

Inside Trader Joe's Transcript – Episode 18: Spices

Tara: We hope that this episode of Inside Trader Joe's will bring a little spice to your life. Here's a sample.

--Music begins.

Jasmine: You definitely cannot talk about spices at Trader Joe's and not mention the Everything but the Bagel Seasoning.

Lori: This one has really one of the greatest stories ever because I was making this for several years at home and everybody kept saying, "Bird, make me some of that, make me some of that!"

Matt: It's the Dutch desire to maintain their monopoly on nutmeg that makes them trade Manhattan, New York City for another island.

Tara: So much to cover. South African Smoke, holiday spices, dukkah, paprika, garlic, rubs, a new blend from Japan, Everything but the... Something Else.

Catherine: I'd love to take credit for this idea, but it was actually a suggestion from one of our crew members.

Jasmine: A few years ago we actually discontinued cayenne pepper and then we realized that we'd be upsetting all those people who do Master Cleanse in January.

Matt: And they're grumpy to begin with!

Tara: Oh this is going to generate more phone calls.

--Music ends.

Tara: Have a glass of milk ready because this could get spicy. Ready?

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

Theme music begins.

Sound: 2 bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, the director of words and phrases and clauses here at Trader Joe's.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the marketing product guy, working with a great team of crew members on the nuts and bolts, the guts of the products that we bring to our store. No one wants to hear about guts now that I've said that.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Okay

Tara: So let's talk about spices instead of guts, Matt.

Matt: No guts.

Tara: Let's talk a little bit about the spice trade. Knowing that history and understanding where the world has been is really useful.

Classical music begins.

Matt: So many things that we talk about now in terms of value and wealth and payment are tied to what was the value of these incredibly important spices. The spice trade is all about the human highs and lows. There's bad behavior, there's resilience, there's a lot of work, not all of it nice, to control things. This is as much about early monopolies as it is anything else. So it's almost like a story out of the 1001 Nights and even Pliny the Elder heard about these Middle Eastern spice traders talking about phoenixes and dragons and giant bats protecting cinnamon...really just so they could charge more. Cause it's like, "Trust me, you don't want to go to the cinnamon cave," (there is no such thing), "but you don't want to go there cause it's dangerous. We did all the work for you. That's why it's so expensive." Pliny the Elder says, "No, I think you're just driving up the cost on this kind of stuff." And you start to then have control and desire for control. Venice becomes the main monopolizing force in the European spice trade and there's a reaction to that. Let's cut out the Venetian middlemen. So the English, the Dutch, they go after their own monopolies and actually it's the Dutch desire to maintain their monopoly on nutmeg that makes them trade Manhattan, New York City, for another island (the Run Island in the Banda Islands near Indonesia) so that they can keep control of nutmeg.

Tara: Is that true?

Matt: I hope so.

Tara: That's a great story.

Matt: It is effectively true. English people were already living on Manhattan and it was sort of this formal agreement and it's like no one asked the people who lived on Run Island in the Banda Islands, how they felt about this. And that's part of the ongoing problem of the spice trade. It's all about control. And these monopolies, they would do anything. They would go to war. They would destroy other cultures to have something. And it becomes then this age of exploration, set of souvenirs for the kitchen. "We found peppercorns." "No, lots of people use them before you did, but you maybe brought them to a different part of the world."

Tara: There had to have been value in the leap of faith that people must've taken to eat some of these things as well. You know if you think about the clove is the bud of a flower, right? Like who decided that was okay to eat and how many different things did they eat first that weren't actually fit for human consumption?

Matt: All of that work, that's where the value comes from. That there are hundreds and thousands of years of human experience with these different plants to figure out how to best use them. The whole trade system and where people placed value was not in fiat or faith-based currency. It was in things that had real material usefulness for them. Spices were those things. And I think we can't get away from the fact that many of them are just delicious. And there you have it.

Tara: (chuckles)

Tara: I think you've just given us so much information that I'm not even sure where to go next, but, um...

Matt: That's when Myke says, "Oh God, you know what? I wasn't recording."

Group: (laughs)

Upbeat music begins.

Tara: Seems like a good time to speak with Jasmine, who is our resident spice trader here at Trader Joe's.

Jasmine: Hi, my name is Jasmine and I'm the category manager of grocery at Trader Joe's.

Matt: So really the spice trade is this culmination of thousands of years of work and travel and learning. How does that feel?

Jasmine: Exhilarating! It does! It feels amazing! Taking something that has been around for thousands of years and just giving it a new twist. And we've done such an amazing job at it and we don't intend on stopping. If you walk into a Trader Joe's store you'll find anywhere from 25 to 30 spices. During the holidays you'll find some more, like obviously you'll find pumpkin spice and cinnamon and nutmeg and some of the more seasonally relevant ones. And then in the summertime you'll find some really interesting grinders like we do a South African Smoke, you'll find a barbecue rub. On average I'd say 30.

Tara: If you shop in other grocery stores, spices tend to be really expensive. Sort of shockingly so.

Jasmine: We put a huge focus on value. For us, value is the intersection of quality and price. It's really just knowing what you're buying, where you're buying it from, aggressively negotiating with the supplier and partnering with someone who understands your vision and just going directly to them.

Tara: There could still be this assumption that because Trader Joe's spices are inexpensive that they must be lower quality and there's no truth to that.

Jasmine: So our product is just as great as any other retailer, if not better. What actually makes ours unique is that ours are non irradiated. I could get into the technicals, but...

Matt: Go for it!

Tara: Go for it!

Matt: Jasmine get technical on us.

Tara: That could be a new segment.

Jasmine: Irradiation is a process of exposing food to a controlled amount of energy called ionizing radiation. Essentially it's a manufacturing process that's used to enhance shelf life and kill certain types of bacteria. We don't do that to our products.

Matt: But you know, this is where our business model and our customers buying stuff frequently, the inventory turn...

Jasmine: Yes

Matt: ...(that jargony bit about how quickly we sell stuff) it really matters for this type of product because fresher spices have more flavor, more aroma. We don't have an "everything under the sun, a to z selection", so how do you choose?

Jasmine: You know, a few years ago we actually discontinued cayenne pepper and then we realized that we'd be upsetting all those people who do Master Cleanse in January.

Matt: And they're grumpy to begin with!

Jasmine: (laughs) I've been known to do that myself so...

Matt: I'm cleansing here like, okay,..

Group: (laughing)

Matt: ...thanks for the info.

Jasmine: Well, you know exactly who they are.

Matt: Because they're only buying cayenne pepper and nothing else.

Upbeat music begins.

Tara: What's big right now in spices?

Jasmine: You definitely cannot talk about spices at Trader Joe's and not mention the Everything but the Bagel Seasoning. I mean you want to talk about setting trends? We're setting them. You could walk into a coffee shop and see an Everything but the Bagel croissant.

Matt: ...latte.

Jasmine: (laughs) ...latte. Probably soon, you might even see a latte.

Tara: Maybe even an Everything but the Bagel bagel.

Jasmine: There you go. I think somebody did that.

Tara: Very Meta.

Matt: Full Circle.

Jasmine: We recently launched an Everything but the Bagel Dip, yogurt dip, I believe. The other day I tasted Everything but the Bagel Potato Chip, which didn't have enough of, we thought didn't have enough garlic nor onion flavor and the sesame seeds were hard to adhere to the shape of the potato and the garlicks had all fallen off. So that's still a work in progress but..

Matt: It's a tough job but someone's gotta do it.

Tara: You have to eat potato chips.

Jasmine: I think we have such an amazing array of spice blends. Like we did a Mushroom & Company UMAMI Seasoning that performed really well. A lot of the reasons why these seasoning blends are performing really well is because a lot of customers are following these Keto and Paleo diets. These seasoning blends are a great way to add flavor without adding too many calories or adding sodium cause some of our spice blends don't have sodium. The ones I mentioned definitely do.

Tara: But they don't have sugar.

Jasmine: You know I've read all these industry reports that say people are cooking less, people are cooking less. I don't think our Trader Joe's customers are cooking less. I don't know if they're cooking things from scratch, but they're definitely continuing to prepare foods. And I think spices are such an amazing way to enhance the flavor of things. Our spice sales are basically off the charts. I usually just hang out in the grocery aisle cause I want to hear what people have to say. I was actually facing the spice section.

Matt: All right we need a retail grocery jargon alert.

Sound: Electronic newsflash sound.

Matt: 'Facing', you don't mean that you are standing doe eyed in front of the shelf.

Jasmine: (laughing)

Matt: Facing is a type of work, sometimes known as blocking, but facing means you have a part of the store that's been actively shopped and you need to pull product forward to face it so that the shelf is faced and full looking.

Jasmine: Yes. And the lady came over and she was just kind of gazing at the whole set. She was just staring at it honestly. And I asked her, I said, "Is there something that I can help you find?" And she said, "Oh, I was just looking for something new." And I thought to myself, there is no other retailer in the world where customers come to, to find something new.

Tara: What's coming up now? Anything interesting coming?

Jasmine: Oh my gosh, we have so many amazing blends coming in. So there's one coming in during the holidays, which is a spice, a seasoning blend set. So there are four different spices in one box and you won't be able to find these as standalone products on our shelves now.

Matt: We're going to call this the Beyond Your Basic Seasoning Blend Set.

Jasmine: It's amazing. The one with the mustard.

Matt: Yes. The fiery honey mustard. It's beautiful and it's super tasty.

Jasmine: I was fortunate enough to score some samples, so I used it at home right now and I'm looking forward to buying it on the shelves.

Matt: How do you use it at home?

Jasmine: Honestly, I'll just add it to like eggs or something, you know, just anything I'm cooking. I'll just add a little bit. Or like chicken. I think it adds like a little bit of sweetness.

Matt: So that's sort of a gift giving either for yourself or someone that you know that likes to cook. What else is coming?

Jasmine: Furikake. That's another one. F. U. R. I. K. A. K. E.

Matt: So which is a classic Japanese seasoning blend consisting mostly of seaweed. I know that for some people seaweed is an intense experience. I love it. So it's kind of like those roasted seaweed snacks that we have in a shakable form. It's amazing on poached eggs, rice, it's just right.

Tara: When do we think customers will see that in the store?

Jasmine: Obviously it has to make its way here...by boat. Probably before the end of the year.

Tara: That's great! In general, how long do spices last?

Jasmine: Typically two years.

Matt: And it's interesting because barring some unusual situation, it's not about it going bad. It doesn't become unsafe, it loses its potency. It becomes less of why you bought it in the first place. It just becomes powder.

Jasmine: Honestly, the only time I've ever thrown away spices is when I moved. And I just figured I'd just buy a whole new set.

Matt: And if they're not too far gone, you can sort of do a light toasting. So people will recommend in like a dry pan, a dry skillet, just a little bit of stove top toasting will sort of reawaken some of the flavors and you know, this works for larger things like peppercorns and some of the whole seeds spices. Like, I don't know if you would like heating a pan of cinnamon, just sounds like a mess.

Jasmine: (chuckles) I don't know?

Tara: I think you'd never get that pan clean again. Do you have a favorite Trader Joe's spice?

Jasmine: So I didn't know what this was until ...cause it was resurrected...

Matt: The Lazarus spice..

Jasmine: Noooo, dukkah!

Matt: Oh dukkah!

Tara: That's a Matt Sloan favorite too.

Matt: I think dukkah's fun. If you take haricot vert amandine, like a classic green bean dish, and you just simple preparation, green beans tossed with the dukkah and it just is a whole new version of kind of boring green beans that are delicious. Dukkah is not radically different from Everything but the Bagel. I mean I'm going to go out on a limb and like everyone's going to be like, "Matt, you're crazy!" I think dukkah is a better product. I think dukkah is more versatile. It's less salty, it has more stuff. It has far more interesting flavors. This is all opinion certainly.

Tara: You're going to get hate mail for this one, Matt.

Matt: Take a number.

Jasmine: It's coming back in January.

Matt: It is?! I am so excited. That is the news of the week.

Tara: Anything else you want to say about spices? I feel like we've covered a lot of ground.

Jasmine: To the lady who said, "I'm looking for something new," keep looking. We'll have them. They're coming.

Matt: You've got to do a sign off where it's like, "So I'm Jasmine and maybe I'll ask you about spices in the grocery aisle the next time you're in your Trader Joe's."

Jasmine: (laughter)

Musical transition....jet taking off

Lori: So I'm Lori Latta. I am the vice president of product innovation at Trader Joe's and really that just means I come up with products that I think would be great for our customers.

Matt: And travel the world doing that.

Tara: Do you ever get tired of flying, Lori?

Lori: Yeah, once in a blue moon. But it's a really great time for me to not have to talk to anybody. I don't talk to anybody sitting next to me.

Tara: (chuckles)

Lori: I do loads of reading and knitting.

Matt: Are you able to finish a knitting project on a flight?

Lori: Well, people have said, "Well, how many flights is that sweater?" (laughs)

Matt: Wow, that's interesting.

Tara: Okay, all that travel takes you to lots of places where people are growing and blending interesting spices.

Lori: Sometimes if I'm eating at a restaurant, I might have something with a really interesting flavor, so I'll ask about it. And so some of them come from that. But I do have a passion for going to markets, outdoor markets. And those are places where you really find some incredible spice blends and flavors.

Tara: I'm going to dive right in to one of my favorites, South African Smoke Seasoning. How did that happen? What's that all about?

Lori: Well, I was at a food show in León, and I ran into somebody on the South African pavilion. On this little pavilion was a guy who had smoked chilies. I thought the smoked chilies were really cool, but I thought that was kind of a stretch. So we worked on a blend, which is actually produced in South Africa. They are putting that into a grinder. So we put the smoke into that grinder. Those chilies are so smoky that they just pervade everything. And I think that's, so then it combines with the other stuff I think is what happens then it all becomes really smoky.

Matt: It's a relatively simple list of things. It's the chili peppers, it's sea salt, garlic and basil. But the smokiness and then I think the grind, like these are sort of large pieces and they get ground into finer pieces. There's some, I mean it's like, I'm going to use the word synergy and I don't like to use that word, but there's something

that these are greater than the sum of their parts. Right? That's amazing. Now I personally, I take issue with that we only sell this in "seasonal" way. So we don't have this all the time. And it's like I keep begging, pleading like let's get more of this.

Lori: Well part of it is that the guy who does the smoking also does the growing, and I'm not sure how much he can actually grow.

Tara: More blends. We would be remiss if we didn't speak at length about the big one.

Matt: You know, I think that needs a little bit of reverb. Let's make this really big.

Tara: Okay, ready?

Matt: Yes.

Tara: (OMINOUS ECHO-Y REVERB) The big one.

Matt: Everything bagels and, sort of like, everything stuff has been around and we've sold everything bagels and things like that. And so it's like the distillation of that flavor that you can put on a bunch of other stuff.

Tara: Everything but the Bagel. How did that come about?

Lori: We were just talking about different blends one day and that one came up in conversation and then we tweaked it to reduce the salt and they've had a lot of garlic. We just kept tweaking it until we thought it was a pretty wonderful blend.

Tara: Another blend that we introduced a couple of years ago now I think, it's a huge favorite I think among every single person I've ever spoken with who has tried it. And that's our Chili Lime Seasoning.

Music begins.

Tara: I sprinkle it on avocados and just eat the avocado with a spoon. I mean it's just one of the greatest flavor combinations.

Lori: It's really incredibly good on mango and then you can, of course use it on just about any type of meat or anything like that.

Matt: Yea...going into the wayback machine.

Sound: *(time machine)*

Matt: In 2014, we actually had an assortment of spices that I guess I'd call Middle Eastern Mediterranean. We called it the Spice Route.

International music begins.

Matt: And in that set of four different spices, we had a dry form of zhug. And this set was amazing. This is another one of the things where it's like man...

Lori: I know I miss it.

Matt: ...I'd wish this thing came back.

Lori: I love that one.

Matt: Because it had, you know, sumac, pilpelchuma from Libya, ras el hanout from North Africa, and the zhug was so interesting. At the end of 2017 you introduced a new version of zhug, right? This sort of saucy version.

Lori: I was making this for several years at home and everybody kept saying, "Bird, make me some of that, make me some of that." Then my kids moved away and like, "Would you make it and send it?" And like, "No, I'm not making it and sending it, but I'll see what I can do about this."

Tara: *(chuckles)*

Lori: And that's where this was born. And it has really resonated with customers because it is truly the greatest condiment sauce ever.

Matt: You know that needs some reverb too.

Lori: *(WITH HEAVY MOMENTOUS REVERB)* The greatest condiment sauce ever.

Tara: *(cracks up)*

Matt: Okay.

Lori: And now I don't have to make it home anymore. And that's really awesome.

Tara: We have some spices that you have developed that actually aren't blends. Any store you go to has paprika, but they don't have the paprika that we have. What's different about the paprika that we offer?

Matt: It's delicious.

Lori: Yeah. I actually just used that paprika last night on a piece of meat with a tiny bit of salt and it was amazing. It made the whole thing taste smoky. This is grown and produced by a company which is run by four Spanish sisters near Valencia in Spain. And I actually met them at a food show in France where they had a little booth and they had these really cute tins. I started talking to them and they had this incredible paprika and that's where it comes from.

Matt: So this is going to take this into a more pedestrian zone. But if I want anything to taste like amazing barbecue potato chips, I put this Smoked Paprika on it. Or if you sort of like make roasted potatoes, like you might think about a tapas bar in Spain, this is the secret weapon. I'm going to give myself a little reverb on this one.

Matt: (HUGE MOMENTOUS REVERB) It's the secret weapon.

Tara: That's great.

Lori: They somehow coax complexity out of this paprika. So you get the sweetness and you get a little bit of spice, but the smokiness and the, the level of smokiness is really astounding in here.

Tara: Let's change gears a little bit and talk about things that are not yet available at Trader Joe's, but that are coming. Something that's not actually a spice, necessarily, but that's used as a seasoning...we have a vanilla bean paste coming.

Lori: I've been wanting to do this for a really long time, so I'm very excited about this.

Tara: And that's coming in. That'll be in relatively soon into stores. Probably by the time this podcast airs that'll be in stores.

Lori: Yeah!

Tara: Thanks Lori for coming and sitting with us and chatting with us again. We appreciate it.

Lori: You're welcome.

Matt: Yeah, thanks. Hit the road!

Lori: I'm going to the Ivory Coast tomorrow where they grow cacao.

Matt: Safe travels.

Transition music begins.

Matt: I'm now thinking about that customer standing in a store looking at that shelving with spices, wanting to find something new. Catherine's here. Catherine's a product developer and Catherine works on making ideas into real things.

Catherine: I know that you read customer emails and I have an email from one of our crew members.

Upbeat music begins.

Catherine: So this comes from crew member Eric, Sammamish, Washington. "Hello, I just wanted to say, these Organic Elote Corn Dippers are flat out amazing. As enjoying them, I thought to myself, 'I want this flavor on everything,' which got me thinking...Everything but the Elote Seasoning. Low carb diets are a great trend right now. Removing the corn chip while keeping all that zesty street flavor would be amazing. If there's a way to make this, it would be so good."

Tara: Everything But the Elote is a great idea.

Catherine: So we made it happen. It's dehydrated corn. There's some parmesan cheese, chili, chipotle peppers, a little bit of buttermilk flavor, cilantro and cumin.

Tara: And that's it?

Catherine: And that's it. It's a very simple seasoning but it's great on corn. You can add it to vegetables, chicken. I think it's going to be the next big thing.

Matt: So it's interesting. So there is corn. So there's some corn in this so then you can actually have it like, it will make things that don't have corn have a little bit of that (for lack of a better term) corny flavor.

Catherine: I've tried it on cauliflower rice and that was delightful, added a lot of flavor. I know some people have added it to enchiladas. Zero calories, zero fat.

Tara: So when do we expect that this will show up in Trader Joe's stores?

Catherine: Probably the beginning of next year.

Tara: And does crew member Eric from Sammamish know this is coming or is this going to be his introduction to the fact that it's happening?

Catherine: This is his introduction. So I think he's going to be very excited.

Matt: I hope he's sitting down.

Catherine: (giggles)

Music ends.

Tara: Matt, we started this episode with a history lesson of sorts about the spice trade, and now it feels like we're pretty much up to date.

Closing music begins.

Matt: I think we are. And please, give us a rating wherever you get your podcasts. We'd really appreciate that.

Tara: And speaking of where you get your podcasts, we also post these episodes on our YouTube channel.

Matt: Oh, how do we look?

Tara: Like a big red Trader Joe's logo. But it's an easy way to listen.

Matt: And be sure to hit that free subscribe button. It is free after all, and it's worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening

Matt: And thanks for listening.