

Transcript — Episode 24: The Coffee Cuppers Guide to Trader Joe's

Tara: Before we begin this episode of Inside Trader Joe's, we want to take a moment to talk about the current state of things. As we discussed in our last episode, COVID-19 continues to affect us all the crew in each of our stores continue to do incredible work every day, and we're grateful for their efforts to support each other and the communities they serve.

[Music starts]

Matt: Our main focus as a company has been doing what's right for our crew members and customers for decades. That focus is as strong today as it has ever been. And in fact it's that focus that provides the answer to one of the most frequently asked questions we're hearing right now.

Tara: Customers are asking if given current circumstances, we're planning on offering delivery or curbside pickup. We understand the impulse and we know that some other retailers are offering these services. We also know those offerings don't always translate into positive results.

Matt: Creating an online shopping system for curbside pickup or the infrastructure for delivery, it's a massive undertaking. It's something that takes months or years to plan, build and implement and it requires tremendous resources. Well, at Trader Joe's, the reality is that over the last couple of decades we've invested those resources in our people rather than build an infrastructure that eliminates the need for people.

Tara: The bottom line here is that our people remain our most valued resource. While other retailers were cutting staff and adding things like self checkout, curbside pickup and outsourcing delivery options, we were hiring more crew, and we continue to do that. We know that this period of distancing will end and when it does, our crew will be in our stores to help you find your next favorite product, just as they've always been.

Matt: And just as they are right now. We're so grateful for the dedication of our crew, for the stability of our leadership and the work that's being done at all of our stores around the country to ensure that our neighbors have access to the food that they need. We're proud of that work and we understand that it reflects a continued significant need

for connection and as it were for content, especially as we all do our part to maintain physical distance.

Tara: We recorded this episode over the last six weeks or so, and while the world has changed since we started it, we decided the time was still right to share it with you because, well, we all still need a good cup of coffee.

Matt: So now's a good time to grab your favorite mug, fill it with your favorite coffee. It goes without saying, which is while we'll say it now and later. Thanks for listening.

[SHORT PAUSE]

Matt: Here's what's brewing on this edition of Inside Trader Joe's.

[Upbeat music begins]

Lauren 1: I'd say the biggest trend we've seen over the past couple of years would be cold brew.

Matt: (strange nervous noise) I've already had too many shots of espresso.

Room: (laughs)

Lauren 2: I think what hasn't changed is people still really want a really great cup of coffee.

Mike: They want to get it as fast and as conveniently as possible.

[Slurping.]

Matt: What is that noise?!

[Music ends.]

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

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

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

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, the Director of Words and Phrases and Clauses and I like my coffee black.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the Marketing - Product guy and I like espresso, made from a stove top moka pot.

Tara: You know what, I think we may need Professor Matt to start us off with a history lesson all about coffee and one that goes back a little further than Trader Joe's.

Matt: OK. (clears throat) I think I'm ready.

[Music ends.]

Tara: And since you're highly caffeinated, this'll be quick. (laughs)

[Music for history lesson begins under laugh.]

Matt: 2.25 billion cups of coffee are drunk, drank, consumed each day around the world. After crude oil, coffee is the second most traded commodity in the world and one of the commodities with the longest history of trading. So what is it about coffee? Now it seems like there are probably two likely points of origin, places on the planet, where coffee usage started. A lot of times you hear about Ethiopia, you might even hear about some magically enhanced entranced goats or you might think of Yemen. And from there the coffee trade grows. Now we're going to jump way ahead in time to Restoration Period England because it seems like that's where Western coffee culture really gets it start. And this is before England falls in love and goes crazy for tea. Coffee houses are a thing around the city of London where people gather to talk about politics, to work on their latest screenplay, if they had such things in those days, or maybe their political tracts and treatises, treatises, treatuseeze, treat us to a cup of coffee.

Tara: Hmm.

Matt: And that's sort of cafe, coffeeshouse culture.

Tara: And then at a certain point that coffee makes its way to the United States of America.

Matt: You have these relatively innocuous giant packages of ground coffee. It's not really interesting where it's even from, it's just do you have enough of it? And that sort of classic bomb shelter stockpile approach to making coffee, creates a huge opportunity to do something that is all about flavor, that is all about quality, that's all about point of origin. And that really presents an interesting opportunity for Trader Joe's way back in the early days.

[Music ends.]

Tara: So that's the history of coffee in a nutshell or in a coffee bean.

Matt: And just for the record, I did that with decaf.

Tara: The treatises, treatiseze, treat us to a cup of coffee is my favorite line that you've ever uttered.

Matt: Well, I was like wondering, "What is the plural of that word?" Tree tie.

Tara: (laughing)

[A car starts.]

Tara: So I think this is a good time to go on that road trip we promised.

[Road music begins. Music up for a moment, then under...]

Tara: We have done a little traveling to come and visit one of our longtime coffee suppliers.

Matt: That's right. We've spread our wings as it were. Took a flight. We're in Northern California.

Tara: Yes. And we are sitting here with Mike and Lauren. Hello.

Lauren 1: How are you guys doing?

Matt: So far, so good. It's early.

Tara: We're excited about this.

Mike: My great grandfather came over from Greece in 1897 and started roasting coffee in San Francisco out of a cart pulled by a donkey. The first time I ever really came into knowing Trader Joe's is my father roasted coffee for Joe. It was late 60s, early 70s.

Tara: OK

Mike: My father ended up selling the coffee business to his partner. And then I started roasting in 1981.

Tara: Wow! When you roast that coffee, from that moment on, you're sort of racing against the clock, right?

Mike: Right. When I started roasting for Trader Joe's in 1981, I don't think it was more than a few years later, he goes, "It would be much easier if you just put in a can line and a labeler and all that." And so that's what we did. And we basically went from roaster to the can. The fresher, the better. Packing the coffee right out of the roaster got the coffee fresher to the Trader Joe's customers. Our coffee sales almost doubled within two months.

Matt: This is kind of like the classic American dream story.

Mike: What's great about having a customer that can't keep its product on its shelf because it's so good. I mean, It helps us not have a freshness problem.

Matt: Coffee is like a fruit, it turns out and you don't just go shake a tree and get a bunch of beans, right?

Mike: Coffee is a bush, takes about three to six years for it to produce it's real full crop, let's say. And the average coffee tree produces maybe two to three pounds max of green coffee...actually coffee cherries.

Tara: A whole tree.

Mike: A whole tree.

Tara: Two to three pounds a year of coffee cherries...that's one crop one year.

Lauren 1: Depends on what size tree too, right?

Mike: One coffee cherry has two beans inside it. Sometimes there's three, sometimes there's one, which would be a peaberry. So you're looking at about 2,000 coffee beans per pound. So you need a thousand cherries handpicked most of it to produce a pound of roasted coffee.

Matt: Wow, that's a tremendous amount of work just to get to that stage.

Mike: Yes, right, right.

Matt: Processing the coffee cherries, you can dry them. And that's just like the whole cherry just gets dried.

Mike: Yes.

Matt: And then they somehow remove the beans.

Tara: Break it open.

Matt: And then the wet process is physically washing.

Mike: Yep.

Matt: This kind of processing of the coffee cherries typically done close to where they're grown?

Mike: Definitely, the mill will then get 10 sacks of cherries from one guy, they may get a thousand sacks of cherries from another within that region. They're buying it constantly and processing it constantly. And that's what gets all blended together to where it's a Mexican coffee from Oaxaca or Vera Cruz or whatever the growing area.

Tara: So what happens next?

Mike: It actually dries with its own little packaging.

Lauren 1: Because you want it to get to a certain moisture content.

Mike: Yeah, which keeps it fresher, sweeter, brighter. It may take another 30 days for them to get it to you or in a, to basically just take it out of parchment. And then we sample roast it, cup it, then we take delivery of it.

[Music ends.]

Tara: All right.

[Game show music starts.]

Tara: We're going to have a little game show. And we're tentatively going to call it, Get Buzzed!

Lauren 1: Oh no.

Tara: We're going to go back and forth and we're going to ask you a question. All right. Are you ready Mike and Lauren?

Mike: Yes.

Lauren 1: Yes.

Tara: Okay. What kind of machine might you be using if you are grinding your coffee extra fine?

Mike: An espresso machine?

[Ding signifying correct, golf clap.]

Matt: Can you grind coffee without a grinder?

Lauren 1: Yes, you can.

Mike: A blender.

Lauren 1: Yes, I was going to say, or you can use a mallet, like a hammer.

Matt: A mallet!

Lauren 1: (laughs)

Matt: What are you doing? Just grinding coffee.

Tara: How much caffeine is in decaffeinated coffee?

Mike: Three tenths of a percent.

[Ding.]

Lauren 1: Well, yeah. What can be in there, but

Mike: 99.7% caff... It's caffeine free.

Tara: Okay. The world's most expensive coffee is famous not just for the money, but for what goes through....

Mike: Kopi Luwak.

Tara: Say that again?

Mike: Kopi Luwak

Matt: That's the name for the coffee.

Tara: That's the name for the coffee.

Mike: It's a Indonesian cat that would actually eat the coffee cherries and it'd swallow 'em whole in a sense. And as it went through the system of the cat, (chuckles) it would leave a pile that inside would be the green beans.

Matt: And on this week's episode of dirtiest jobs...

Tara: (laughs)

Mike: It brings new meaning to the "wet process" is all I can say.

Tara: Last one. In what country was it grounds for divorce if you did not supply your spouse with enough coffee?

Mike: Sounds like the United States to me. (laughs)

[Buzzer, incorrect answer.]

Tara: Apparently it's Turkey. (laughs) And I don't believe it's that way anymore. That was a little silly.

[Game show music ends.]

[Transition. Music begins.]

Tara: Can we talk really quickly about packaging? Cause I'm seeing on our shelves at least more bags of coffee. Um, especially those small lot coffees all seem to come in a bag with the one way valves. What do you prefer from a packaging perspective to keep coffee fresh?

Lauren 1: Nothing beats the can.

Mike: Trader Joe's pretty much was the first to put whole bean in a can. Where everybody else perceived coffee in a can as ground coffee. You know, it would be a ground metal can. Then they changed the shape of it. They used the fiber can.

Matt: By introducing a lot of really special, carefully handled, very fresh coffees in bags in the small lots, we've cemented the idea that the bag gives you better coffee.

Mike: Right.

Tara: Yeah.

Mike: Right.

Matt: And so that's not the case.

Lauren 1: What's amazing about that small lot program is that you were doing small lots from the beginning.

Mike: From the beginning! And those are what turned into everyday coffees.

Tara: Right.

Mike: No national chain has exposed their customers to so many varieties of coffee.

Tara: I remember being a kid and my mom would open up the can and scoop the dried out ground coffee that was in that can and that would be coffee. There's so much more now than there used to be.

Lauren 1: I think what hasn't changed is people still really want a really great cup of coffee, I mean that hasn't changed.

Mike: They want to get it as fast and as conveniently as possible.

Tara: Our customers love coffee.

Mike: What you have is you have that turn... Your...

Matt: Inventory turn.

Mike: You're selling fresh coffee.

Tara: It's a great place to end the conversation, actually. The freshness of the coffee, that's the key.

Mike: Oh yeah. Well thank you. (chuckles)

[Music ends. Jet taking off. plane noise.]

Tara: Okay, Matt, let's head back to the Trader Joe's mothership and talk to another Lauren.

[Transition back to the mothership. Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Lauren, I'm going to let you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about you and your Trader Joe's experience.

Lauren 2: Sure! So I came on the Trader Joe's team about four years ago now. Now I am a category manager in the Boston office and I work primarily on shelf stable beverages and our coffee and tea section.

Tara: In the coffee category now at Trader Joe's, we used to do one thing. We used to do whole beans in a nitrogen flushed can. And that was kind of our coffee section. And now we have pods, we have ground coffee, we have whole bean coffee, we have limited edition coffees. Like, there's a lot going on in the category.

Lauren 2: Yes. And that's actually something that's shifting right now. We're seeing our customers move away from those big cans of whole bean coffee and we're seeing growth in ground. But there are some coffees that they're better left whole bean until you're ready to grind and brew. But when we look at what we're going to do with it, there's a couple of factors that come into play. You know, the coffee grinders in the store. Is this going to fit under the grinders? Is it easy to use? Is it easy to reclose for our customers? Is it better off in canned format, but overall with our sustainability initiatives as well, we are moving away from the can to be a little more green and earth-friendly.

Tara: What packaging is more sustainable than the can?

Lauren 2: Coming soon. We have worked with a couple of our major vendors to come up with a home compostable bag. So, same format as our bag coffees are in now but completely compostable. We are going to attempt to move in that direction and we're doing the same thing with our pods and a couple of our other items in the category. I would say we're probably six to 12 months away before we see any hit the shelves. We're close. We're not there yet, but we're almost there.

Tara: That's pretty exciting.

[Music ends.]

Matt: We're still trying to figure out how our customer's making coffee. Are these people a classic drip brewer? Are they making cold brew at home? Are they using a moka stove top espresso maker? Are they, I mean like, what the heck? How do we even get a sense of that? How do we get any intelligence from customers on this?

Lauren 2: It's a little trial and error. Everybody's really picky and has their own methods and so we just have to find something that is available for every type of brewer.

Matt: So how do we do that and still be true to what we are attempting to be... That is, not everything for everybody?

Lauren 2: An area we do shy away from is flavored whole bean. When you add a flavor sometimes that, I mean obviously, it narrows the audience. So we have French Vanilla, it's a very applicable flavor. Everybody drinks French Vanilla coffee I think or has at some point.

Matt: Speak for yourself, Lauren.

Lauren 2: (laughs) I know, I'm sorry.

Matt: We've done some interesting things where they are ostensibly flavored coffees but they're like spiced or seasoned coffee.

Lauren 2: Mm-hmm.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: So we have that great wintery blend that's like basically coffee with a bunch of spices in it.

Lauren 2: Exactly. So it's a cleaner way to approach a flavor than adding some, you know, artificial flavor to a ground coffee. Not that that's what everybody out there is doing, but that is really the way to get that flavor to punch. And we don't want to do that.

Matt: How do you determine this coffee should be whole bean, this coffee should be ground, this one deserves to go in a cup or a pod...?

Lauren 2: We're really thinking about the customer and one thing we're seeing in terms of changes in the category is ground coffee is growing. Our ground coffee selection hasn't grown as much. You know, we're working on it. I'd say the biggest trend we've seen over the past couple of years would be cold brew.

Matt: For the sake of clarity, what is the 'cold' in cold brew mean? What is cold brew?

Lauren 2: Cold brew coffee is coffee that has been brewed using zero hot water. You are brewing the coffee from cold water and letting it steep in cold water versus hot brew, which is where your traditional coffee comes from. We wanted to hit that in a couple of different areas and we achieved it with our cold brew concentrate, and we have some other cold brew options coming that don't need to be drunk cold, but were brewed cold. You're going to have a less acidic experience overall. Like I said, just a smoother coffee flavor overall. I don't know if you can tell. I prefer cold brew.

Tara: How do we find coffees? How do we source our coffee?

Lauren 2: Items like our Bay Blend and our everyday assortment, those really are a result of, what are our customers saying? We're lacking dark roast, we're lacking medium light. So we kind of search for items to fit those gaps. We really do rely on our vendor partners to tweak the roasts and the beans and everything to the exact specification we are asking for versus small lot coffee. There are boots on the ground in these remote areas of the world and they are finding the coffee for us. And they bring it back and they say, "I found these wonderful options from these small lot farms, and we can have all of their crop for this year. What do you think?"

Matt: There are more than 60 countries around the world that grow coffee. Most, you know, within a thousand miles of the equator. It's the bean belt. But then there's this almost alchemical process of roasting. So what you do with the beans, I mean the bean's almost nothing without the roast.

Lauren 2: Exactly.

Tara: So if it's a small farm in some remote country near the equator, we'll take a farm's entire production, a small farm for that year. We'll take the whole production. So it's a small lot. Our customers really respond to it. It's really great. "Oh my gosh, when can I get more of that?"

Lauren 2: It would be at least a year. Yeah. Because we are taking their whole crop, and so they have to regrow that crop.

Tara: Right.

Lauren 2: And it may not taste exactly the same the second time, but that's the beauty of it.

Tara: Right.

Lauren 2: And it's a very different experience than the way we source our coffee for our Joe's Medium, Joe's Dark.

Tara: Well, and we're looking for consistency with the..

Lauren 2: Exactly.

Tara: ..Joe's Dark and the Joe's Medium. We're looking for something that every time a customer opens that bag, they know exactly what they're going to get.

Lauren 2: That's my Joe's.

Tara: Right.

Lauren 2: Every time.

Matt: It has to smell and ultimately taste within expectation. Whereas a small lot is both storytelling and a great cup of coffee. Small is a relative term, right?

Lauren 2: I would say typically a small lot is one to two containers.

Matt: OK, 40 to 80,000 pounds...

Lauren 2: Mm-hmm.

Matt: ...which to me sounds like wow, that is like swimming pools, multiple swimming pools, full of coffee beans.

Tara: That would be a hard swim.

Matt: When you think about all the stores and all the customers that are excited about it, it probably doesn't last very long and that's probably a good thing I'm going to guess.

Lauren: It is. We want to make space for the next small lot we've got coming. And we started the small lot program, we only had I think maybe two or three in one year and we're working towards having 10 to 12 in 2021. We have eight coming out this year.

Matt: Where would these beans go were it not for Trader Joe's buying them?

Lauren 2: Sometimes they may go nowhere. And so we're really helping a community taking all of this product from them, and that's their year.

Tara: I want to talk about bulk bins because I've been in some specialty coffee shops where the coffee is all out in bins and you take a scoop and you put it in a bag and you pay for it by the pound. And people tend to think, well that's really fresh. And I know that not to be true, but can you explain why?

Lauren 2: Well, when you are putting whole beans into a bulk bin, you're exposing them to more elements than they are when they're in a can or in a bag. You're introducing more oxygen, you're introducing outside contaminants.

Matt: I think it's really oxygen.

Lauren 2: It is oxygen.

Matt: The oxygen is the enemy of freshness here. And part of the magic of coffee is inventory turn, selling stuff quickly. It diminishes, it becomes less of itself over time. So when you're smelling coffee in one of those small shops, it means that that stuff's leaving the beans. We have more things in bags and you can smell coffee in bags because you squeeze them and a little "psht" of air might come out. But that's a one way valve, right? So air doesn't go back in. So that's why those become more compressed and compacted the more you squeeze them. Cause I'm always squeezing those bags in the store like, "sh sh sh."

Lauren 2: That's you?

Matt: That's me.

Lauren 2: Been looking for you.

Matt: I'm poking the stuff in the store. Ah, Mr. Whipple.

Tara: (laughs)

Lauren 2: It's a one way valve and you're just pushing out some of the nitrogen oxygen that is still in there. And that's exactly why they get almost um, where you can see like the beans on the outside of the bag cause it will get really tight.

Matt: Sure. It's like that pair of pants where you're just like, these still fit.

Lauren 2: (laughs) Yeah.

Matt: They still fit.

Lauren 2: Yeah.

Matt: And once upon a way back, our coffee canisters did not have those valves. And every so often they would get packed a little too soon after roasting, and they would just blow up and sometimes they would explode.

[Quick small canister explosion. Pfft!]

Matt: I recommend squeezing those bags.

Tara: Please don't squeeze the coffee.

Lauren 2: (chuckles) Be gentle to the coffee.

Matt: Anything coming out that you're really excited about that you think like, "Man, can't wait for people to check this out?"

Lauren 2: Surprisingly, we have a new cold brew instant coffee coming out.

Matt: How does this make any sense? You got to explain this.

Lauren 2: Our vendor cold brews the coffee.

Matt: Like normal cold brew.

Lauren 2: Like normal cold brew. So it's brewed cold, freeze dried. And that's how it's made instant. So when you get it home and you pour it in your cold or hot cup, it's gonna dissolve right in there.

Matt: So if you were camping by a spring and you could wake up and you could make cold brew coffee.

Lauren 2: It'd be lovely.

Tara: (chuckles)

Matt: Now that is the way to start the day, people.

Tara: And I think that is a perfect way to end our conversation.

Lauren 2: Thanks for having me.

Matt: See you later.

[Trader Joe's coffee cupping room. Quick slurping sound.]

Matt: Was that our ramen tasting in the kitchen?

Tara: No. You know what that is? That was recorded during our road trip.

Matt: Oh yes. That's cupping coffee, the sound of slurping coffee samples.

Tara: What's up with that?

Matt: When you taste coffee on an evaluative basis, when you're trying to determine whether or not you should purchase this coffee, you go through the cupping process. You actually just pour some grounds into a glass, pour boiling water over it. The grounds rise to the top and form almost like a crust. You let that sit for just a minute or two. You then take a spoon and you sink those grounds into the bottom of the glass with the hot water, scoop off some of those floating grounds so you've got a clear place and you use a big soup spoon, get it nice and full of that. And you (shhlp) slurp it up and you're almost aspirating the coffee because your olfactories, how you smell, is a huge part of how you taste and certainly important for coffee. So you're getting almost this vaporized coffee experience in your mouth, letting it fall all over the soft palate tissues and getting a real sense of how this thing's going to taste. And you're tasting for consistency across those three to four samples. And you want to see how your roasting worked on those beans.

[Quick slurping sound.]

Tara: Matt, that was the best explanation of coffee cupping I've ever heard.

Matt: It might be the only one you've ever heard.

[Transition.]

Tara: There's a lot of excitement around the mothership about some things that have nothing to do with coffee and some of these things are about to hit stores pretty soon. Right around the holiday time I got a call from my sister who said, "I have some feedback from one of my friends about one of your products." And she said, "You know, my friend Fran loves the Step Up to the Bar Mix, but she really wants to get those, the honey mustard pretzel pieces that are inside just as its own product."

Matt: So, Fran, good news. And we've got a bag of just those pretzel pieces coming and they're really, really great. They have a nice, obviously a sweetness, a little bit of this tanginess from the mustard, a little powdered onion to round out the flavor. Delicious.

Tara: It'll be out sometime in the spring. Matt, I am excited about a new cookie that's coming in. They're called These Sprinkles Walk Into A Sandwich Cookie, and it's kind of like a play on our, you know, This Strawberry Walks Into a Bar kind of product. It's kind of like birthday cake in a sandwich cookie form and they've got sprinkles in them. And they're really fun and they're sweet. I mean you have to have a sweet tooth, but if you're eating cookies I'm, I'm kind of assuming you have a sweet tooth, right?

Matt: Absolutely.

[Paper turning.]

Matt: We're introducing a second ketchup. I've always said, you know, we've only got one ketchup, not for long folks, because we're going to have a limited edition ketchup with black summer truffles. And to be fair, this is delicious. So it's worth a second spot. Don't expect it forever, but I think this is going to be great on French fries.

Tara: And that one's coming what... like around the beginning of May?

Matt: That's what we're hoping for.

Tara: Oh, the Pork and Ginger Soup Dumplings. So if you're a fan of our Chicken Soup Dumplings, you should be excited about the Pork and Ginger Soup Dumplings.

Matt: I think our freezer is like a little mini dim sum palace.

Tara: Yep.

Matt: There's a lot of good options.

Tara: It really is. It's pretty great. You know what's finally coming, Matt? I'm super excited. Springle Jangle. That one is finally reaching store shelves around the end of April. Springle Jangle is explained in detail, by the way, in episode 21. There's a little incentive to go back and listen to the "All Things Chocolate" episode.

Matt: Another S word product, Synergistically Seasoned Popcorn. A little bit of tangy acidity, some salt, some smokey, some sweet. It's pretty fun. I'm thinking that looks like also May if everything goes well at the popcorn popping place, plant.

Tara: There's always something new, which is the exciting piece of what we do. Which is fun.

Matt: It is fun.

[Transition. Music ends.]

[Closing theme music begins.]

Matt: And we hope you enjoy learning about new flavors and new ideas from around the world or around the corner at your neighborhood Trader Joe's.

Tara: It's that spirit of discovery that we try to capture here on Inside Trader Joe's, too. If you want to discover our next episode, click on that free subscribe button.

Matt: It is free and worth every penny. You might even leave this podcast a quick rating too. That helps other people find us.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.

[Closing theme music ends.]