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Eli Zabar

Stefano Giovannini



Eli Zabar's gourmet-food legacy started with a fight.

"I had been doing business with a small Italian bakery up here," says Zabar, the youngest son of Louis and Lillian Zabar of Upper West Side Jewish supermarket fame. "The son took over and didn't give a s - - t. The bread was getting worse and worse.

"One day I threw it back and said, 'Take your goddamn bread and get out of here.'"

It was the early '80s, shortly after Eli had branched out from the family supermarket biz to open E.A.T. cafe and market across town.

Since then, he's launched more than a dozen restaurants and markets, including the famed Eli's Manhattan, all on the Upper East Side, where Zabar lives with his wife and

two dogs.

He makes daily rounds at the businesses, fueled by lukewarm coffee made from beans roasted just so.

On all matters of taste, Zabar says no one can match his expertise. "My job is to tell people what they should like," he says. "How could anyone know as much as I do about something like smoked salmon? I'm not saying this arrogantly. I'm saying: 'If you're not a doctor, how could you know anything about heart surgery?'"

Deliveries must pass muster, or a verbal lashing ensues.

"Food will come in that is just unacceptable," he says. "I tell my managers to call up the vendors and tell them, 'Get this piece of s - - t out of here!'" —Steussy