

The Zabar's Podcast

S. 1 E.1: Welcome to Zabar's

Willie Zabar: How long have you been coming to Zabar's?

Customer 1: About 10 years now.

Customer 2: 54 years?

Customer 3: This is my first time in Zabar's.

Customer 4: Oh my god- it's a neighborhood institution that's number one but it's really unique.

Customer 5: My son went to school around the corner. And he used to come with his friends at lunch and they would actually run into my son's grandmother here. It's a social place but it's a food place- it's a place to come explore, it's a little bit of retail therapy.

Customer 6: I'm getting a refrigerator delivered tomorrow because mine died and so walking by Zabar's now is torture not to be able to go in and buy something.

Willie: What's your favorite thing to buy at Zabar's?

Customer 6: Coffee. I get the coffee always.

Customer 7: Crumb Cake is my absolute favorite thing in the store tho.

Customer 8: I like the cheese- the scallion cheese.

Customer 9: I appreciate you guys, you know what I mean they are one of the best.

Willie: Hi! Welcome to The Zabar's Podcast. I'm your host Willie Zabar. Zabar's was founded by my great grandparents in 1934. My grandfather Stanely

Stanely: Thank you

Willie: and his brother Saul

Saul: How are you doing people of the internet?

Willie: still run the store. My dad works there, I work there, and so do two of my brothers. I'm a 4th-generation Zabar. Zabar's is a specialty food store on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York City. We wanna give you a little look into our history, how we do things, and who we are. We're gonna talk to all kinds of people, including customers, employees management and food history experts. I grew up in the store. It's where I had my first job. As soon as I turned 16, my dad made me get my working papers and I started selling knishes and strudel behind the deli counter. There's a lot I can tell you about this store but if i'm being honest, there's also a lot I don't know. One of my

goals in making this podcast is to change that. Over the course of this series, you'll hear me get an education in all things Zabar's. So, join me as I take a deep dive into what this store is, how it came to be and what it's got going on these days. Welcome to Zabar's. To kick things off, I thought I'd speak with my grandfather Stanley, to hear about the origins of our store. Zabar's was founded in 1934 by my great grandparents, Louis and Lily. Back in the old country, Louis's family actually ran a small store. We don't know what that store was called, but you could argue this was the original Zabar's.

Stanley Zabar: They owned a lumber company and food company of basic groceries in this small "shtetl" that was there.

Willie: For those of you who don't know, shtetls were small Jewish communities in eastern and central Europe.

Stanley: They left Russia when they were being attacked by the people who were antisemitic. They came to the United States. Originally, my father and mother did not have any relationship until they found themselves in the United States where they came in the 1920's. We moved to Broadway and 81st street-the corner and now I live in more or less the same area.

Willie: Tell me a little about Louis and Lily.

Stanley: Well, they were hard working people. My mother and father worked in Zabar's from 1934- they had a good following and they were known from early days for having top food and for being very involved with customers. Zabar's was open 'til midnight everyday and on Sunday when I was somewhat older, let's say about 11, I would help out in the store. Actually, when I could walk I went to Zabar's.

Willie: What's your favorite Zabar's product?

Stanley: Well, smoked salmon is my favorite for breakfast and for lunch too. Naturally, I can't do without Zabar's coffee. We try not to sell anything we don't like ourselves. Zabar's means to me a place to go. A place to meet all the West Side/Upper West Side people- people I've grown up with. A place where the personnel are like family. It's part of a small community- without it it's very difficult to live a gourmet life. It's a second home. I think it's our responsibility to keep Zabar's going for the population that loves it now and to my family who wants to be involved in it. It's a center of activity for us.

Willie: As my grandpa said, there's a strong connection between our store, our family, and our neighborhood. I can't really make a podcast about Zabar's without telling you about the Upper West Side. Ever since Louis Zabar moved his family and his business out of Brooklyn in the 1930's, most of the Zabar clan has lived on the Upper West Side. I grew up just a few blocks from the store on Riverside drive. I'm a little further uptown now, but still close enough to walk to work.

The first thing you see when you walk into Zabar's is cheese. So much cheese. A lot of these are available in pre-packaged blocks and wedges, but for some of the good stuff you need to go to the cheese counter. There, Monica will cut you exactly the amount of cheese you need for your picnic or let's be honest just to eat standing up in front of the fridge.

So yeah how long have you been working at the cheese department?

Monica: Only 26 years.

Willie: What's selling really well right now right now?

Monica: Istara. It's a very good cheese. We sell a lot of cheese.

Willie: Past the cheese department is a small, windy staircase that leads to our housewares mezzanine. Not a lot people know about our 2nd floor, and it's a real shanda because there's some great stuff up there. We have everything from pots and pans to espresso machines. Just ask Housewares manager Bernardo Muniz.

Bernardo Muniz: I have been here 42 years. It's exciting. I find it more interesting than going to the Empire State Building. If you like to cook, this is the place to come.

Willie: I'm also gonna let you in on a little family secret: if the store is super crowded and there's a line for the registers, you can take your shopping basket upstairs and do checkout there. Fair warning, if you do this you may be tempted to pick up a Zabar's T-shirt while you're up there, but at only \$5.98 it's one of the cheaper impulse buys you can make.

Back at the bottom of the staircase, you'll find another hidden gem: The candy department. That's where my brother Danny happened to be working when I was recording this segment.

Danny Zabar: My favorite product in the candy section right now are the dark chocolate covered marshmallows because I just discovered them today.

Willie: I really wish Danny hadn't told me that, cuz I've been eating those things nonstop ever since. Next we've got the Deli department.

Andrew: My name is Andrew. I work at Zabar's, a great place where you can get your fresh Deli meats cut.

Willie: Whether you want turkey, corned beef, pastrami, or ham, we'll slice it to your desired thickness and wrap it in some nice wax paper. The expansion of our food selection beyond traditional jewish deli fare was one of the many contributions of Murray Klein. He was Stanley and Saul's business partner from the 1960's until his retirement in 1994. Next up is the fish counter, also known as the Appetizing Counter. Everyone at the fish counter used to work at the deli department, and only the best and brightest make the cut.

Ean Pichardo: My name is Ean Pichardo. I've been working at the fish department for about 2 and a half years now. What's your favorite item at the fish counter?

Ean: Oh that's a tough one- I started off with the Zabar's Nova but because I like the smokiness and the smoky flavor of the salmon I go with the scottish.

Willie: The fish counter is really the heart of our whole operation. Smoked fish was the first product sold by Louis Zabar, and the rest of the store really grew out of this department. Louis used to visit the smokehouses in Brooklyn to sample the fish personally, a tradition that our appetizing department continues to this day. When I was growing up my dad would always return from trips to Brooklyn smelling like a pound of lox.

Next up we've got the coffee department. My uncle Saul has been tasting and curating our coffee for over 50 years. One thing I love about this part of the store, is that we still scoop the coffee beans out of giant wooden barrels. Episode 2 is going to be all about coffee, so stay tuned for that.

Let's talk baked goods. Bagels. Rolls, baguettes, brownies, rugelach. You can find all of these at the bread counter. It's too bad you can't record smells on a podcast because this part of the store schmecks goodly.

Last but not least, you simply cannot shop at Zabar's without stopping by our checkout counter, because that would be stealing. If you're lucky, your register might be staffed by Lesly.

Lesly: I have been working at the register 12 years? 10 to 12 years. It's wonderful. I like it. I like it alot. I like math. I like customers and money. It's really fun to work on the registers. You find people interesting cuz it tells you a little bit about each customer, each of their stories.

Willie: I know I'm biased but I think this store is great- I think if I was not related to these people I'd still think their store is great. I love food, I love eating food, I love finding new foods. I think uncle saul sums it up best.

Saul: This is a store that doesn't exist anywhere else in New York or maybe in the world. And it's a place to enjoy and to find things that you like.

Willie: Thank you for listening to Zabar's podcast. Join us again next time to learn more history, hear more stories, and meet some more of the people who make this store what it is. I'm Willie Zabar and I'll see you at the store.

The Zabar's Podcast is produced by Emily Charash with sound editing and mixing by Henry Butler. Shoutout to everyone at Zabar's for making it such a nice place to shop and to work.