

DAILY NEWS

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FOOD

Sarabeth Levine expands her empire with a new outpost on Park Ave. South

New Sarabeth's is geared more to businesspeople and has a more modern ambience; her signature dishes get a tweak from chef Freda Sugarman



Sarabeth Levine shouldn't be fretting over a batch of dough.

She's the face of a colossal brand — a \$40 million empire that includes wholesale clients, global licensing, even a Bronx jam factory.

But here she is in shopworn chef's whites and scuffed Merrell sandals, fixated on a hulking Hobart mixing machine filled with batter for cinnamon-raisin French toast. Its contents will supply her perpetually packed Manhattan eateries with one of its most popular orders — but not yet.

"I have to get some sugar in here!" she declares as a staff of six quietly mixes, pounds, rolls and shapes more dough behind her. "There's not enough!"

At the Chelsea Market bakery that serves as Sarabeth's nerve center, Levine still acts the eager cook who vets batches of batter before they hit the oven.

"Of course, I'm a brand these days," she says in a hoarse trill still inflected with the Long Island tones of her childhood. "But I act like I don't know it. I'm still involved in the day-to-day. It's what I love."



Sarabeth's newest location — Levine's 11th and largest — opened Monday on Park Ave. South and gives her brand a bit of a makeover. Rather than the prairie-chic of her upper West Side spot, or the country-club opulence of her Tribeca outpost, the cavernous dining room boasts a clean, modernist ambience.

"Tribeca's more about families," she says. "This one's more about businesspeople."

The room's a brilliant stage for the lavishly simple food of chef de cuisine Freda Sugarman, an Altoona, Pa., native handpicked by Levine to run the new kitchen. Sugarman's painterly, uncluttered platings get a beautiful complement in the restaurant's pale wood furnishings, simple striped banquettes and clean lines.

With Levine's blessing, Sugarman is adding personal touches to signature Sarabeth's dishes — including nearly sacrosanct customer favorites like the seafood Cobb salad (\$25). Sugarman tweaks the recipe with smoky Moody Blue cheese from Wisconsin, a quiet but strong companion for plump, pristine lobster, crab and shrimp. It's a brilliant choice — true to the dish's essence, but subtly shifting the balance between flavors.



"When you have a brand, you want people to be creative under that brand," Levine says. "But you can't start serving Chinese food at a Sarabeth's."

Levine's success story has practically become New York City lore. The daughter of Jewish immigrant furriers, Levine launched her edible empire by accident. In 1981, between careers and fretting over money, she gave homemade marmalade as a holiday gift. Friends went batty over the orange-apricot-pineapple preserves, and urged her to sell it to local food shops. Retailers like Dean & DeLuca started carrying Sarabeth's fruit spread, and a business was born.

To flog her jams and some home-baked pastries, Levine and husband Bill opened a tiny storefront on the upper West Side. Once word got out, the place became a magnet for busy neighbors pining for a taste of

the home-cooked and handmade. Weekend brunches became a sensation. An upper East Side location sprouted in 1983, and another upper West Side eatery opened three years later.

Fast-forward to 2013: Sarabeth's Kitchen has hundreds of employees, a suite of executives, and a crew of managing partners who oversee real estate, licensing and product development. With Levine, they operate 11 restaurants in plum locations from Central Park South to Key West, Fla.; four Lord & Taylor stores house Sarabeth's cafes.

A 15,000-square-foot plant in the Bronx cranks out fruit spreads for markets as far-flung as Korea and Japan. And Levine's products now adorn Duane Reade shelves — perhaps the ultimate New York crossover. "I sparked the whole breakfast revolution in New York," she says. "Now, I can't even take a table in my own restaurants."



The industry has also changed beyond recognition, she says. Food blogs and review sites, especially, have altered how diners experience food. "They actually deter people from eating out," she says. "I don't want to be preprogrammed by someone else's opinions. I'm an optimist. I don't want to read bad things. And maybe the server's mother died yesterday and they're having a bad night. How would you know?"

As much as a titan as she has become, Levine still professes nerves before an opening — especially one involving 248 seats, 9,400 square feet and a greatly expanded menu. "There's just so much to do. Finalizing menus. Working on desserts and breakfast. Training people to serve, cook and maintain the place. It's a lot. And here at the bakery, we have to add everything from Park Ave. South to our repertoire," she says. "It's like a Broadway show, and we're in previews."

But at a preopening dinner, Levine works the room with polished but self-effacing ease. Unflagging energy and relentless enthusiasm make it nearly impossible to believe she'll turn 70 in May. She's still up at 4:30 most mornings, she says, and doesn't stop moving until the 11 o'clock news. Husband Bill, she notes, recently turned 80.

Do they think about slowing down? "Never. Well, maybe sometimes. Like this morning. I felt a little overwhelmed. But I expressed it. You give it up to the universe, and it's gone. Like a hairball," she laughs.

And anyway, Levine's too busy to entertain the notion. She's in talks to open a restaurant in Taiwan and a second in Japan. Her new Perfect Pancake Mix is due in stores next month and Sarabeth's branded syrups will add raspberry and blackberry flavors. Boxed buttermilk biscuit mix should hit shelves in 2014, along with Levine's first-ever line of packaged cookies. And a collection of gift boxes — "big business in Asia" — just took off online.

"One day, I'm probably going to fall over in this bakery," she says. "And when it happens, they can just put me in a box and pour the crème anglaise on top."

Sarabeth's, 381 Park Ave. South at 27th St, (212) 335-0093.