

A lesson from Mr. Bean: Saul Zabar

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[SAUL ZABAR](#)

AGE: Turns 80 on Wednesday.

JOB: President and co-owner of Zabar's; chief coffee taster

HOURS/WEEK: At least 40 to 50, with Fridays off in summer for [Fire Island](#) or winter weekends in [Florida](#).

TIME ON THE JOB: 58 years

On Wednesday, one of the city's living icons turns 80. Over the past six decades, Saul Zabar has helped turn the upper West Side shop founded by his parents into an international destination known for great smoked fish, amazing cheese and olives and some of the country's first gourmet coffee beans. Zabar still puts in at least 40 hours a week, and he still samples all the coffee the store sells.

Your parents, Louis and Lillian, started the original Zabar's in 1941. What was your first job?

My first job at Zabar's was when I was a teenager. I used to work in the store on Sundays with my brother Stanley for four hours, and why four hours? At that time in the city, they had something called the blue laws [which restricted certain activities on Sundays]. That meant no food store could be open on Sunday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. ... And so it was impossible to get people to come in for the short day, so we would come in for the last part. Generally, I worked behind the dairy department.

How did you take over running the business?

I started here in 1950, when my father died. And I stepped in to spend a year or two here, to keep things going, because my mother had my brother Eli, who was about 7 or 8 at the time. ... So I came here from [college in [Kansas](#)] and I thought I would spend a few years here and then go on about my business. Because I wasn't really interested in this business, it was not something that I had imagined I would be involved with. But that year grew - it stretched out for 58 years.

How have things changed in the food world over the past six decades?

After the war, there was a lot of travel - the Second World War, not the First World War - people developed a taste for good bread, a lot of artisan breads that we didn't have a few years ago, a lot of cheese, olive oils that we never even knew existed, vinegars. ... When I used to work behind the cheese counter, we sold sour cream by the measure. I had a big dipper, and I had a refrigerated thing and I used to dip the measure in and I used to pour it into a container. You got to be so expert you didn't spill a drop.

What are you most proud of?

That when we started the coffee business 40 years ago, this business didn't exist. A&P was the only one that you could really buy bean coffee from. We didn't have this so-called "gourmet coffee business." I thought it would be a great business. And my wife said to me, "What are you wasting your time for? It'll never amount to anything." And we've spawned all this coffee business: Fairway has it, and Citarella, and [Whole Foods](#). We were the first to kind of understand it and kind of develop it.

You're responsible for picking out Zabar's coffee beans. How did you learn how good coffee should be roasted?

Forty years ago, I apprenticed myself to a retired coffee man. His name was White. I really love a good-tasting cup of coffee.

Was the store smaller when your parents started it?

They moved to this location, the center of this location, in 1941. I believe there's a picture of it in the window of what it looked like in 1920. And in 1921, we occupied this location right here in the center of Zabar's. And then about 20 years ago we acquired the whole building and we took over all the retail operations on the ground floor. ... Since this was five separate buildings built over 100 years ago, we broke through each of the buildings to create the current Zabar's, while we were working. It was tough.

With all the fancy supermarkets in the city these days, do you have a lot more competition that you used to?

We have no competition. All our competition has died! The only competition I have here is Russ & Daughters down on Houston Street - meaning the type of store that we are - appetizing, selling smoked fish. And then there's [Barney Greengrass](#). And appetizing - who knows what an appetizing store is now? You ever heard of an appetizing store? That's the nomenclature of this type of store. It isn't an appetizer, it's appetizing.

AS A COFFEE TASTER, HIS CUPS RUNNETH OVER

Zabar's sells 8,000 pounds of coffee a week. On Tuesday mornings, Saul Zabar holds a cupping - what the pros call a coffee tasting - in a corner of his office. Here's how it works:

1. Beans are sent from growers around the world, and Zabar stores them in a mini-fridge in his office to keep them fresh. When he's ready to taste them, he toasts them with a portable roaster.
2. Zabar grinds the beans in a self-cleaning sample grinder, which prevents new beans from being contaminated by previous batches.
3. The coarsely ground beans are placed in a short, wide cup and covered with water just under a boil (about 200 degrees).
4. Zabar smells each brew, then slurps up a bit with a silver spoon, letting air into his mouth along with the coffee and letting the coffee cover his entire tongue. Then he spits it out and moves on to the next sample.