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What to Eat and Drink, According to Eli Zabar

New York restaurateur knows what you should be consuming, and he won't hesitate to tel



Eli Zabar, right, at his new wine bar Eli's Essentials in Manhattan. PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By **LETTIE TEAGUE**

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Eli Zabar knows what New Yorkers should be eating and drinking and he's happy to offer them (in person) advice. In fact, Mr. Zabar plans to be a regular presence at his newly opened wine bar, Eli's Essentials, on Madison Avenue and 91st Street in Manhattan. After all, he pointed out, "I live around the corner."

Mr. Zabar and I were sitting at the ground floor bar of Eli's Essentials earlier this week discussing his latest venture as well as his philosophy about wine. The latter has a number of components, of which the most important may be drinking wine at point of perfect maturity. "People drink wine far too young," Mr. Zabar said—over and over again.

The ground floor of Eli's Essentials is a breakfast and lunch cafe until 5:30 p.m., at which point it turns into a wine bar. That's also the time when the restaurant's second-floor space, which is dedicated to the wine bar, opens for business.

Although the wine bar debuted just a few days ago, the cafe has been open for several months and is already a favorite among neighborhood children and moms said Mr. Zabar. As if on cue, a baby began wailing in the background as Mr. Zabar made this observation. “Give that baby a glass of wine,” he said, sotto voce.

The New York-born Mr. Zabar is a well-known—even iconic—presence on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. In addition to Eli’s Essentials (the former and much-beloved Jackson Hole burger joint), he owns E.A.T on Madison, Eli’s Vinegar Factory on 91st Street, Eli’s Table restaurant and Eli’s List, both on Third Avenue.

While he earned his fame and fortune in the food business, Mr. Zabar is equally passionate about wine—in fact, over a period of decades he has managed to amass a collection of some 16,000 bottles. And yes, he wants to make sure they are consumed at exactly the right time.

Mr. Zabar is determined that no one at Eli’s Essentials will drink a wine that isn’t at its prime, and he says he would rather not sell them wine at all if it isn’t at its absolute peak. Fortunately, he has a team—with wine director Randall Restiano at the helm—devoted to making sure the list is well-stocked with such wines.

Mr. Zabar also wants to make sure the wines match the food. “I will control what you eat and drink,” Mr. Zabar said at one point, a declaration I considered mere rhetorical flourish until I tried to order the Pecorino and black pepper Arancini balls, one of the many items on the wine bar’s small-plates menu.

What wine did I plan to pair with them? Mr. Zabar wanted to know. Happily he approved of my selection of the 2012 Moreau Naudet Chablis Vieilles Vignes at \$16 a glass, a terrifically bright, minerally white.

The Chablis is one of a number of excellent wines-by-the-glass selections on the short all-European Eli’s Essentials wine list. Other terrific choices include a savory 2010 Jayer Gilles Hautes Cotes de Nuits (\$18), a red Burgundy that I paired with an excellent cumin-infused lamb slider. The latter was so generously proportioned that I ate it in several parts—much to the consternation of Mr. Zabar, who told me, “You’re not eating that right.” (At least he approved of the food-and-wine combination.)



A wine case at Eli’s Essentials in Manhattan. PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Zabar is keen on the wines of Europe (particularly those from France, where he has a second home) and the Eli's Essentials wine list reflects his passion. He doesn't care much for New World wines from countries like the U.S., Argentina and New Zealand, so no New World wines appear, with the exception of the Hermann J. Wiemer Riesling, from New York's Finger Lakes region (available by the glass and in magnum—\$10 and \$70, respectively). "It's a very good Riesling," said Mr. Zabar.

Mr. Zabar doesn't like the Cabernet Sauvignon grape at all either—there isn't a Cabernet on the list—despite the fact that his neighborhood is, according to Mr. Zabar, a "Cabernet and Merlot quartier." The only Cabernets that Mr. Zabar owns are two bottles of an old first-growth Bordeaux that he received as a present from Sting. Did he have any of Sting's wines on his list? (Sting makes wine in Tuscany.) He did not, although Mr. Zabar does sell Sting's olive oil and pronounced it "quite good."

In addition to making sure people drink wine at the right time with the right food, Mr. Zabar wants to ensure that they don't pay too much. The wine prices in New York restaurants are far too high, in his opinion. "We're just choosing the wine, we're not making it," he pointed out.

Food prices are another matter. "I believe I'm entitled to charge whatever I want for food, we're making it into something special," he said.

Wines at Eli's Essentials range from the \$40s to over \$400 and Mr. Zabar says most are priced at 2 or 2 1/2 times their wholesale cost. Many New York restaurants charge four times the wholesale price and some even more.

Savvy drinkers (who also eschew Cabernet Sauvignon and wines from the New World) will be pleased by the thought and care that has gone into the wine list—not to mention the wine bar—and they might even receive a bit of guidance from Mr. Zabar himself.