

Lox of love

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Zabar's is, in old-time parlance, an "appetizing store" — not a deli or a grocery, but a place that specializes in delicacies like smoked salmon and caviar. Only the old-timers use the term now, but it still seems the most fitting description of a store stocked with belly lox and Nova, smoked whitefish, bialys and bagels, over 600 varieties of cheeses, fresh pasta and gnocchi, a world-class selection of chocolate bars, and dozens of choices in prepared meals.

Whenever we get to New York, my husband and I always stop at Zabar's for belly lox (the old-fashioned, real salty stuff), cream cheese, French bread and fresh squeezed orange juice for a picnic in Central Park, which is just three blocks away. Zabar's also has a corner eat-in or to-go spot, if you'd rather not make your own snack. This past summer we rented an apartment and could walk to the store and try a full range of items.

I was surprised to learn that belly lox was only purchased by old-timers now. Zabar's sells just 75 pounds of it a week, compared with up to 1,200 pounds of the less salty Nova. Saul Zabar explained that in the old days all smoked salmon came in salt brine. Then importers started using the methods of the English, Irish and Scots — salting the salmon first, then washing and smoking it. According to Zabar, almost all of the salmon is now farmed in Norway or Chile; and the caviar, in Italy and California. But the whitefish is still wild.

The fish section of the store is in the center — a long counter where specialists slice and package salmon, whitefish and gravlox. The slicing of smoked salmon, especially, has always come with a certain "schtick" — often a comedy routine. The old slicers in these places were usually Eastern European immigrants. Now many of these countermen at Zabar's are Hispanic or Asian, but there's still a certain amount of banter.

One slicer argued with my husband that the Yankees were over, "too old," and that the Rays would be the team to cheer for. (That turned out to be true.) The quieter Yankee fan who sliced our lox wore a dark T-shirt that read "Feed the needy and the hungry" under his white jacket. They may be feeding the hungry at Zabar's, but at \$34 a pound for smoked salmon, I'm not sure they're the "needy."

A modest beginning

Saul Zabar is the 80-year-old president and, along with his brother Stanley, co-owner of the \$50-million-a-year business. His parents, Louis and Lillian Zabar, started the business in 1934, renting a counter at Daitch Market to sell quality smoked fish. Eventually they purchased Daitch. When Louis died in 1950, Saul Zabar was whisked out of college and into the business. At one point he did enjoy a life of squash and summers on Fire Island. But 15 years ago he was back in charge when Murray Klein, the former employee and later, partner, retired. Murray, the legendary marketer who died last year, used to say, "If I walk out onto Zabar's floor and I can see my shoes, it's not busy enough."

Saul Zabar credits Murray with establishing the Mezzanine on the second floor, which sells housewares. There you can find coffeemakers, toasters, knives and every kind of

kitchen item you've never even thought of — like a plastic thing shaped like a tomato to keep your sliced tomato fresh. The dozen or more choices available for most items are truly dizzying. Zabar's is a kind of hardware store, too — with practical stuff like batteries and air conditioners. Zabar's offers a 10 percent discount if you shop on one floor and then purchase something on the other floor.

Community fixture

Saul Zabar, like the store, is an Upper West Side fixture who says his life is now lived between 72nd and 95th streets. That's his community. Most of his family lives nearby. Some work in the store. He supports the local charities like Symphony Space and the Jewish Community Center and picked up the phone and casually authorized a \$10,000 gift to another charity when I was in his office. "Now," he says, "time is running out" and he does need to work less.

Most workers at Zabar's are unionized, which may help account for the cheerful atmosphere. But Zabar fretted about the economy when I met with him, lamenting the fact that he had to raise prices that day due to the higher cost of imports. He sees his clientele as middle class, not the inflation-proof super rich. He said the days of Zabar's price wars with Macy's over caviar are long gone and prices are no longer fixed.

Saul Zabar's father took a keen interest in the coffee trade many years ago, before gourmet coffee was in fashion. Now the son oversees the roasting and is the official taster. He grinds samples in his office of each variety, adding boiling water and using the large spittoon nearby after sampling each.

Zabar's sells beans and will grind them to your specifications. Zabar says grinders should not "slice" beans with a blade: "The best-tasting coffee comes from beans that are crushed with a ball." I did my brewing at the apartment and was impressed with the full-bodied "Zabar's Blend." The store sells around 8,000 pounds of coffee a week.

Saul Zabar's father, Louis, fled Ukraine, coming to the United States in 1901 after seeing his own father killed in a pogrom. And Murray Klein lost most of his family to the Holocaust. Somehow out of all that suffering, they and the younger generations of Zabars built a business based on fulfilling the pleasure principle for their customers. Zabar's is synonymous with the good life, with treating yourself or those you love to a delicacy.

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Sampling Zabar's

Zabar's is at 2245 Broadway (at 80th Street) in New York; (212) 787-2000.

If you can't get to New York, you can visit Zabar's online at www.zabars.com and place your order for overnight delivery.