

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

All in the Family

at New York City Restaurants

Veteran restaurateurs enlist their children
to modernize older businesses



Oliver and Eli Zabar at Eli's Night Shift, their new craft-beer spot on the Upper East Side. 'This is a younger generation thing,' said Eli Zabar of enlisting his son to help with the business.

PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By
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Dec. 1, 2015

When the veteran restaurateur and market owner Eli Zabar started thinking about opening Eli's Night Shift, a craft beer-centric bar on the Upper East Side, he worried that he didn't know enough about the brews or the young clientele he hoped to attract.

Then the 72-year-old realized he knew someone who did: his 24-year-old son, Oliver.

"This is a younger generation thing," said Eli Zabar, who admitted he is more of a wine drinker. He added that he was similarly stumped as to what 20-somethings want to eat.

A telling example of the generational disconnect: When the two Zabars were coming up with the bar's food menu, Oliver noted it was heavy on meat and pushed for a kale salad.

"I said, 'Eh,'" Eli Zabar said, but he ultimately relented.

Now, his son said, "it's probably one of our most popular items."

As the younger Zabar takes the reins, similar transitions are occurring at many of New York's family-run food establishments. Second, third and fourth generations of family members are often bringing new approaches to these decades-old businesses, seeking to keep up with a fast-changing industry and customer tastes.



Jeremy Schaller at Schaller's Stube, the new street sausage spot he opened next to Schaller & Weber. PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

At [Schaller & Weber](#), founded on the East Side in 1937, third-generation owner Jeremy Schaller, 37, has added an adjoining restaurant and takeout window specializing in sausage sandwiches. He has also expanded the German butcher shop's offerings well beyond wurst to include Alpine cheeses and German beers, and he plans to open a modest beer hall on-site as well. His biggest achievement, however, may be rearranging the unflattering window displays.

"There was no one under 60 years old shopping here. It was like walking into a time capsule," he said, adding that all his changes resulted in an influx of younger customers.

Russ & Daughters, which has been selling smoked fish and other specialty foods on the Lower East Side since 1914, is now operated by its fourth-generation proprietors, Niki Russ Federman, 38, and Joshua Russ Tepper, 41. Last year, the cousins opened a [Russ & Daughters Cafe](#) a few blocks from the store, maintaining an emphasis on fish but with nods to the neighborhood's increasingly hip sensibility, such as a cocktail list that includes \$12 drinks like the Schmoozer with rye, aquavit and bitters.

Similarly, at the Nom Wah Tea Parlor in Chinatown, second-generation owner Wilson Tang, 37, insisted upon offering beer and wine when he revamped the dim sum restaurant's menu.

Mr. Tang took over from his uncle a few years ago and has since opened a second Nom Wah in Philadelphia. Among the other changes he made: adding pictures and descriptions to the menu.

"It's more approachable," he said of his philosophy.

In these and other family businesses, the plan hasn't always been for the next generation to take over. The opposite has often held true, since the food business hasn't traditionally been viewed in the same league as such white-collar fields as law, medicine or finance.



Jake Dell, now the third-generation owner of Katz's Delicatessen, is helping the restaurant expand to Brooklyn. *PHOTO: CASSANDRA GIRALDO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“I had no plan of them taking it over,” said Alan Dell, a second-generation owner of Katz's Delicatessen on the Lower East Side.

Yet some descendants have embraced the food business, seeing it as a potentially lucrative, high-profile and even sexy profession.

Jake Dell, now the third-generation owner of Katz's, was set to begin medical school a few years ago, when he decided instead to try out the family business.

“I said, ‘What the hell am I doing? I love this place. I love the history. I love the tradition,’ ” the 28-year-old said. He is now helping the restaurant expand to Brooklyn, where it is expected to open next year within the still-under-construction Dekalb Market Hall in the borough's downtown area.

He is also helping Katz grow its e-commerce business, where it sells some of its signature deli foods like sliced pastrami and pickles.

It isn't always easy for the younger generation to bring its perspective to the family business.

“If I listened to my father and uncle, we’d have our restaurant in Brooklyn and that would be the extent of it,” said Alan Rosen, 46, one of the next-generation owners of Junior’s, the downtown Brooklyn restaurant best known for its cheesecake.

Under Mr. Rosen’s watch over the past several years, Junior’s has opened restaurants in Manhattan and Connecticut, as well as mail-order and wholesale businesses. Sales have increased about tenfold over the last 25 years to \$70 million, Mr. Rosen said.

Not every youthful initiative succeeds. Buoyed by his success at Junior’s, Mr. Rosen opened his own Manhattan East Side restaurant in 2013, an American grill called Enduro, only to watch it fail in about a year.

After losing several million dollars, he said, “it was an expensive lesson.”

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Corrections & Amplifications

Eli’s Night Shift is the name of the new craft beer-centric bar opened by the Zabar family. A photo caption in an earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the bar as Eli’s Late Shift.