

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Schmear Ye, Schmear Ye

Zabar's

By Lori Zabar Schocken, 216 pages, \$28

Satisfaction Guaranteed

By Micheline Maynard Scribner, 236 pages, \$27.99

BY RIEN FERTEL

THE DELI IS DYING. That's the lesson behind popular histories of Jewish-American foodways, like David Sax's "Save the Deli" and Ted Merwin's "Pastrami on Rye." According to Mr. Merwin, the number of kosher New York delicatessens has plummeted by 99% since the 1930s. But nontraditional Jewish restaurants have recently redefined what it means to eat deli. Two new books chronicle the roots of this reformed cuisine.

"Zabar's: A Family Story, With Recipes," by Lori Zabar, begins in the Ukrainian village of Ostropol, a small, historically Jewish community situated halfway between Kyiv and Lviv and the birthplace of Lori's grandfather Louis. Louis Zabar survived Polish, then Russian, pogroms, during which his father and a sister were murdered, before arriving in New York in 1922. With his new wife, Lilly—a family acquaintance from back home—Louis (pronounced "Louie") opened produce stands in the Yiddish-fluent Brooklyn neighborhoods of Brighton Beach and Flatbush. But handling fruits and vegetables caused him to break out in allergic rashes, which Louis relieved by plunging his hands into briny barrels of pickled herring.

In 1934, Louis and Lilly opened Zabar's at 80th Street and Broadway on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The couple now specialized in deli meats and "appetizings"—foods that pair with bagels, such as cured fish and cream cheese—joining a prewar wave of "kosher-style" storefronts that would feed generations of modern, non-kosher-keeping Jewish patrons, as well as gentiles looking for a quick and



are honored. Their names and stories point to how far Zabar's has come. From a Jewish-American produce stall to a global culinary destination filled with products and staffed by people from the world over, including Olga Dominguez, who began working at Zabar's in 1972, soon after immigrating from the Dominican Republic. "She was seventeen years old and knew nothing about cheese," writes Zabar. Today Ms. Dominguez is the store's chief cheese-monger, overseeing one of the nation's largest dairy departments.

If Zabar's represents the classic big-city delicatessen that could survive, Zingerman's, of Ann Arbor, Mich., is the small-town upstart that has learned to thrive. Founded in 1982, the kosher-style deli has become the flagship institution in a bustling entrepreneurial fleet with an unmistakably hip vibe. In 2003, Inc. magazine named Zingerman's "the coolest company in America."

According to Micheline Maynard's "Satisfaction Guaranteed: How Zingerman's Built a Corner Deli Into a Global Food Community," Zingerman's cool factor begins with its co-founders, Paul Saginaw and Ari Weinzwieg. The pair make for a dynamic duo. Mr. Saginaw is the business strategist who eschews business-as-usual. "I don't buy into traditional economic theory that the business of business is business," he tells Ms. Maynard. Mr. Weinzwieg is the management philosopher, a self-proclaimed "lapsed anarchist" who condemns the "value of

filling bite. (The dearly remembered Reuben's Restaurant and Delicatessen advertised: "From a sandwich to a national institution.") Louis soon re-entered the produce trade and, over the next decade and a half, expanded his fiefdom to include enough stores that by midcentury it must have been difficult not to shop at a Zabar's. Friends dubbed Louis "the Octopus," and the Upper West Side had teasingly become, according to Lori Zabar, "the Zabar shtetl."

After Louis's death in 1950, his sons—Eli, Saul, and Lori's father, Stanley—considered dismantling the family empire, which was losing \$200,000 a year, before turning to Murray Klein, a Ukrainian émigré and former Zabar's store manager blessed with the vaudevillian's knack for bridging the theatric and the chaotic. Klein transformed Zabar's into a one-stop gourmet emporium. Salami and copper cookware garlanded the ceiling; food processors and other new must-have kitchen gadgets overstuffed the upstairs mezzanine. "If I walk out onto Zabar's floor and I can see my shoes," Klein often said, "it's not busy enough." The orange, brown and white logo-wrapped shopping bag, one of New York's most iconic designs, would hit the streets in 1972. Klein was the king of publicity stunts. He sold smoked salmon at cost and challenged Macy's to numerous price battles, including what became known as the 1983 holiday season's Great Caviar War. "Blood will run in the streets," he declared—picture him scaling the deli-counter ramparts—before slashing the price of a \$200, 14-ounce tin of Beluga by nearly 40%. Selling the caviar at a loss, Zabar's won the war.

Manhattanites flocked to Klein's reimagined superstore, rescuing Zabar's from financial ruin. Not that customers always got what they wanted. Leonard Bernstein discovered that the store wouldn't dispatch an order of smoked whitefish to his Dakota penthouse. Zabar's didn't deliver, no matter one's celebrity. Unless your name was Barbra Streisand. "Barbra likes herring and sturgeon," Zabar's financial manager, Joy Watman, told New York magazine in 1982, "and she can get *any* special treatment here. Anything." (Zabar's finally abandoned its Babs-only delivery policy in 2015.)

Lori Zabar, who died in February at the age of 67, offers a loving portrait of a business family. "Zabar's" is not a tell-all but rather an embrace-all.

hierarchy," which he deems unnatural. "The more you share," he says, "the better it goes for everyone."

Sharing starts with Messrs. Saginaw and Weinzweig's quirky guiding principles, including what they call open-book management: the candid communication of financial numbers—minus the cost of rent and salaries—among employees. Another guiding principal, called visioning, is a concept that will be familiar to dream manifesters and Oprah acolytes. About a dozen years into their business, Zingerman's owners began drafting inspiring forecasts of success. "Throngs of people are milling around the Roadhouse parking lot," Mr. Weinzweig wrote in a 2005 vision plan for an anticipated farmer's market, "amazed and excited at the abundance of locally produced goods and services." This simple act of hopeful, prognostic storytelling might sound a little woo-woo—what Murray Klein would think of visioning!—but it's hard to argue with Zingerman's success. In 40 years, a closet-size corner deli has transformed itself into a \$65 million community of businesses (or ZCoB, for short), co-owned by managing partners who have honed their own visions.

Today the ZCoB umbrella includes a bakery, creamery, candy factory, farm, Korean restaurant, consulting company (ZingTrain) and mail-order catalog. The mail-order business, which disseminates the deli's original college-town pop-aesthetic to more than two million subscribers, has not only kept Zingerman's afloat during the pandemic but supports, with roughly 41% of ZCoB's total revenue, the slim-to-nonexistent profit margins of Zingerman's less-lucrative ventures.

Though written by a company outsider, "Satisfaction Guaranteed" is even more reverential than Lori Zabar's memoir. To paraphrase Mr. Saginaw, the business of Ms. Maynard's book is all business. It lacks the Zingy-ness that makes a pilgrimage to Zingerman's such an unforgettable experience.

For now, it seems, the deli is in safe hands, sandwiched within a sliced bagel, lightly toasted, with a cream-cheese schmear. We nosh on. *Mr. Fertel's next book is a human history of the brown pelican.*

The big-city deli that could survive, and the small-

Even uncle Eli, who left the family business in 1973 to open his own store, E.A.T., is celebrated. Recipes, most attributed to Lilly Zabar, round out each chapter: latkes, stuffed cabbage, sweet noodle kugel. Longtime staffers

town upstart that has learned to thrive.

LOX, STOCK & BARREL Zabar's appetizing counter in 1971.

MICHAEL GOLD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES;
ON C7: GETTY IMAGES

[Copyright \(c\)2022 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 5/14/2022](#)

[Powered by TECNAVIA](#)

The following is a digital replica of content from the print newspaper and is intended for the personal use of our members. For commercial reproduction or distribution of Dow Jones printed content, contact: Dow Jones Reprints & Licensing at (800) 843-0008 or visit djreprints.com.

Saturday, 05/14/2022 Page .C012

Copyright (c)2022 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 5/14/2022