

Transcript — Episode 20: Cheese, Cheese, and More Cheese with Trader Joe's

Tara: Let's admit it. Sometimes we get a little cheesy on Inside Trader Joe's.

Matt: Really, Tara? I think your theory about cheese has some holes in it. See what I did there?

Tara: That's Gouda.

Matt: I think this could be one of our GRATER episodes. Here's a slice.

[Music begins.]

Ena: If a customer asked me about his cheese, in particular, and I explained to them basically what it's all what I feel about it, I also offer a taste.

Tara: We call it the Cheese-opedia. It's a document that provides loads of information about every single cheese that we offer in the store.

Mike: We are in the Wookey Hole Caves, about 20 miles South of Bristol.

Matt: I'm going to throw down the challenge. I think you're ready for it. Goat cheese. What works with goat cheese?

Chris: Maybe a crisp Sauvignon Blanc?

[Music ends]

Tara: From the Trader Joe's mothership in Monrovia, California.

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

[Theme music begins and two bells ring at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.]

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, the Director of Words and Phrases and Clauses at Trader Joe's.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the Marketing – Products guy. Let's just get this out of the way early. My first job at Trader Joe's was cutting the cheese.

Tara: That never gets old, Matt. And really you have to start somewhere.

Matt: It's true. Once upon a time before we had centralized distribution centers doing the handling, cutting and wrapping of cheese, we did that work at each store.

[Theme music ends and upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Kind of, sorry that I missed that, Matt, but I'm also kind of glad that we've really come a long way when it comes to cheese. I mean, these days, all of that cheese gets cut in facilities around the country that are as close as we can get to our stores. And it's done in a way that saves us money, which in turn saves our customers money, which is great. Matt, you know, people who haven't really discovered our cheese case, when they first see it, they're just shocked at the pricing because you know, we'll offer a cheese that might be \$25 a pound at a specialty cheese shop and they think, well that must be different, but it's not. It's the same cheese from the same part of the world from that same tiny little cheese maker, but we just buy so much of it that we can get a better price.

Matt: Sure. That's just really the Trader Joe business model playing out, being made real.

Tara: You can buy sliced cheese for your sandwiches and you can buy shredded cheese to put on a pizza or to add to eggs or you know, so we have the mozzarellas and the, you know, we have a Mexican style shredded cheese blend.

Matt: It's like ease of use...so things that are grated, sliced, shredded. I just love what our stores are able to do within this idea of everyday cheese because those blocks and shreds and slices, with all due respect, they can be a little boring. They're sort of the commodity end of the spectrum, but we have a ton of great cheese that can be everyday cheese that's really special. Like a Manchego for example.

Tara: One of my favorite everyday cheeses that we have is the sharp Cheddar from New Zealand.

[Music ends.]

Tara: And you can bring that home for not a lot of money.

[Chicago store ambience background noise with a bell ringing three times.]

Tara: Okay, Matt, there are important things to discuss when it comes to cheese. And I feel like maybe we need a little... "Professor Matt explains it all to you."

Matt: Well, good luck with that.

[String instrumental begins.]

Tara: If you're a cheesemonger, you're someone who sells cheese.

Matt: Sure, and we are often mongering cheese. And I think of that is like similar to hankering for, but it's not exactly the same.

Tara: Right.

Matt: Mongering is to really collect and offer up for sale.

Tara: And we often will hanker for a hunk of cheese.

Matt: We will do that.

Tara: A turophile, which may not be as commonly used, but that's somebody who is kind of like a cheese aficionado.

Matt: It's an abnormal form of the Greek *tyros* for cheese and then, you know, *philos* is sort of loving. And so you're a cheese lover.

Tara: Right.

Matt: If you're a turophile.

Tara: Well, and you sound way smarter if you're speaking in a form of ancient Greek than if you just say cheese lover.

[Music ends.]

Tara: How does cheese happen? I mean, we know that there's milk.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: So it's, you know, it's often described as milk's great leap toward immortality. We all remember Little Miss Muffet, sitting on the tuffet, eating her curds and whey. But in cheese making, this distinction and separation of whey from curds, curds and whey is really important. And what you do with milk is, you need to introduce some enzymes to start that process. The introduction of these enzymes into the milk starts to form the curds. It starts to change it and it's actually where you get that word curdle. So if something's curdled, it's turning into curds. It kind of sounds yucky in most contexts. It's like don't drink the curdled milk unless it's turning into cheese.

Tara: You remove the whey. The curds are the solid. And that gets pressed into cheese molds?

Matt: Basically. And there's a lot of stuff that you can have happen along the way. You can introduce other cultures. Sometimes those cultures turn the texture into something less like a block of Monterey Jack cheese and more like a creamy Brie.

Tara: And the curds become the cheese.

Matt: So you can add a lot of things to the curds when you're making cheese that will really change how they wind up, impact the appearance, the aroma, the flavor, the texture. So you introduce basically blue cheese mold. And mold on cheese is a really tricky thing because it's totally normal. And yet there are some instances when you don't want moldy blue cheese. And that's what's fascinating to me cause you buy moldy cheese on purpose. And then I get upset when non-moldy cheese gets moldy.

[Music ends.]

[Upbeat music begins again.]

Tara: We provide to all of our stores a living document. We call it the Cheese-opedia. It's a document that provides loads of information about every single cheese that we offer in the store. So if you are a customer and you, you have a question, "Is it cow's milk or goat's milk or sheep's milk?" You can find out where that cheese is from.

Matt: Absolutely. And most of those points, while they are covered on the label...

Tara: Sure.

Matt: ...the actual product label, this is an organized resource that the crew can use and even frame up how they might want to do pairings.

Tara: You can ask a crew member in our stores and they can access the Cheese-opedia and find you the answer to those questions.

[Music ends.]

[Hokey car speeding noise, traffic, to quickly make the point that we're heading out on the road.]

Matt: So this is a little road trip.

[Moving through a store to find Ena.]

Tara: Matt, I think we are looking for Ena here at the Silver Lake store in Los Angeles.

Ena: Well my name is Ena and I've been working for Trader Joe's for 14 years and here in charge of the cheese section for eight years.

Tara: You want to go into the back room and have a conversation?

Ena: Absolutely.

Tara: Great.

Matt: Let's go.

Tara: Let's go.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: We have heard from several people that you are the person in this store to go to with a cheese question.

Ena: It is one of my favorite foods. It just evolved into being more interested in all the cheeses and you know, what, what their flavors are and let's, you know, the tastings and...

Tara: You must have customers coming in saying, "I have to do a cheese board and I don't know what to put in it."

Ena: Right.

Tara: How do you advise them? What do you do?

Ena: Well, first of all, I advise him that, per person, the answer should be about three to four ounces of cheese.

Matt: I was thinking per mouthful...

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: ...or no, that's total.

Ena: Yeah, it's advice three to four ounces per person, then you want four varieties.

Matt: How do you keep it simple?

Ena: I figure Bries are a sure thing to get.

Tara: So that's your soft cheese.

Ena: Semi-soft would be something like Gouda, Jarlsberg, Stilton, blue cheese. And then your semi-hard which is Cheddars and Manchego. And then the hard cheeses, which would be like Parmesan, Pecorino, Asiago.

Tara: Do you put the stinky cheese on the same board with the non-stinky cheese?

Ena: I mean, you could separate it with meats or, you know, fruits or,

Matt: Or a wall.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: I mean, there are lots of ways to, to make that cheese feel bad. He's like, "Hey guys, wait up." And no one waits for the stinky cheese.

Ena: (laughs)

Ena: It's so fun. I mean, you can, you can be so creative with it and there are so many different food items you can include in that cheese board, you know? And you can be artful about it. Cut it, in like, if it's a rectangle, if it's a square, you can cut it again to make it a triangle, triangle pieces or you know, just be like, like Parmesan could be in little cubes. And not all cheeses have to be cut. You know, like Bries would be an excellent cheese to just leave alone.

[Upbeat music ends and game show music starts.]

Mtt: So let's go to the board and let's play Cheese Boarding – True or False?

Ena: (giggle)

Matt: True or false?

Ena: Okay.

Matt: A cheese board has to be an actual board made of wood.

Ena: No, false.

[Ding.]

Matt: Cheese boarding, true or false? There is a prescribed time when you must eat cheese.

Ena: No, never a prescribed time.

[Ding.]

Matt: It can be equally suitable as an appetizer, meal, dessert.

Ena: Yes.

Tara: There's a wrong way to do a cheese board? True or false?

Ena: False. I mean there's no wrong way.

[Ding.]

Matt: True or false? Kids don't like cheese boards.

Ena: I think it's false.

[Ding.]

[Game show music ends.]

Tara: How do you highlight the spotlight cheeses that we bring in monthly?

[Upbeat music begins.]

Ena: It has a big spot in the center and we put beautiful signage. We just really like, try and have as many people as possible to taste it

Tara: That's a terrific idea for cheese. I think because sometimes people are intimidated by a cheese they don't recognize.

Matt: I think that fear factor is real. Is it funky? Is it stinky cheese? And you're supposed to act like you like it, but you're afraid of it. There's a lot of intimidation going on.

Ena: (laughs)

Tara: You don't know what that tastes like.

Ena: Yeah.

Tara: You'd like to try it. Sure, let's open it up!

Ena: Yeah, let's do it!

Tara: Yeah.

Tara: Can you freeze cheese and more importantly,...

Matt: Please.

Tara: ...would you?

Ena: I wouldn't because I eat it so fast, but...

Tara: (chuckle)

Ena: Apparently you can, but it's advisable to shred it. It freezes better shredded and sliced, but sliced, you stack it and you staggered it so that when you take it out of the freezer, it's easier to break the pieces out.

Matt: If you have a bunch of weird stuff in your freezer that makes your freezer smell funny, that cheese could take on those aromas. So clear out the freezer before you do that. Break it down for us. The perfect grilled cheese sandwich, that classic iconic meal. Deceptively simple. How do you go about making one? What is needed for a perfect grilled cheese sandwich?

Ena: Well, I'm going to start with sourdough, because that is my go to bread. I love it. And then I'm going to put either Unexpected Cheddar or the English Coastal because those two are the ones that I always go to. Sometimes I put pickles.

Matt: You're going spears, slices or relish?

Ena: I like rounds.

Matt: Okay.

Ena: I just put a few rounds.

Matt: So you're thinking an aged Cheddar with a little bit of the crunchy salt crystal action going on.

Ena: Yes.

Matt: A sharper flavor profile and then you might balance that. I think that the tanginess of a sourdough bread kind of supports that.

Ena: Yes.

Matt: But I thought the inclusion of a sweet bread and butter pickle slice, that was a fascinating counterpoint. That's pretty neat

Ena: Now if you want to take it a step further, which...

Matt: We do.

Ena: You can make that like a French toast version.

Tara: Whoa.

Matt: Oh man, that...yes!

Tara: Oh my gosh, that's...yes!

Matt: So the Roasted Red Pepper Tomato Soup is the classic accompaniment to a grill cheese sandwich.

Tara: And it's so much better than just going with a regular tomato soup.

Matt: It's the ridiculous idea of synergy, it just haunts me. But things that are more together than what they are on their own, greater than the sum of their parts.

Tara: We're back to syner-cheese.

Matt: Syner-cheese.

Ena: Aw. (laughs)

Tara: (laughs)

[Music ends.]

[Airport noises — distant flight announcements, etc.]

Tara: Ena mentioned the English Coastal Cheddar. That's one of my favorites too. Oh and the English Cheddar with Caramelized Onions, yum! I'm at the airport and this is going to be fun. I'm taking you to the beautiful English countryside where those fabulous cheeses are made.

[Jet taking off.]

[Very light echo to the cave portion that begins here. Very soft trickling of water in the background.]

[Light music begins.]

Tara: Mike, I'm gonna ask you to tell us a little bit about where we are.

Mike: We are in the Wookey Hole Caves, about 20 miles South of Bristol. These caves have been showcased for a couple of centuries now, with many, many people coming in always with that fascination about being underground seeing rock formation: stalagmite, stalactites. What we've used them for over the last 10 or 12 years is actually putting cheese in and it's the ideal place because of the humidity, the temperature for storing cheese and maturing cheese and we're giving it an amazing flavor.

Tara: It's legitimately a cave.

Mike: I think the entrance, I mean was found like I say many, many years ago, well over a hundred years ago. The Victorians used to come in here and even before then. Obviously since then, people have poked around in here and dived and dugout bits and find other caverns, which is obviously the cavern we're in today. As you can see. it's the brain, I would say it's around about 4,000 square feet. So you can imagine this, you know, we're 150 meters, sorry, 150 feet underground. And the space we've got down here is amazing.

Tara: It is amazing. The rock formations, things that look like they've never been touched by humans and they're just staring right at us. What is it about this type of cave that is so perfect for aging cheese?

Mike: The area that we keep the cheese stays quite dry. Although you can hear a lot of water around us and obviously water's responsible for these amazing formations of many years of the water running over them. But it creates a very, very high humidity. And with traditional cheese, if you can keep the outside of the cheese moist and soft, you don't get ingress bluing, which you see in a lot of traditional cheese. So with the cheese we keep here, we get a great quality and flavor with the cheese.

[Walking with echo...transition to new location.]

Tara: Tell me where we are now and what's happening in this room.

Mike: Okay, so we're now in the cheese cabin, which you can see we've got cheese all around us on both sides. Where we are is quite a tight space. The rock above us is conglomerate, which is a type of rock within the Mendip Hills. You can smell, I was gonna say you could smell the flavor, you can smell the cheese, but you can smell the rock.

Tara: Yes.

Mike: You know, a piece of cheese, whatever it's put close to and it's not completely wrapped, it will pick up the flavor of wherever it is. Which gives us this great nutty flavor in the cheese. The percentage of humidity here is around about a 100% and it's around about 45 to 52 degrees in temperature.

Tara: And looking at the different cheeses here and though they're all the same size, they all look a little different.

Mike: We mature on the farm for about the first nine to ten months. Then it stays up here for three to six months, it depending on when it's graded and the flavor, we're looking for preferred optimum flavor. The different amounts of mold, you see, is the length of time that the cheese's been in here.

Tara: Oh.

Mike: It depends on when the cheese is made. Obviously May cheese and September cheese for us, to me, always tastes the best because of the extra carotene in the milk. It tastes pretty good all year round actually.

[Music ends.]

[Cheese factory ambience noise in the background.]

Tara: So we're in the factory now, and actually we just got through shooting some video showing the entire process of making Cheddar. You should check it out on the Trader Joe's YouTube channel, which you can find at [youtube.com/traderjoes](https://www.youtube.com/traderjoes). So Mike, how long have you been doing business with Trader Joe's?

Mike: Do you know off the top of my head, I can't tell exactly, but it would be somewhere in around about 12 or 15 years.

[Music begins.]

Tara: That sounds about familiar to me because I feel like I remember the first time I tasted the Coastal Cheddar and I still remember how much it made me smile because it just tasted so good. What's the future? I mean, do you see yourselves continuing to just grow and?

Mike: Yeah, I think there is, you know, it's like all business, you know, you have your ups and your downs. What everybody says is that American cheese isn't great, but actually it is. There is some actually pretty good American domestic cheese makers now.

Tara: I agree.

Mike: Which is not good news for me. But what I have to do is stay one jump ahead of them (chuckles) if I can.

Tara: We love having cheeses from around the world, because they're all, they taste different, you know, depending on the milk that is used to make the cheese, you're going to get a different flavor. And the cultures that are used to make the cheese, you're going to get a little different flavor. So even though, yes, there are plenty of great American cheese makers, they're... they're not making English cheese. Thank you again for taking us around. This has really been exciting.

Mike: Well thank you for coming all the way over here to see us.

[Cheese factory noise ends and jet noise again. She's headed back home. Music ends.]

[Game show music begins.]

Tara: Matt, it's time for a little game show fun on Inside Trader Joe's. We're going to call it Cheese Counter Cheese.

Matt: What do you like to put by way of cheese in an omelet?

Tara: I'm really boring about this, but I just like the Shredded 3 Cheese Blend.

Matt: Ah, okay.

Tara: It melts really evenly and really quickly and it's just good.

Matt: I'm going to go with a little fresh goat cheese, maybe one with some herbs.

Tara: Hmm, okay. Pasta. So this is a big category because you could be talking anything.

Matt: I'll go Pecorino Romano.

Tara: For me, I can't have a plate of pasta of any kind without sprinkling it with a little grated Parmesan Romano blend. It's the two hard cheeses with different flavor profiles come together in one place and it just makes my life so easy.

Matt: It's burger time, cheeseburger time.

Tara: Cheeseburger time in my family is all about Swiss cheese.

Matt: Really!

Tara: All about Swiss cheese.

Matt: This is tried and true and I feel a little boring in saying it. Unexpected Cheddar on a burger is great.

Tara: Hmm.

Matt: It has enough vibrant sharpness to cut through everything else that's going on.

[Game show music ends and transitions to upbeat music.]

Tara: I want to know what your favorite cheese is for a grilled cheese sandwich.

Matt: I'm going to go the English Cheddar with Caramelized Onion because it's so rich and in that focused presentation, you get the cheese and all of its glory with nothing else to distract you.

Tara: Okay, me, it's the smoked Gouda.

Matt: Nice, nice. Now we've got to go holiday classic cheese ball. Not the kind of person, not that uncle, not that guy, but cheese ball. I love the Pesto Gouda for a cheese ball because it's green so it looks like a piece of kryptonite. It's weird and you kind of have the fun visual, but it has that classic basil pesto flavor that is really nice in that application.

Tara: We haven't had the Pesto Gouda in stores for a while, but it'll be back again this spring. And I have to be honest with you, I have never made a cheese ball.

Matt: It's very retro.

Tara: Yeah, it is. I kinda liked that. It kind of fits with the whole fondue theme.

Matt: Absolutely. So bring your turtlenecks.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: I don't know where that came from. Sorry.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: (chuckles)

[Music ends.]

Tara: Okay, Matt, as promised, we have our Category Manager for Wine Chris Condit here with us.

Matt Finally!

Tara: Yes, I know!

Chris: Hello!

[Music begins.]

Tara: So Chris, you're on the spot.

Chris: Excellent, good place to be.

Tara: Okay, so let's start with Cheddar. If I have a rich maybe sharp Cheddar, what kind of wine do I want to drink with that?

Chris: So Cheddar, you know, rich, sharp, lots of flavor. So why don't we pair that with our Platinum Reserve Rutherford Cab, which is big, rich, full flavored and ridiculous value cause not a lot of Rutherford Cabs in the world for \$14.99 except at Trader Joe's.

Tara: Okay. Hard cheese. Parmesan. I think a lot of people don't think to eat Parmesan just on its own. If you're eating Parmesan cheese as part of a cheese tray or a cheese board, what's a good wine to pair with Parmesan?

Chris: Why don't we do a little bit of the salty with some sweet and some bubbles? A little hint of sweetness maybe. How about that big bottle of Prosecco we've got? The Incanto Prosecco?

Tara: And so it's an Italian cheese with an Italian wine.

Chris: Yeah, nothing says holidays like breaking out a magnum of sparkling wine.

Tara: Right, okay. (laughs)

Matt: I'm going to throw down the challenge. I think you're ready for it. Goat cheese. What works with goat cheese?

Chris: I think you need something with a little more backbone to kind of cut that goaty flavor, if you will. Maybe a crisp Sauvignon Blanc Sancerre or something out of New Zealand perhaps. Maybe even a Hefeweizen beer.

Matt: Oh, okay. Nice.

Tara: That I wouldn't have thought of. Okay, one of my favorite cheeses is Manchego.

Chris: Let's do like the country for country kind of thing. We have a beautiful wine that we've carried for a while now. It's our Puerta de Plata Spanish Wine from Northern Spain. It's a Tempranillo, Grenache blend and I think it pairs beautifully with a nice Manchego.

Matt: It's an interesting thing if you kind of stick close to home as it were, like if you had a wine from where the cheese is made, does that usually work?

Chris: I think so. It's like, eat local honey and it cures your allergies. Same idea.

Matt: Perfect! Okay, I get it. That's what we'll tell everybody

Chris: I don't want to be out on the airwaves saying this is going to cure your allergies, but you're going to feel a lot better.

Tara: (chuckles)

Tara: Blue cheese in general, right? I think wine is difficult with blue cheese because it's so strong.

Chris: Uh, oh boy. You could do kind of a classic pairing. You could go with a port. So fortified wine that's bigger, richer and can maybe stand up to it or go the sweet route. Riesling, Gewurztraminer, sweet with a little hint of spice. Or we have a couple of great stouts that are coming out this holiday season.

Matt: Beer pairing.

Chris: Yeah, oh, beer pairings are wonderful. We've got our Tiramisu Pastry Stout. We've got our Babka Stout. I think those would be fantastic with blue cheese.

Tara: If you've made a cheese board that has a little bit of everything on it, but you don't want to serve every single wine that we sell at Trader Joe's, what works with almost everything?

Chris: How about an 18 year old Highland Scotch?

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: Ooo.

Chris: That's good with everything.

Tara: (laughs) Thanks for coming in and talking to us. We appreciate it.

[Music ends.]

Tara: When we choose our holiday cheeses every year we're always looking at which of the cheeses from last holiday are we bringing back.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: What worked and what should come back and what didn't work and what can we not bring back to create some room for some new things that will be exciting.

Tara: But we always carry fondue at the holidays.

Matt: Yes, you could make it yourself, but if you've had either of the offerings that we put out this time of year, you would quickly realize you don't need to make it yourself. These are perfect.

Tara: Yeah, my family has a tradition of having a fondue party on Christmas Eve. And one of our favorite cheeses that's not fondue that comes back during the holiday season and we've had it for a few years now is the Fromage Pavé, that really beautifully soft, ripened cheese that's really delicate and doesn't have too much stinky, pungent stuff going on. But is just smooth and creamy. So we have, we have some new cheeses coming in for this holiday season.

Matt: We do. One of our product innovators was in the French city of Leon and she met the producers of a small soft ripened cheese. It's called Langres and it's actually from the Champagne region. It's made with cow's milk from locally raised cattle. It's a soft ripened small cheese and a lot of times as cheese ages and ripens, it's often turned and that turning helps it have a consistent shape. This cheese is never turned and it actually ends up developing this divot or concave top. And the story goes that in this region of Champagne, you have this amazing cheese and you have champagne. So small wheel, so you serve, you set up a whole wheel, you make a small cut across the top of it and pour just a splash of champagne on top of it...

Tara: Ooo.

Matt: ...and then you dig in. But this is a kind of cheese that once you dig into it, it goes everywhere. It's an oozy, creamy, rich unctuous cheese. You need to have guests at the ready. It's just a wonderful thing that you don't get to experience very often. It's a little over six ounces for this small wheel where like, you know, about \$7.00, \$6.99. Also from France is a really special version of Roquefort the world famous blue cheese. We're the top importer of French Roquefort into the United States. This is a region in France, it's Roquefort-sur-Soulzon and there are these incredible caves in this area. It's made with sheep's milk from a particular breed of sheep, the Lacaune sheep that are raised in this area. They only milk them maybe half of the year, about seven months out of the year. They make the cheese and then they use a very specific strain of blue cheese mold, *Penicillium roqueforti*. So yes, it's related to the medicine, but used very, very differently here. A specific strain of this roqueforti culture found only in a particular cave is used in this Templar Roquefort. So we wind up with a very limited, very special version of this cheese. It has a very strong classic Roquefort pungency, but it's balanced by this amazing creaminess and it's got a nice salinity and nice saltiness.

Tara: I love the fact that we're the only place in the entire country that you can find this cheese.

Matt: It's just a really exciting thing. I mean, I'd love to just geek out on this Templar Roquefort cheese.

Tara: But I think the best way to figure out what you might like is simply to taste it. You could ask a crew member at Trader Joe's, "Can I taste that?" And they'll open it for you.

Matt: Sure, sure. You don't need to gnaw through the plastic yourself. I mean, like the crew will help.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Well Matt, I'm pretty fondue this episode.

[Closing theme music begins.]

Matt: We did have some sharp guests.

Tara: Want the next episode?

Matt: Well, ricotta hit that free subscribe button. It is free and it's worth every penny.

Tara: (chuckles) Oh, we should apologize for these cheese puns.

Matt: Nacho idea?

Tara: Until next time. Until next year. Happy New Year! Thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.