

Luxury Takes a Page From Frugality

By [ALEX WITCHEL](#) JAN. 27, 2009

I'VE been obsessed with waste lately, convinced I'll go to the poorhouse if I don't clean my plate. A constant refrain of "times is hard" from "Sweeney Todd" plays in my head. That's Stephen Sondheim's musical about a murderous barber in Victorian London. Once he joins forces with the proprietress of a local pie shop, the show becomes an unwitting paean to the ultimate leftover — meat pies made with (yes!) his customers.

O.K., times isn't that hard — yet. But when I unearthed some three-week-old spaghetti with pesto from the back of my refrigerator, I said, "Enough!"

As I dumped it, a vision appeared before me: [Eli Zabar](#). Granted, not exactly a vision of frugality. In New York, he is the Jekyll and Hyde of gourmet food; at E.A.T., his signature cafe on Madison Avenue at 82nd Street, the chicken salad sandwich costs \$18, the brownie \$5 and no one blinks, least of all Mr. Zabar.

But at his stores, the high-end Eli's Manhattan and the somewhat less pricey Vinegar Factory, both on the Upper East Side, he has established himself as a master of recycling, giving unsold products new life by reinventing them as prepared foods. Focaccia becomes Parmesan toast which becomes Caesar Salad Crunch.



Unsold jelly doughnuts become a pudding at Eli's Manhattan.
Credit Evan Sung for The New York Times

As early as 1993, when I interviewed him on the occasion of the Vinegar Factory's opening (the headline was "A New Hero for 'Waste Not, Want Not' ") Mr. Zabar was touting his philosophy that it's not enough to use a leftover to create a new dish. It has to be even better than it was originally. In that spirit of resurrection, I figured he was the perfect person to talk me down from meat-pie madness.

It turns out that resurrection, the culinary kind, at least, is labor intensive and no bargain. On the day after Christmas, I met Mr. Zabar at Eli's Manhattan, where he charges \$24.99 for eight ounces of that Parmesan toast and \$7.95 for a nine-ounce bag of Caesar Salad Crunch. Talking to Mr. Zabar about his prices feels like confronting a teenager coming in past curfew: his cornered tone hovers between "How dare you" and "How am I going to get out of this."

"That Crunch is 70 percent Parmesan [cheese](#)," Mr. Zabar said, "which is \$14 or \$15 a pound. You couldn't buy it and make it for that money. You sprinkle cheese on toast and 10 percent of it ends up on the tray."

O.K., O.K. I was hearing this on a tour through the store, which was unsurprisingly empty. Much of the Upper East Side had fled a week earlier to lick its wounds and take inventory of any remaining blessings. "A lot of customers made a point of telling me they did *not* invest with Madoff," Mr. Zabar said.

Even so, sales at E.A.T. have fallen about 10 percent, he said. Still, he remains unrepentant about its prices.

"Everything there is more delicious," he said. "I opened it in 1973, it's my original baby and the result of endless experimentation, heartache, successes, failures and pain. You don't want the prices, there are other places to go. I've always known I'm not for the mass market."

He says that business at Eli's Manhattan is also down 10 percent. "That's a big number," he said. "I've never been down anything. We have a lot of private chefs who shop here, but people who entertain are doing less entertaining."

We arrived in the bakery department, where there's a "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" abundance. Among the packed shelves are three types of [coffee](#) cake, pans of sticky buns, stacks of dark- or milk-chocolate-covered graham crackers — and Mr. Zabar's famous jelly doughnuts. Each one is tall, powder white and spotlight ready at \$3 a pop (at E.A.T. the same ones are \$4). I have ogled them for years, the way I ogle diamonds at Tiffany's, and have never, ever eaten one. (Reader, I am too cheap.)

On this day, it was right after [Hanukkah](#), when doughnuts, being fried in oil, were in the spotlight. I noticed a stack of unsold boxes as Mr. Zabar led me to the kitchen. There, in addition to bread [pudding](#) made with leftover challah, they also make jelly doughnut pudding. He cut me a generous wedge to take home.

It was a triumph. When it was warm, it tasted like pie, a sweet, fresh fruit pie, which left raspberry seeds in my teeth. (Mr. Zabar uses his own jam, made out of leftover raspberries.) After it sat in the refrigerator for a few hours I tried it again. This time it tasted like [ice cream](#). No matter how good those doughnuts might have been, even fresh out of the fryer, they could never have had the nuance of this dish. At \$8.95 a pound, it's worth every penny.

You certainly don't need Mr. Zabar's doughnuts to make the pudding yourself. Any will do. And what ingredient can't be improved by adding heavy cream, whole milk and eggs?

As my grandmother would say in times like these: “Eat something! You need your strength.”

Recipe: Jelly Doughnut Pudding Adapted from Eli Zabar

Time: About 2 1/2 hours

3 1/2 cups heavy cream, at room temperature

1 1/2 cups whole milk, at room temperature

1 1/2 cups plus 2 tablespoons sugar

8 large eggs

4 large egg yolks

1 tablespoon vanilla extract

14 jelly doughnuts, preferably filled with raspberry jam

Butter, for greasing pan.

1. Heat oven to 325 degrees. Fill a kettle with water and place over high heat to bring to a boil. In a large mixing bowl, combine cream, milk, 1 1/2 cups sugar, eggs, egg yolks and vanilla. Whisk to blend.

2. Using a serrated knife, gently slice doughnuts from top to bottom in 1/4-inch slices. Butter a 9-by-12-inch baking pan and sprinkle with 1 tablespoon sugar. Pour about 1/2 inch of the cream mixture into pan. Arrange a layer of sliced doughnuts in pan, overlapping them slightly. Top with another layer, pressing them down slightly to moisten them. Top with a small amount of cream mixture.

3. Arrange 2 more layers of sliced doughnuts, and pour remaining liquid evenly over top. Press down gently to moisten. Sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon sugar. Cover pan tightly with foil, and place in a larger pan. Fill larger pan with boiling water until three-quarters up the side of pudding pan.

4. Bake for 1 hour 50 minutes. Remove foil and continue to bake until top is golden brown, about 15 minutes. Turn off oven, open door slightly, and leave in oven for an additional 10 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Yield: 8 to 10 servings.