

edible

MANHATTAN

Celebrating Gotham's Food Culture, Season by Season



As seen in the *January 2009 Issue*

ROOTS

THE BROTHERS ZABAR

How a family of prescient purveyors anticipated America's gourmet revolution.

BY GERALDINE PLUENNEKE

Back when the Beatles's "Let It Be" first filled the airwaves, it was unheard of to walk into a Jewish deli and buy a little round of Saint-André—the cheese was difficult for a New Yorker to find outside Lutèce. There were no bottles of balsamic vinegar, no French-press coffeemakers, no mesclun mix, no American farmstead cheeses—anywhere. And while you might find extra-virgin olive oil in, say, an Italian grocery in Hell's Kitchen, and the rare bodega might carry cilantro, both were virtually unknown.

But a 22-foot-wide Jewish "appetizing" store on Broadway and 80th specializing in superior smoked fish and decent coffee beans was poised to introduce New York to the then-mysterious ingredients and equipment that now stock nearly every city kitchen. The family behind the tiny store would soon become one of the most influential food retailers in the city, spawning not one but two epicurean empires, straddling Central Park. As they did, Manhattan mortals first tasting radicchio and chèvre began to see the Zabar brothers as godly figures on a food Mount Olympus hurling down lightning bolts of sun-dried tomatoes, sturgeon caviar and potato gnocchi.

Today Zabar's is a New York institution, throbbing with customers—40,000 a week, spending \$50 million a year on 800 varieties of cheeses, 400,000 pounds of coffee, nearly 300 different prepared foods made by a kitchen staff of 39. The little-shop-that-could now covers more than 20,000 square feet—almost the entire block. If you read of a gourmet mustard, a black Hawaiian salt, anything new, odds are you'll find it among the thousands of edibles stocked here. There are mountain ranges of olives, breads, jams, desserts, pastas, sauces and racks of high-octane chocolate at each register. True to founder Louis Zabar's lox legacy, if you fancy smoked salmon you may choose from Nova, double-smoked Nova, pickled lox, salty belly lox, gravlax, hot-smoked kippered salmon, Scottish-cured salmon or even pastrami salmon, some of the 2,000 pounds sold each week.

Globetrotting Begets Gastronomy

The seeds were planted back in 1934 when Louis Zabar opened a tiny store at 80th Street where his three young sons would watch him inspect every batch of fish the way he'd watched his own father scrutinize his stock of nuts and dried fruit in Ostropolia, a shtetl in the Ukraine. When Louis died in 1950 at the age of 49, his youngest son, Eli, was entering the second grade, and his middle son, Stanley,

was at Wharton, so his oldest son, Saul, then a bored 21-year-old college dropout, took over the business to help out his mother, Lillian. He didn't intend to stay. Today, 80, he's still company president.

"We had a modest amount of success," Saul recalls of those years. But business would soon skyrocket, thanks in large part to a man named Murray Klein who came aboard in the early '60s. Klein, who once smuggled arms to what would become Israel, escaped from a Russian prison and later landed in an Italian refugee camp, began work at Zabar's sweeping floors. He'd go on to become a managing partner, and—buying out Lillian's share—co-owner. Klein brought a sixth sense for the shifting sands of consumer demand. Looking back, Saul says globetrotting begat gastronomy, explaining that after the war, "as people began to travel there was a groundswell of interest in foods they'd tasted abroad."

Their brilliance "lay in the realization that ghettoized Jewish and Italian foods could appeal to everyone," says Kamp.

Sociologist Harvey Levenstein observed this phenomenon in his 1993 book *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in America*, explaining that travel "stimulate[d] a growing cosmopolitanism, which made people receptive to foreign foods in general. Many thousands of Americans returned from abroad with their gustatory horizons expanded." The number of Americans vacationing overseas each year tripled in the 1960s, spawning a gourmet snobbery as conspicuous consumption of exotic eats, from croissants to couscous, became the latest status symbol. The *Times's* Craig Claiborne remarked that suddenly "people were dying to become the first ones to discover where to buy fresh basil."

Zabar's responded, cramming shelves with olive oils, vinegars, mustards, cheeses and pastas, then the pots and pans to cook them in.

"They understood trends before a lot of others did," reflects *New York Times* food and wine columnist Florence Fabricant.

David Kamp, an editor at *Vanity Fair* and author of *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation*, says the Zabars brothers' brilliance lay in the realization that ghettoized Jewish and Italian foods could appeal to everyone along with European imports.

Cover Photo: Manhattan's market moguls. Saul and Eli Zabar in Central Park, which their epicurean empires straddle.



And when competitors like Macy's, Fairway and Citarella entered the ring, Zabar's was nimble, slashing prices and moving housewares—already bringing in a million dollars a year—to a new mezzanine. “They would not be undersold,” Fabricant says, recalling the days when customers lined up to buy the new and deeply discounted Cuisinart food processors.

The store filled with a clientele mix as varied as its smoked fish, from celebrities like Woody Allen and Itzhak Perlman to housewives from New Jersey. Kamp says Zabar's became a magnet for “a more worldly, affluent, educated, Upper West Side intellectual, New Yorker—reading, PBS-tote-bag-toting shopper.”

Eli Moves East

Despite their wild success, the Zabar brothers approached change differently. “Saul was willing to take baby steps in a different di-

rection,” says Kamp, “whereas Eli was ready to run.” He muses that the brothers' differing childhoods helped shape them. “Eli's brothers had a significantly more middle-class to working-class upbringing,” he says. “Eli's the first to tell you that maybe he was a little bit of an entitled brat, maybe...a little abrasive.”

He'd fallen hard for French foods on a post-high-school biking trip in Provence (“We'd buy a baguette and a Camembert and picnic in the fields, eat in little restaurants,” he recalls, sounding like Alice Waters describing those fraises des bois she tasted on a college trip to France, forever changing her palate, and America's). Eli was ready for Zabar's, but was Zabar's ready for him?

He attended Columbia by day and worked as Zabar's night shift manager, but his older brothers denied his request to be made partner. (“Eli was never rejected,” corrects Saul. “He was told it was not available at an entry level.”) Ready for something bigger,

Eli set out to conquer new territory.

“I got a job at a grocery wholesaler and they said ‘You can go out one day a week and try to pick up some accounts.’” With unerring instinct, Eli began working the accounts the full-time salesmen rejected. Soon he was developing a prime larder of contacts, chefs, restaurant owners, sources.

He committed the sources to memory and before long began placing orders for his own enterprise—launching what would be come an Upper East Side epicurean empire, and fueling decades of chatter of a family feud.

In 1973 he staked his territory by opening E.A.T. (reportedly for “Eli Abbie Together”, though they’ve long since divorced) at Madison and 80th Street, a deli fashioned after “Justin de Blank’s Elizabeth Street London store with NY deli influence.” From the start he curated an eater’s delight, down to the most coveted and exquisite raw-milk cheeses in the city. E.A.T. was a smash hit garnering rave reviews, Eli’s first victory. “He inherited the ahead-of-his-time gene,” says Fabricant.

Of the widely perceived schism, Eli demurs these decades later: “It’s easy [for people] to think that, when one brother goes off to do something by himself. I don’t think that existed. The truth is, when I was ready to go to work their business was extremely small and there wasn’t room, wasn’t opportunity for me.”

Stanley, the seldom-seen brother who has kept Zabar’s finances straight since 1952, also denies a rift. “I acted as Eli’s surrogate father. Eli has always wanted to be able to control his own destiny and he’s always enjoyed the East Side. Whereas we always had more of the social ethic of the West Side.”

Kamp offers another reason: “Eli said, ‘I want to open on the Upper East Side because I love the way the women smell.’”

E.A.T. was just the beginning. Eli added an outpost at Henri Bendel’s, then leased space for a store at Madison and 72nd. He’d barely settled in before Ralph Lauren arrived, converting the whole building, and bought Eli’s lease out. “For \$3 million,” recalls Saul.

“No,” Eli smiles the next day, “for much more.” Eli used the money to buy an old vinegar factory at 91st and York where he would develop a market, café and commercial bakery, and later 20,000 square feet of rooftop greenhouses. Next came Eli’s Manhattan on Third Avenue at 80th, offering a café plus wine, flowers and food market. Today his Manhattan retail stores and bakery cover 60,000 square feet plus the greenhouse.

Eli says his driving passion stems from his anger that so much American food has been debased by industrialization, combined with a responsibility to teach what he’s learned since he first inhaled the aromas of coffee and spices in his father’s tiny warehouse on Jay Street.

His passions famously extend into human interactions. In 1978, Dean & DeLuca opened downtown, joining the high-priced gourmet fray. “Their interests and mine were very different,” says Eli. “DeLuca was more about style. My story has to do with what

we can make ourselves, cooking, discovering.” Was it true that Eli threw Giorgio DeLuca out of E.A.T. for copying down the names of condiments on the shelves? “That was a long time ago, in another time,” he shrugs.

Says Kamp of ill feelings between the two men, “To this day they don’t like each other, but that’s their problem. For New Yorkers and Americans it’s a net gain.”

One bystander of this intense period who asked not to be named says such interactions came with the territory. “There is just tremendous tension in the retail food business—bottom line. There’s all the cost of the product and you’ve got to pray that it walks out the door before it spoils. Being a real bastard went with the job those days.” Words—and sometimes merchandise—flew through the air.

Nor was Zabar’s a stranger to the battles of competition. Today a yard-wide blow-up of a Times article on the so-called Caviar Wars sits on the floor beside Saul’s desk. He chuckles recounting how Klein goaded the Macy’s food buyer into a discount food battle, first cutting the price of Pommery mustard. By Christmas 1983, skirmishes had escalated, product by product, into a showdown on the same brand of caviar. Until then Zabar’s sold relatively little caviar because, as Saul explains, people expected to pay dearly for caviar, and distrusted cut-priced grains even from quality-focused Zabar’s. It was a race to the bottom Klein was determined to win; he undercut everyone, selling caviar below cost after Macy’s dropped theirs to cost. The conflict generated shopping carts of publicity, and the victory put Zabar’s into the caviar business big-time.

“As a result of the Caviar Wars we are probably one of the largest retailers of caviar in the United States,” says Saul. Although the firm sells thousands of pounds of expensive, top-quality caviar, Saul, who has made it his specialty for 55 years (his other love is coffee), offers fascinating advice in these days of economic downturn: “Salmon caviar, which I think is as delicious, if not more delicious, than all the sturgeon caviars, is renewable and it’s cheap.” (It sells for \$26.95 a pound compared to their highest priced Azerbaijan Wild Osetra Caviar, 1¾ ounces for \$260.)

As the war wound down, so did the tempestuous union with Klein. Relations between him and the brothers were always fractious, and by the mid-’80s Klein wanted out. There was a lawsuit. The Times reported: “Several of the principals denied that the unfolding drama was really, as [Nora] Ephron put it, ‘a great smoldering Jewish family fight.’” New Yorkers heard the rumble from Mount Olympus. Klein, who had so effectively helped increase Zabar’s market share, retired. He died last year.

Spring No Expense

While his brothers across Central Park shaved prices to compete, Eli tested the ceiling.

“What he doesn’t apologize for was his ambition or his pric-

Zabar's filled with a clientele as varied as its smoked fish, from celebrities like Woody Allen and Itzhak Perlman to housewives from New Jersey. It became a magnet for a more worldly, affluent, educated, Upper West Side, New Yorker—reading, PBS-tote-bag-toting intellectual.

Eli tested the ceiling.

“What he doesn't apologize for was his ambition or his pricing,” says Kamp. “He was prescient. He anticipated the direction in which America was going culinarily before most people did.”

Today two most common descriptions of his products are “overpriced” and “delicious.”

“He doesn't fool around,” says Fabricant. “His produce is excellent. He has some of the best prepared food in the city.” His cheeses remain exquisite. You can even buy a numbered jar (1 to 75) of apricot jam made by his Provençal housekeeper with apricots grown on his property in Menerbes, priced at \$25 each. Marcona almonds at 12 ounces for \$35 are the most popular nut at Eli's Manhattan.

If you can afford his prepared lasagna, and dips and desserts, you're also buying a lesson in flavor 101. He has mentored food writers Ina Garten (the Barefoot Contessa TV personality) and Patricia Wells, who runs cooking schools in Paris and Provence.

“Taste was really a big part of his M.O.,” says Mary Cleaver, who worked at E.A.T. in the '70s (she started washing dishes and wound up a sous chef) and today owns the acclaimed Cleaver Company caterers. “He understood that some of his clientele needed to learn about taste and were willing to [let him] be the one to tell them. That there was a slice of the population interested in buying something because it was expensive. That was the market Eli really understood, and he was brilliant at working it.”

Stanley says Eli takes a different approach. “His concept is ‘I produce a product, I give my soul to that product, and you have to pay me for my soul.’ He's done a fabulous job. He's really a genius. It's a different world, the West Side and the East Side. He was able to deal with that East Side.”

When a reporter asks about the grumbles that he's overpriced, Eli sits silent, staring into his coffee, then says, “What it comes down to is that I bring something very special to the table. There is a creative soul behind this whole enterprise. There's a lot of experimentation. I put a very high value on my talent. And if you want what I've got, you've got to pay for it. What the customer gets in return is something very, very special that I don't think they get anyplace else.”

Not even at Zabar's.

Slave to Starter

If caviar is the one ingredient that defined Zabar's, bread is Eli's edible incarnation. Dismayed at the flagging quality of bread

available in Manhattan, Eli baked his first loaf with a New York Times recipe. Why was a good bread so hard to find? Ideas rose to the surface of his brain like bubbles in a sourdough starter.

One theory was that American flour had been over-milled for factory operations that valued shelf stability over taste. Another was that flour contained sugar, and if he could bake at a high enough temperature, he'd get the sugars to caramelize. He bought a high-temperature pizza oven and began baking bread at 600 degrees at E.A.T., charring more than a few. A third hypothesis reasoned that sourdough starter coaxed out more flavor than commercial yeast. (He now calls himself a slave to starter. The active culture used in his breads today, the progeny of a piece of dough an old Jewish bakery in Tarrytown gave him early in his bread career, has been fed flour and water every few hours for years.)

He tinkered over time and around 1985 developed his wildly popular Health Loaf, made from stone-ground whole-wheat flour. “My Health Loaf may be the best bread I ever invented,” he says proudly. Baked from coarse, stone-ground flour, its dense, moist flavor and seeded crunch reveals a great deal about its creator.

But he wasn't satisfied. In the early '90s, he flew his own Cessna to Saratoga Springs to meet with Michael London, whom *Saveur* magazine called “the best baker in America.” London recalls Eli kept a taxi waiting outside for several hours while they talked. “Eli told me he wanted the lion's share of bread in New York,” says London.

Today Eli's Bread uses 105,000 pounds of flour a week for bread, which it sells to nearly 1,000 restaurants, hotels and markets. “Bakers such as Eli Zabar can proudly place their spectacular sourdough side by side with the world's best,” raves Patricia Wells about her former mentor.

A Way of Life

In the mid-'90s, both Dean & DeLuca and Balducci's were sold to corporations. Meanwhile, Macy's eased up on its food battles and Fairway began its major expansion to its current four locations, beating everyone's low prices. “Fairway has become the Goliath. We're the David,” says Saul. But they're no slingshot-wielding upstart.

“New York wouldn't be New York without Zabar's,” says one actress. Few think it could be replicated. Eli says, “In a way they have a very distinct identity that is really New York. There is no place that that store could exist except where it is.”



Despite decades of gossip, the first family of food has been gathering four times each year for the last 40 years to celebrate holidays. Last April, Eli, his wife, Devon, and their twin 17-year-old sons prepared Passover for 34 guests, the 20th straight year the extended family celebrated at Eli's house. Today the reportedly warring figures have nothing but compliments for each other. "Eli is the genius of the Zabar family," says Saul. "He did it all himself—the stores, the bakery. He can run an empire. I can only run this store."

From Saul's perspective, market share takes a backseat to something greater. "We get asked often why we don't franchise, because we have a lot of branded products. I have more money than I... Money is not why we do this, not why we're here seven days a week. It's a way of life for us. It's kind of old-fashioned."

Across town Eli says, "Saul is a very generous person emotionally. He doesn't have a hidden bone in his body. He's very, very smart, very moral with a strong sense of what is right and wrong. We're all very close."

Generous indeed. Zabar's owners have an uncommon relationship with their staff. Stanley says the business "has been dealt by us, rightly or wrongly, as another child." Thus they offer interest-free loans to their 250-plus mostly Dominican employees, with \$40,000 or \$50,000 out to various staff at any time; they also spring for up to a third of any employee's children's college tuition. Saul says such policies are grounded in the notion that what's good for the worker is good for Zabar's, but a listener suspects it runs deeper than that. Olga Dominquez, who began working for Zabar's part-time in 1972 while earning her business degree and soon took over management of the cheese department, says, "Saul Zabar is a father figure to all of us."

Which is not to say the bottom line is unimportant. Many suppliers report that Eli and Saul pool their buying power on

everything from produce to paper supplies. "Those guys are so tough, always beating me down on price," moans one such source. "If it's not one brother calling me it's the other."

Something else the brothers share is a disinterest in calling it a day; although both businesses are stocked with any number of potential talents who could take over, Saul and Eli each say they have no intention of retiring.

Last summer Eli annexed his latest conquest, the Amagansett Farmers Market in the Hamptons, under lease from the Peconic Land Trust. This winter he spent several days wedged between two trips to Europe talking to farmers on Long Island's North Fork about possible new crops, new varieties. He's exploring growing strawberries, melons or even wheat on the seven acres behind the market.

"He's kinetic energy on two legs," says Rebecca Chapman of the Peconic Land Trust. Some area merchants viewed Eli's arrival with suspicion, a moneyed New York carpetbagger set to cream off profits. Marie McEnergy, who runs a restaurant nearby, checked out the operation. "There Eli was on his hands and knees, mopping up a leak under a refrigerator case. He's like any of us," she marvels. "He's real."

I was buying an almond croissant and a strong cup of coffee at the market last summer when I recognized the good-looking, curly-headed teenager at the cash register as one of Eli's twin sons, Oliver. His brother, Sasha, rounding the corner with a box of peaches, grinned. I sipped my coffee wondering: Did these two inherit ahead-of-their-time genes?

Geraldine Pluenneke has written for Newsday, the International Herald Tribune and other publications, and is writing a book on recovering America's lost flavors and nutrients. She is hooked on Eli's Health Loaf, toasted and thickly spread with chèvre.