

HOME & GARDEN

## AT WORK WITH: Eli Zabar; A New Hero for 'Waste Not, Want Not'

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Published: December 22, 1993



NEW YORKERS love a love-hate relationship, and with Eli Zabar, they have their man. At his E.A.T. on Madison Avenue, shoppers are cordially invited to spend \$3 on one brownie, \$7 on one hallah, \$12 on one chicken salad sandwich. But if they stop complaining long enough to get the object of their disaffection into their mouths -- especially the bread, Eli's bread, which in the last few years has transformed the staff of life in this town -- the outrage inevitably gives way to a rush of warm, mushy adjectives. They'll hate him in the morning.

At 50, Mr. Zabar's bad-boy image persists, only now, everyone else wants lessons. The baby brother of Stanley and Saul Zabar, (61 and 66 respectively) the owners with Murray Klein of Zabar's on Broadway, Eli was always the renegade. Manners? Nah. He repeatedly told the press how rotten his competitors were, threw Giorgio DeLuca of Dean & DeLuca out of E.A.T., accusing him of spying for information on importers. And when his brothers offered him a job on the night shift at Zabar's after he asked to be a partner, he flat out quit and never looked back. Saul Zabar says: "I think he made the right choice. Both sides of the family have been successful, West Side and East Side. There's no jealousy. I think he's more up-front than the rest of us. That's his nature."

Mr. Zabar agrees. "I just have a fairly strong sense of what I don't want," he says. "I don't like a lot of dishonesty in anything, food or people. I'm pretty black and white."

As is Mr. DeLuca. "It is totally preposterous to say I was spying and I absolutely and categorically deny it," he says heatedly. "I never needed him for any resource at any time. He flatters himself."

Despite Mr. Zabar's fears, E.A.T., a combination of takeout delicatessen and prepared foods and eat-in cafe, is

going strong at 20 years old, still boasting long lines at Sunday brunch (“I would never stand in line to get in here or anywhere,” Mr. Zabar snorts).

Then there’s Eli’s bread. Mr. Zabar supplies 1,000 restaurants, hotels and stores, mostly in Manhattan -- using 240,000 pounds of dough each week for 22 varieties -- everywhere from the Hotel Macklowe to Montrachet, from the commissary at Mount Sinai Hospital to the Barefoot Contessa in East Hampton, L.I. No Corian counter or Sub-Zero refrigerator in Manhattan is truly accessorized without an Eli’s bag from Fairway, Balducci’s, Zabar’s or Grace’s Marketplace.

And this week is the first of full operations at Eli’s at the Vinegar Factory, a marketplace concept, as Mr. Zabar calls it, which he owns with a wholesaler, Gourmet Garage. Located on 91st Street between York and First avenues, on the site of a mustard and vinegar factory that stopped production only last week, it sells cut-rate fancy foods (chevre and chanterelles), Eli’s bread at 20 percent above wholesale (down from the usual 50 percent markup), and prepared foods. A 70-seat cafe is to open in February with a roof garden to follow; a bagel factory will also open on the premises. The marketplace concept is the ultimate in recycling, Mr. Zabar emphasizes. Unsold products get cooked and find new shelf life as prepared foods.

Well, his timing is impeccable. As much as E.A.T. and its high-priced treats stood poised for the 80’s, the home cooking of recycled foods at Eli’s at the Vinegar Factory is genius for the 90’s. As he will be the first to tell you: “In many ways I’ve been prescient.”

As Mr. Zabar leaves for work through the front door of his town house in the Carnegie Hill section of Manhattan, he looks like a candidate for the service entrance. He wears two shirts, a down vest, corduroys, sneakers and a gray knitted cap, and carries a ragged E.A.T. shopping bag (“my attache case”) filled with newspapers, notes and his Filofax. Scribbled on one side of the bag is a recipe for shortbread: 8 pounds butter, 4 pounds sugar, 11 pounds flour.

His first stop is the vinegar factory, open seven days a week from 9 A.M. to 8 P.M. Mr. Zabar doesn’t walk as much as he charges. He doesn’t converse as much as think out loud. “I have to get some more firewood for the pizza oven,” is his response to “How are you?” His mind spins. Whatever an employee is thinking, he thought it first.

In the kitchen at the back of the factory, racks of chocolate chip cookies are baking for the caterer David Ziff, while baskets of tomatoes are being cut for sauce. Day-old focaccia is turned into the addictive Parmesan toast, and loaves of brioche are drying for bread pudding. Muffins and cakes are also drying, to be ground back into crumbs, mixed with nuts, butter and sugar to find new life as streusel toppings and fillings.

“We do a lot of recycling through pizza,” Mr. Zabar says. “Tomato sauce, mushrooms and lots of cheese trimmings, Parmesan and provolone, to go with the mozzarella. Yesterday we made 100 broccoli rape pizzas. They were fantastic, like the pizza you got in Brooklyn in a brick oven when I was growing up -- floppy and doughy, and each one a little bit different.” He rubs his hands while he speaks, but he’s not just relishing an idea. Even in the kitchen, it’s cold.

Mr. Zabar points out one chef, Scott Appell, peeling apples. “He works only for me,” Mr. Zabar proclaims.

“Lucky me,” Mr. Appell retorts. Unfazed, Mr. Zabar says, “Scott will develop ideas oriented to fruit left over from Gourmet Garage and what we’ll do with it.”

Maybe the customers won’t want fruit. Then what? “I never cook for anyone except me,” he says loudly, feet planted. “I have a very clear idea of what I don’t want, and I know what I do want. If it tastes good to me, I’m sure

it will satisfy other people.”

All eyes in the kitchen are down, concentrating on knives and peelers. It is one of life’s little ironies that this man, who feeds tout Manhattan, excels at giving stomachaches. He’s behaving, on the whole, quite politely in front of company, but remains unyielding when faced with any little thing he doesn’t want. You see the real story by watching the employees’ choreography as they speak to him: tap dances with bright smiles, slow-paced shuffles with hunched shoulders, shallow plies while walking backward. They start out coming close, then question their direction.

Having exhausted the staff at the vinegar factory, at least for now, Mr. Zabar heads down 91st Street to his bread factory -- a former laundry -- which he opened a year ago. He employs 70 people there, 30 at the vinegar factory and another 60 at E.A.T. There’s also E.A.T. Gifts in a shop next door on Madison Avenue. Mr. Zabar will not divulge his various companies’s earnings as they are all privately held.

A huge vat of dough for brioche is being mixed automatically and the butter smells sweet. Where does he sell them? “You mean those little things?” he asks. “I have no patience with those. I make it in loaves or use it for hamburger rolls.” He walks over to a vat of sourdough that’s rising, feeling it with the pads of his fingers, nudging it with his palm, like someone’s soft shoulder.

Moving on to E.A.T., he is stopped by an elderly woman in a raccoon coat. “Is the bread as fresh at the other place?” she demands, knowing it is sold at the vinegar factory for less. “Yes, sure,” he says. “The idea there is for people who don’t buy it every day. A lot of it freezes very well.”

Devon Fredericks, Mr. Zabar’s wife and the chief executive of E.A.T., approaches. When the store first opened there was much publicity about its name, that the letters really stood for Eli and Abby Together, referring to Mr. Zabar’s former wife. It must feel now like an unfortunate tattoo. “It never meant Eli and Abby Together,” Mr. Zabar insists. “It was just a play on words.”

Ms. Fredericks has a placid manner and a huge braid. Mr. Zabar has been in the store for all of three minutes, but has already seen enough to displease him mightily. He pulls her aside and starts a litany in her ear about an employee answering the phone who shouldn’t, why certain foods should not be displayed certain ways, and more. She nods and breathes, nods and breathes, until he runs out of breath. She handles him.

Finally settling at a table in the back, he pulls out a picture of his twin sons, Sasha and Oliver, who are almost 3. They sit behind a huge bowl of dough, making bread.

Mr. Zabar spent his own childhood on the Upper West Side in an apartment on Riverside Drive near Zabar’s, which his father, Louis, founded. He went from yeshiva to Public School 9 to Fieldston. “I was not a very good student,” he admits. “I don’t learn easily from books. I learn well by doing, which requires a certain kind of focus. I always say I do things better the second time around, though I have a certain inability to do things twice the same way. The people who work for me can. The business couldn’t exist if I were the kind of employee I have.”

He attended Hobart College and graduated from Columbia University in 1967. To get a draft deferment, he enrolled at Columbia Business School, and when that deferment was eliminated, changed to education. He taught gym and third grade at a public school in Harlem.

But he couldn’t resist the food business. He ran a restaurant on Nantucket for a year (where he still has a home) and spent brief stints at food and wine businesses in New York. “When I was coming into the job market, Zabar’s was still a small operation,” he says. “They hadn’t figured their direction. There was not a place for me. It’s not that they didn’t want me. So, do you get the distinction? They were working out their relationship.”

How about now? There have been numerous articles about the animosity between his brothers and Mr. Klein. Would he take the store over himself? “Zabar’s is not what I want to do,” he says. “My goal with the vinegar factory, which has interested me forever, is volume. I like the idea of using things in a good way, which is one of the reasons why working with leftovers excites me. If the ingredients aren’t good at the beginning they won’t be good at the end. The focaccia is wonderful, but when it’s turned into Parmesan toast the second use is even better than the first.

“That’s what’s good about doing things twice. Most people don’t give themselves the opportunity. They decorate their home once and never again.”

When Mr. Zabar is not working, which is almost never, he tends his antique Cessna plane and flies a twin-engine plane not only for fun, but on business. He spends some of each summer at his house in Provence, where he conducts his love affair with the marketplace full time. He rarely eats out in New York, but for a steak he goes to Gallagher’s, where they let him pick his own. He remains close with his brothers and his mother, who still lives on the Upper West Side and shops at Zabar’s.

Mr. Zabar’s attentions are now turning toward Union Square. He is talking with ABC Carpet and Home about 14,000 square feet of space it recently acquired so he can start another market.

“I want to expand the idea of cooking the market, making large quantities for very large outlets,” he says. “And I like the idea of being big enough to be my own best customer, buying my own products because it gives me more control.”

He says he can sell in volume because he keeps the quality of his merchandise high, and his customer knows it. “I used to get negative publicity that people bought things from me because they were expensive, that they wanted to make an ostentatious show,” he says. “That is so wrong. It’s very easy to make fun of the price and most journalists don’t want to work too hard.”

“I just have my own point of view,” Mr. Zabar continues. “I may have been less tolerant when I was younger and finding my own voice. But I think I’ve been lucky to make a living doing what I want to do for me. I’ve had so much trouble working with other people.” He looks around the cafe, steadily filling with customers for lunch.

“I always wish things were fixed,” he says, “but then I’m constantly changing them.”