 79th and 3rd in which he plans a similar concept, focusing more on beer.

"We arguably have the best resources," maintains Zabar as he bites into a bright green crostini made with peas that seem to have been picked earlier that day and covered with mizuna, baby arugulam and mustard greens. Next to that sits a plate of tomatoes with exceptionally creamy burrata, a dish of plump white asparagus, and a bowl of vegetable, beef, and barley soup. "We grew the tomatoes and made the cheese," he notes. "We grow our own carrots lettuces and figs around the corner in a greenhouse on 91st Street, and I have a forager in San Francisco who sends us organic vegetables. The idea here is to take a menu like the one at [Eli's Table](#), but make it for sharing. This place is compact, but everything that I want or you should want is here."

Apart from harvesting his own produce, Zabar bakes his own bread, and has his own commissary where the linens are done. That sweet aroma wafting from downstairs emanates from the pastry shop below. In an ecologically conscious set-up, the heat from huge ovens that turn out brownies and rugelach is pumped into his greenhouses.



Daniel Krieger

Now married with 23-year-old twin boys, Zabar has mellowed since his early days. "I used to throw out people left and right," he recalls. "Once I threw out the wife of Ed Kosner, who was editor of *New York Magazine*. The writers weren't allowed to mention me for years."

He makes the daily rounds of his establishments. "I love getting up every morning to do this, visiting the different things I do," he smiles. "Something brings me to every one." All except one, that is, because he still has his feisty moments.

"I haven't been to Eli's Bread and Pastry in Grand Central because it's dark and the kale and lettuce looks like a black hole," he says. "Metro North didn't do their homework. They put lights on top with bulbs that burned out and you can't get those bulbs anymore. It's a bit of red tape, but until I get that lighting right I am boycotting it."