

Transcript — Episode 3: Informative and Seriously Not Too Serious

Mitch: I hear it's going so fast because it's so hot in here. (laughs)

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

Matt: Let's go INSIDE TRADER JOE'S.

[2 bills ring in a neighborhood Trader Joe's]

Tara: We're up to episode three of our five part series. I'm Tara Miller.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan. On this episode, we're going to be informative and seriously, not too serious.

Tara: Actually, that's always our goal around here. We'll explore how and why we keep customers and Crew Members up to date.

Matt: I'll interview the editor of the Fearless Flyer, and I'm going to ask some really tough questions, too.

Tara: Uh oh. Of course, there's no better way to be informed about the new products at Trader Joe's than a visit to the demo station at your neighborhood Trader Joe's. We'll do that too.

Matt: Also... Hawaiian shirts, products that just didn't quite make it... and a lot more. So let's get started.

Mitch: My name is Mitch Heeger, and I'm the Executive VP of Marketing and Merchandising.

Tara: If there's a job to be done at Trader Joe's, Mitch Heeger has probably done it.

Mitch: I've been with the company a long time, been 40 years with the company. Started off sweeping the parking lot and mopping the floors and actually vacuuming the carpet on the, in the store, but started off as a box boy.

Matt: There was carpet?

Mitch: There was carpet. Yeah. And when you, when you spilled the, the grape juice, it wasn't a pretty picture... or the bottle of wine.

Mitch: We used to have some really, really long wine tastings, and uh... (laugh)

Matt: Were they drinkings or tastings?

Mitch: They were tastings, but it's not about having a lot, a lot to drink. It's about really having some great discussion, and having an ability to learn from people that could teach other Crew Members in the store. So, um, yeah, there's probably some stories that I probably shouldn't share. Our business has changed so much that, you know, where we might have opened up 12 bottles of wine and tried them and compared and discussed. Now a store may try a bottle of wine and a bunch of other products, so that they can learn on all the products in the store, and the focus isn't as much on wine.

Matt: Which really sets up in terms of this idea that we think of ourselves as wanting to be informative. We want to be in an informative retailer.

Mitch: We like to talk to our customers, you know, just seeing if they need some help, they're looking for something, they want some information on a product.

[Store noises... cash register, beeping, people chatting]

Tara: We're here at the Trader Joe's in Sherman Oaks, California. So we're producing a podcast that's all about Trader Joe's and a big part of Trader Joe's is the people who shop here.

Rae: To be honest, I only started shopping at Trader Joe's this past year. So I always ask, "Hey, where's this, where's that?" And not only do they tell you where it is, but they show you. So which is, I really like that, unlike when you go to *(BLEEP)* and you say, "Hey, where's this?" and they're like, *(gruff voice)* "Aisle five!" Here, you say, "Where can I find my almond butter?" And they'll direct you and walk you and give you recommendations on which is the best one, so I really like that."

[Store noises]

Tina: We're not going to sound silly? (laughs)

Tara: Well, you might! But that's ok. Everybody sounds silly sometimes, but what, what we're trying to do is really just get a sense of... What are the things that make Trader Joe's an interesting place to work? Do you want to start, Tina?

Tina: I love being here. It's like with my friends. It's my other family. There's good food. I get a discount. I laugh every time I come. It is nice to help people. It's amazing how much people, some people don't know and some people do know. Like, some people don't know that our sliced Turkey is ready to eat. They don't know that they don't need to cook it, for example, or gluten free, vegan, stuff like that. It's nice to be helpful to the customers that have diet restrictions or just started on diet restrictions, and we can help them because we have all the knowledge here.

Robert: In every section there's someone that's extremely knowledgeable. You got wine, you got cheese, you got... I mean the list goes on and on. For produce, it's either me or Mateen. Me, Roberto.

Tina: You come to me for anything. I know it all. (laugh)

Matt: Our Crew Members do love to recommend great products. Just ask 'em.

Randy: We have a new, a frozen item that's a baked chocolate chip cookie that is really, really good, especially with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top. It's amazing.

Mitch: We've made a huge improvement in our new fresh salmon. So that's certainly a favorite, and I have that quite often.

Dan: My favorite product at Trader Joe's is Charles Shaw Wine, and it's because it's our customer's favorite product.

Jason: I think my current favorite would probably be our spatchcocked chicken. I've been cooking that a lot lately on the barbecue. Very good.

Lori: Right now, I would have to choose the Icelandic strawberry yogurt that we have. I can't stop eating it. It's so addicting. (laugh)

[Store noises]

Jay Jay: We do try just about everything in the store, so our Crew are very knowledgeable about our products. We try to have a tasting once or twice a week. And our Crew get an opportunity to not only fill their bellies, but their minds so they're able to pass on that information to our customers.

Tara: We're at Trader Joe's store 49 in Sherman Oaks, California, and we're talking to the store's Captain. I'll let her introduce herself.

Jay Jay: Hi, I'm Jay Jay Sweiss.

Tara: How long have you worked for Trader Joe's?

Jay Jay: I've been with the company 25 years. I'm at the store where I got hired 25 years ago, which is pretty phenomenal for me. It was full circle. It was kind of a, a dream come true in some respects.

Tara: And your trajectory just kept going up from there.

Jay Jay: Little by little, I had a couple of kids in between. (chuckle) Everybody who I'd worked with at that point were so supportive and just wanted you to grow. The best thing about it, and I'm going to get choked up here... um... *(voice wavering)* is that no one ever told me that there was an obstacle or I couldn't do it. *(choking back tears)*

Tara: This is ok. This is real. This is how you feel.

Jay Jay: I was pushed and made me feel like I can accomplish anything. They promoted me, pushed me on and gave me direction. And uh, always, always said, "Keep going." And that's the direction I went.

Tara: Is there anything else that we didn't ask about Trader Joe's or about you and your life at Trader Joe's and how it's impacted you?

Jay Jay: Well, I hope I can put this in a nut shell, but it, it has changed my life. It's, it's given me opportunity. It's given me security. It's given me hope in people. There's nothing standing in my way to achieve anything I want to achieve. Same thing for every single one of our Crew Members. You know, no matter what race, creed, religion you are, nothing ever stops you from achieving those goals. If they're really your goals and you want to achieve them, you got to put some work into it. Absolutely. It's not easy. None of it's easy and it shouldn't be easy if it's worth it, and it's definitely worth it.

Tara: Thank you.

Jay Jay: Thank you.

Matt: Then of course, we also have to keep Crew Members informed about the products that are going away. Yeah, it happens.

Tara: The Tasting Panel does such a good job choosing products to bring into Trader Joe's, but even they miss sometimes.

Matt: In hindsight, we probably should have known that some of those products were going to be misses.

Tara: Like what?

Matt: Well, like all good things that sound great on paper or even when you're thinking about it, Laplander cuisine soup just is necessarily tricky stuff. So we had a line of soups that were cuisine from the land of the midnight sun, and this is on the go Laplander cuisine for those of you pressed for time but still wanting a bit of that authentic old country taste, and we had a cream of venison soup, and it was in a very gold foil can. It looked fancy, But really, no one wanted it.

Tara: We thought they might though, huh?

Matt: We really did. And you know, a lot of times an opportunity will present itself, something that seems though at the surface, like a negative situation. You turn it around and you try to make it positive and you still wind up in that awkward negative spot, so... There was actually a large peanut crop failure that led to a peanut shortage that led to a peanut butter problem. We didn't have enough peanut butter to sell, and people love peanut butter. So what we found was cottonseed. Cottonseed actually is plentiful, abundant, and it produces lots of oil. And we thought, "Wow, if you just blend this up, whip this up, it's like a cottonseed butter. Who's not going to love this?" Apparently no loved this. So... swing, miss. Another similar situation... There was, again, we're going back some time here until the late seventies, early eighties. There was a shortage of what they call chunk light tuna. We needed more cans of tuna to sell. Well, there's another fish. It's sometimes known as an ale-wife or a pilchard. We thought chunk pilchard in a can would be great.

Matt: And the rest is history.

[Mail arriving by jet]

Matt: And so this just also in from the mailbag here. A lot of Crew Members get this question. "How many Hawaiian shirts do you have?"

Dan: I'm not sure I can provide an accurate count, but my closet has changed considerably in the time I've been with Trader Joe's. It used to be all gray and blue suits, and now it's like the brightest colored Hawaiian shirts you could find are in my closet. About once a year, I make a donation to a nice charity of Hawaiian shirts.

Tara: So Matt, how many Hawaiian shirts do you own?

Matt: Without giving an incriminating number, I have enough shirts to wear a different one each day of the week for at least 2 months. Although I have the same six that I always go back to.

Tara: So... we asked a bunch of our Trader Joe's Crew Members the same question.

Matt: What did they say?

Randy: I have fourteen. Some people have a full closet. I only have a small row.

Jay Jay: Probably close to forty. My kids laugh at me, but there you go!

Crew Member: A lot, believe me.

[Store noise]

Tara: Can you just start off by giving us your name and what city you live in?

Xavier: My name's Xavier Burt, and I live in South Pasadena, California. I just was telling the gentleman at the register that I read that Fearless Flyer cover to cover because it's super engaging and the writing is really great and I gave it to another person I cook with because I was like, you need to read this about food. It's really good. I came in last night and bought all the stuff I found in the Fearless Flyer that was interesting that I never had. So last night I made sunchoke. I never even had a sunchoke. And yeah, just nerding out on food.

Tara: OK, well I write the Fearless Flyer, so you just made my whole day. Thank you. That's fantastic.

Xavier: Oh, hey! This one's great. I just was sitting there and my wife was sleeping, and every time she woke up I was like, "I'm still reading this thing." And she like... dozed off. And I was like, I'm still reading this thing.

[Flyer's propellers buzz overhead]

Matt: Lining birdcages near you...It's the Fearless Flyer Show. And so Tara, what is the Fearless Flyer?

Tara: The Fearless Flyer is Trader Joe's main way of talking to our customers. We call ourselves "a store of stories," and the Fearless Flyer is that idea manifest on paper.

Matt: But it's a specific set of stories, right?

Tara: Rather than just show people a product and a price like a traditional grocery store circular would do, we tell stories about our products. We, we talk to the people who developed our products. We want you to know a little bit about what's in it. We want you to know a little bit about what it tastes like and what a great value is. So we tell you the price.

Matt: The usual grocery playbook says "Item, price" or "BOGO" for you jargon fans out there... "Buy one, get one." It's none of that. It's actually a lot of words.

Tara: It's a lot of words.

Matt: But they're words that have a look like you can spot it at 50 paces. And why does it look like that?

Tara: Originally it looked like that because it was the least expensive way to put something on paper. So our founder, Joe Coulombe, would type it on a typewriter and make mimeographed copies.

[Manual typewriter pecking and "ding"]

Joe: I wrote the Fearless Flyer for all those years.

Tara: Originally it was for Crew Members. It was intended to give information about products, specifically wines to Crew Members. It was called "The Insiders' Report." And he started doing that in 1970, and customers got wind that this was happening and said, "Hey, I want to see that. I want to know about that wine. I want to know what that's all about." The cartoons that are in the flyer...? You know it's got these old tiny Victorian era art pieces?

Joe: We put in the cartoons. Lighten up. Don't take it so goddamned seriously.

Tara: They were royalty free and Joe didn't want to have to pay anyone to create art to put in it and didn't want to have to put pictures of products in it because that was expensive too.

Matt: These old engravings... It was absolutely a necessity to not spend money on it. And it became, over time, a look.

Tara: A cross between MAD magazine and Consumer Reports.

Tara: The initial cartoon image on the Flyer was of someone who looked like he was flying, and I don't know if he looks fearless or terrified, but "Terrified Flyer" probably wouldn't have worked...

Matt: No one wants that.

Tara: So "Fearless" it was and "Fearless" it is.

[Propellers flying overhead]

Matt: Is there any option for like a paid placement? Can someone buy a spot?

Tara: No. No. It's not an option. That's just not part of how we do our business.

Tara: We put things in the flyer that we think are interesting and hopefully our customers agree are interesting.

Tara: I'm Tara.

Curtis: I'm Curtis.

Tara: I'm the Marketing Director at Trader Joe's. Why do you shop at Trader Joe's?

Curtis: I shop at Trader Joe's because I love the products. I love the staff. I love how helpful they are, how friendly they are. And I love to sample their food.

Tara: Do you sample product from the demo?

Curtis: Absolutely. And I get a lot of ideas for dinner and for lunches for my boys.

Tara: So what a lot of people might not know is the biggest marketing expense we have at Trader Joe's is actually just letting people try our food. Today we're with Angel at the Demo Station in our East Pasadena store. What's for lunch, Angel?

Angel: Today, we've got a little a beef brisket. This is the corned beef brisket on rye bread with mustard, a little cabbage and Swiss cheese.

Tara: So you don't just put out the food, you actually make things that customers could make it home.

Angel: Yeah, that's what we're striving to do. We're looking for ideas for inspiration, things that are easy and that they could do for themselves at home real quick.

[Lots of store noise... People walking past]

Angel: I've got a tasty sample for you here. You're very welcome to try, guys. Please have a taste.

Customer 1: I'm SO full.

Angel: Good afternoon, Miss. How are you? This is actually a little sandwich we made with our corned beef.

Customer 1: Oh, very good.

Angel: Not bad, huh? Want to try some grapes, too? Because they're really crunchy and good.

Customer 2: That was really tasty.

Angel: Thank you, sir.

Customer 2: Maybe a glass of wine next time, too.

Angel: I'll work on it.

Tara: Ray Miller at our original Trader Joe's in Pasadena, California, is one of the first Crew Members to work the Demo Station.

Ray: Well, in the early days, before we had potato salad, I brought out my potato salad, and I was quite proud of that. Unfortunately it's not on the shelves, but I thought it was delicious and people used to love to have it when I would do that. At the Demo Station, you never know what you're going to be. You may be a nurse, you may be a secretary, you may just be a counselor. You are many things because everybody come to the table, as the bishop would say, from a different place of enlightenment, and we just have to deal with the situations as they come, you know? (laugh)

Matt: You're listening to a 5 part series that takes you Inside Trader Joe's. If you like Trader Joe's and you even liked this podcast, rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever it is you found this.

Tara: Oh, we'd like that. And here's what's on the next Inside Trader Joe's. We'll go to Napa Valley, California, to sip some wine.

[Montage of clips from new episode:]

Chris: Merlot is one of the great, easy drinking, one of the most approachable varietal wines there is, and people hate Merlot. They just hate it. "I don't want Merlot. Merlot! Merlot is dead to me."

Matt: You sound like a jerk if you order Merlot.

Chris: Yeah, if you order Merlot, you don't know what you're doing, you're a complete loser.

Tara: The store... is our brand.

Jon: The store is our brand. People can't understand, "Why aren't you selling products online?"

Matt: And just to be clear, we are not spying on you. We don't have access to your data at Trader Joe's because we don't have any data on you.

Tina: I see my other friends that don't work for the company and the things they complain about or how they don't have friends at work, and I'm just... They don't get to drink wine at work or eat cheese!
(laughs) I fit in, right?

Tara: That's on the next Inside Trader Joe's.