

Transcript — Episode 17: LIVE From The Captain's Meeting

Laurel: Hi, this is Laurel from Trader Joe's, La Jolla, California. Here's what's coming up on this episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

Tara: Today we're at the annual Trader Joe's Captains' Meeting.

Lori: Well, this is the Chocolate Lava Gnocchi.

Matt: I could probably make a dinner out of that.

Tara: Alright, let's move on to things that are intended for non-human consumption.

Colin: Well these are magical treats made of salmon and seaweed and cats actually love seaweed. Are you going to try it?

Matt: (crunch)

Ambi: (crowd laughs & applause)

Matt: We're gonna play a little bit of Name That Captain.

Tara: I'm keeping score.

Matt: All captains. The captain from Moby Dick.

Nancy: Captain Ahab.

[Bell Dings]

Nancy: I'm very competitive.

[Crowd of Captains Laughs]

Jon: We have an amazing podcast that's done here at Trader Joe's. Matt Sloan and Tara Miller, they're going to do it live right here on the stage.

[Crowd of Captains Laughs]

Matt: Thank YOU for being HERE with us today.

Tara: We're ready? Okay? We're good?

Captains: Four, three, two, one...

Tara: Live from New York, from the Trader Joe's Captains' Meeting.

Matt: Let's go Inside Trader Joe's.

[Crowd of Captains Wild Cheering & Applause]

[Theme music begins and 2 bells ring in a neighborhood Trader Joe's]

Tara: All right!

Tara: So the problem becomes now every time we do this in the conference room in Monrovia, we're going to be bummed because we have no applause. So far on the podcast, we have taken you, our crew, and all of our listeners around the country and around the world in search of new products. We've come into the office...

Matt: Some of the more top secret places was in the office, the tasting panel where we make those really tough, necessarily tough, decisions about which products we should or shouldn't carry. We've even gone there.

Tara: So today's another first. Today we're at the annual Trader Joe's Captains' Meeting and this year it happens to be in New York City. It's in a different city every year. Captains are store managers, and if you've listened to our episodes so far, you know that. Every year we gather all of our captains together to let them know where we're going, say thank you for all the things that have happened over the last year and to bring home some great energy back to all the stores. It's important to us that our stores are really great ambassadors to their neighborhoods, or in their neighborhoods. And our captains are our ambassadors back to the stores so they can work with our crew to become great neighbors.

Matt: We get a lot of feedback on the podcasts and we get a lot of comments. And this comment for me really summed up the impact, the hard hitting touchstone moments for our listeners that we've been able to create. I'll read you just a little snip here. This podcast is the perfect blend of being interesting but not so important that I need to listen to each word.

[Crowd of Captains Laughs]

Matt: That's real stuff. So thank you.

Matt: One of the most important aspects of this gathering every year, the leadership of the company, captains of Trader Joe's stores, is to look at and think about new product. What's new? It's really about two parts of our merchandising group, of the buying organization. Product Development versus Product Innovation.

Matt: Product Development is really bringing things that we know we want to have in the store, that we think will really sell well and customers will be excited about that. So Marcy Kopelman, Colin Fields, their teams really focused on that.

Matt: Product Innovation is a really interesting spot. It's about finding those things that we never knew were out there that we now can't live without.

Tara: From an excitement perspective, that product innovation category really tends to be the one that excites people, right? It's like, oh, I've never heard of that. That's so cool. Or that's so weird. I don't know if people are going to buy that and then it flies off the shelf because... cauliflower, right?

Matt: Or it doesn't, I mean, product innovation is riskier certainly, and that's okay. We want things to be interesting and we know that vanilla ice cream will likely always be the best-selling thing. But in ube (purple, sweet potato ice cream) bought in the right way, limited a certain fixed amount. That could be really fun and interesting. And that's that balancing act between the two.

Tara: We wanted to bring out some folks whose lives every day at Trader Joe's are focused on just those things.

Matt: Absolutely! So let's have Lori Lotta, Marcy Kopelman and Colin Fields come on out here.

[Crowd of Captains Applause]

[Music begins]

Matt: All right, have a seat. Let's get cozy. This is like a lightning round, a speed dating introduction to new products coming soon to a Trader Joe's near you.

Tara: I'm gonna start by asking Lori, please explain Chocolate Lava Gnocchi.

Lori: Well, this is the Chocolate Lava Gnocchi and I had seen some chocolate gnocchi when I was at Harrods in London. And I asked our gnocchi supplier if they could make something similar but better than what they had at Harrods.

Tara: What is it? I mean, I think gnocchi and I think dinner. I think chocolate lava and I think yummy. But I think dessert. So is it entree? Is it dessert? Is it both?

Lori: This was originally designed to be dessert, but I think that there are some people, Matt?

Matt: I could probably make a dinner out of that. I could see that happening.

Lori: ...who might make dinner out of it. They're really easy to prepare because you just put them in a sauté pan with a little bit of ghee or butter and brown them.

Tara: Pass that plate, would you? Matt can't be the only one who gets to try it.

Lori: I think it takes maybe no more than the cauliflower gnocchi. So six, seven minutes.

Matt: It's incredible that that's now a measurement of time that people understand...“no longer than a cauliflower gnocchi.” And we're all like, “Oh yeah, cool. I got it.” And then we're like, “Which instructions? The ones that work or don't work. Oh, okay.”

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Matt: Wow! So I'm glad that we started with dessert. Now let's go onto more of a center of play thing. Marcy Kopelman, tell me about this.

Marcy: This comes from countless emails that we have gotten asking why don't we have an Impossible Burger or a Beyond Burger? So this is our version of it. And what's interesting about this, I shouldn't even be calling it a burger because that is no longer something we're supposed to be calling these, they're patties. Yes.

Matt: Yeah. The cattlemen's association is storming the doors as we speak with that.

Marcy: This is going after a meat eating customer and, as a vegetarian, I can tell you that this is not going after me because it really emulates meat. You want to see the interior is nice and pink. And it smells like meat and it tastes like meat

Tara: As you said, they're everywhere. There's a Beyond Burger. There's an Impossible Burger. What makes ours different?

Marcy: Ours is different because we don't do blood. So all of the other ones they, they actually are designed to, to bleed like, like meat.

Matt: I think that's a, that is a technical thing. Like give me a little more bleed on this patty, Marcy.

Marcy: Yes, right. No blood.

Matt: Yeeeeeaaah.

Marcy: So that makes ours different. Ours will retail for \$4.99, which is at least a dollar lower.

Matt: I think this is going to be exciting. And as an avid burger fan, I would eat this. And like if I'm trying to be like flexitarian guy and just like with that kind of stuff, I can see this working.

Tara: (chuckles)

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Marcy: I actually think it's going to be the beginning of possibly a sausage, a hot dog and other non-meats.

Matt: And then we'll just come full circle and we'll just say, "Carrots," and people would be like, "Oh my God, genius!" So it's good. I love what you've done with the vegetables.

Tara: Alright, let's move on to things that, are intended for non-human consumption. Colin, can you tell us a little bit about this one?

Colin: Last year we came out with the dog advent calendar, which seemed pretty odd until we got out in the stores and there was quite a following for it. And we heard from our feline, loving customers that we should have something for their cats. So we found it, we developed it and it's pretty cool.

Matt: What's inside of this?

Colin: Well these are magical treats made of salmon and seaweed and cats actually love seaweed.

Tara: Matt's going to eat it.

Colin: Are you going to try it?

Matt: I don't know. Do I? I shouldn't smell it before I eat it....no. What'd you do at work today? Well, I sat on stage and made an (BLEEP) out of myself.

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Tara: Like every other day.

Matt: (sampling cat treat) You know what? That's not good.

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Matt: But I'm not a cat.

Colin: But if you're a cat, you'll really like that. And after eating 24 of them, your 25th one will be a gigantic one, shaped like a fish.

Matt: OK you're going to have SOME happy cats as if they weren't already happy enough. I'm excited about this (ooh audible gasps from the audience). Kung Pao Chicken Mochi Balls. Appetizer? What do we have here? Lori, what's up?

Lori: Well, this is pretty much an appetizer or you could have it alongside a salad if you ate a few of them because it's really satisfying. It's really filling and it's really different. So the idea of this came from a meal that we had in Tokyo where we had some mochis. Something similar to it that was in a soup and then some that were fried and the fried ones were incredible, so we asked someone to make a version but more flavorful than what we had in Japan. So it's a filling of really spicy Kung Pao chicken. It has mochi on the outside. And when you take these and put them in a toaster oven, which is easier than an oven, or in an oven for about 12 to 14 minutes, they get really crisp on the outside and then there's a chewy layer and then there's the interior and it's pretty wonderful.

Matt: I think I'm onto your MO. Take a dessert and make it an entree. Take an entree and make it a dessert here. I'm seeing it..so again, you were in Tokyo? And you see this and then there's a lot of work to make this idea on a trip from a far flung place happen through USDA Regulatory, someone's got to make it and then someone's got to make it at home, it's gotta be easy to do, and toaster oven. Like I almost want to buy a toaster oven just to have these cooked up so nicely.

Lori: Well it's the easiest way to do it and these things are great and the tasting panel just went absolutely crazy for these so I hope everyone else will too.

Matt: (crunch) It's good!

Matt: Tara, since your mouth is full, it's your turn..

Tara: Great!

Matt: ...to talk about the next product.

Tara: That's excellent! I like to speak into a microphone with a full mouth. OK so we're going to talk to Marcy again. This product I have to keep referring to the package because I can't remember the name yet. Organic Chickpea and Red Lentil Risoni. Is that a real word?

Matt: It is now.

Tara: Tell us about this one.

Marcy: This one is made with just two ingredients, the organic chickpea flour and organic red lentil flour. It has 10 grams of protein versus 3 in a normal rice. And you're really using it as a rice substitution. We felt like based on what has exploded with our cauliflower rice or other frozen cauliflower products, our red lentil pasta, that this in the grocery world should have some good volume. You prepare it like a rice. So in 14 minutes it's ready to go.

Tara: So you just put it in a pot with water and?

Marcy: You can add a little flavor, you can leave it plain.

Tara: Serve it with the protein patty and just have a protein fest.

Matt: Protein out...

Tara: Well, yeah, I think especially with this one, with the protein patties. I mean it started out as a shopping list item for sure, but then it definitely became an innovative item over the course of the development because we wanted to do things differently.

Matt: Thinking about how trends keep evolving. I mean it's like God bless us for finally putting pumpkin spice in a face mask.

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Tara: If anyone could do it, it's us.

Colin: I think it's a super cool product actually. And this one is an improvement over the one that we currently carry. We carry a normal, a regular face mask, a hydrating face mask. And this one happens to maybe be made out of bicellulose, which I won't go into all the details, but it's better material. Deeply soothes and moisturizes your skin and it gives you aromas of pumpkin spice notes and just super enjoyable.

Matt: It's like Strawberry Shortcake's autumn friend.

Colin: Yeah. As I was testing this, I was getting a lot of compliments on the scent and my skin.

Matt: So I think that's it. So thank you so much Marcy, Lori, Colin.

[Crowd of Captains Applause]

Matt: So now what I'd like to do, I'd like to randomly select some people from the audience for a little game, Tara. I would like to activate our captain randomizer.

Tara: Okay, let's do it.

[Hokey bee boop beep beep, computer calculating noise]

Matt: Let's see. Randall Stevens from 688 Chicago. You need to come on stage, Randall!

[Crowd of Captains Applause]

[Music begins]

Tara: Hey, Randall!

[Hokey bee boop beep beep, computer calculating noise]

Matt: Nancy Parks from 160 Sammamish. You need to come on stage, Nancy!

[Crowd of Captains Applause]

[Hokey bee boop beep beep, computer calculating noise]

Matt: Shevana Omadathie Thai from 541 the New York City wine shop. Come on up.

[Crowd of Captains Applause]

Tara: How are ya? You go stand with Randall.

[Hokey bee boop beep beep, computer calculating noise]

Matt: Hugh Armell 724 Bloomington. That's in Minnesota, still. Come on up.

[Crowd of Captains Applause]

[Music ends]

Matt: What are we going to do? I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're gonna play a little bit of Name That Captain.

[Name That Captain theme music starts and fades]

Matt: We're going to go through pop culture captains. Go ahead and pair up in twos, people. Why do coaches always say that? Yeah, it's a pair, there's two. We're going to give a clue. First team to shout out the answer gets the point.

Tara: I'm keeping score.

Matt: I'll start with the first one. Easy. The captain from Moby Dick.

Nancy: Captain Ahab.

[Bell Dings]

Tara: All right, Nancy got it.

Matt: Here's a super tough one. The captain from Peter Pan.

Nancy: Captain Hook.

[Bell Dings]

Matt: Superhero captain, the newest Avenger.

Nancy: Captain Marvel.

[Bell Dings]

Matt: Good grief, Nancy!

[Crowd of Captains Cheers]

Nancy: I'm very competitive.

Matt: It's okay.

[Crowd of Captains Chuckles]

Matt: Sometimes winning is when others win too.

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Matt: The captain from The Adventures of Tin Tin. Good grief people. He's named after a fish.

Shevana: Captain Nemo?

Matt: Oh, good one. That was a good one. You know what? I'm going to give you a point for that.

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

[Bell Dings]

Matt: It's wrong, but you got a point. It's Captain Haddock. Next captain. The only captain in this list to be played by Bill Murray from a Wes Anderson movie, The Life Aquatic.

Nancy: Captain Steve Zissou, yeah!

[Bell Dings]

Matt: Our next captain hosted a kid's show in the 1970s. He's friends with Mr. Green Jeans.

Hugh: Captain Kangaroo!

Matt: Hugh!

[Bell Dings]

Hugh: Give it to the old guy!

Matt: Our original captain from the USS Enterprise?

Hugh: Kirk!

[Bell Dings]

Matt: Captain of the USS Enterprise from Star Trek, the Next Generation.

Hugh: Picard.

Matt: Hugh! Hugh is like, "Thank God for the Star Trek questions!"

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Hugh: Nerds unite!

Matt: Captain of the USS Enterprise from Star Trek Voyager, the first female Enterprise captain.

Hugh: She wasn't the captain of Enterprise. It was, uh...

Crowd: OHHHH! HUUUUUUUUUGH!!

Matt: You know, it's eerie. It kind of rhymes with boo.

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

Matt: I'm just saying.

Hugh: Captain Janeway.

Matt: He gets two points for that one!

[Crowd of Captains Laughter]

[Bell Dings Twice]

Tara: Shevana and Hugh are up by two.

Matt: No more Star Trek. The good guy captain from Pirates of the Caribbean?

Randall: Captain Jack Sparrow.

Matt: Okay.

[Bell Dings]

Matt: Randall got that. This next captain doesn't even go by captain. He's Gilligan's guiding light.

Hugh: Skipper.

[Bell Dings]

Matt: Hugh, nice! Dav Pelkey superhero creation, making fun and fun of and fun with reading through toilet humor. Captain...?

Nancy: Underpants?

Matt: Nancy.

[Bell Dings]

[Crowd of Captains Light Applause]

Matt: How about a brand of rum?

Hugh: Captain Morgan.

Matt: Hugh! Captain Morgan. Nice job. One of the original Avengers out of deep freeze to become a superhero.

Hugh: Captain America.

[Bell Dings]

Matt: Hugh, nice! Okay.

Crowd: HUUUUUUUUGHH

Matt: Okay, here we go, people. Final sudden death. 1970s Hanna-Barbera cartoon captain kind of hairy.

Hugh: Captain Caveman.

Matt: Hugh, nice!

Crowd: HUUUUUUUUUUUGHH!!!

Matt: So for winning Name That Captain, you get captain hats and Nancy and Randall for losing, you get cold mochi balls.

[Crowd of Captains Applause]

Matt: Thank you so much. All right. Thanks guys. Thank you. All right, Tara, I don't know about you, but I'm feeling like that's a wrap.

Tara: What have to say before we wrap up is, "Thanks for listening!"

Matt: And thanks for listening!

[Crowd of Captains Boisterous Applause]