

Transcript — Episode 34: 11 (or more!) Trader Joe's Fail-Safe Freezer Finds for Dinner (and more!)

[Walk-in freezer door opens. Matt steps inside.]

Matt: Brrr. It's cold in here.

Tara: Here's a preview of what's coming up on this episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

[Upbeat music begins. Preview montage.]

Alex: I think for dinner tonight is going to be Cauliflower Gnocchi with a bolognese sauce on top.

Mary Ann: Frankly, I'd say it's the advent of the air fryer, that's definitely moved the appetizer section.

Tara: What is your favorite product in the freezer case at Trader Joe's?

Nikki: The Mandarin Orange Chicken.

Rollyn: Orange Chicken.

Matt: I mean, no offense, Mandarin Orange Chicken, but enough already.

Jon: I know that arrabiata means angry in Italian but the only time I'm angry is when we don't have any.

[Music ends.]

Tara: From the Trader Joe's mothership in Arendelle.

Matt: Arendelle?

Tara: I'll explain later.

Matt: Okay, let it go, let it go... Inside Trader Joe's.

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

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, director of words and phrases and clauses.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the marketing product guy.

Tara: Hey, thanks for your ratings and reviews of this podcast on Apple, Spotify, Stitcher, wherever you find it.

Matt: One of the comments we see often is that you love hearing about the products. It's all about the products. We hope you'll like this episode, because we're going to pack this podcast full, just like a freezer case.

[Theme music fades.]

Mary Ann: Hi, I'm Mary Ann and I am the category manager for frozen at Trader Joe's.

Tara: We just did our Customer Choice Awards episode recently. Congratulations Mary Ann on your category's domination of the Customer Choice Awards.

[Light music begins.]

Matt: I mean, I think it was total domination.

Tara: Yes, a SmackDown.

Mary Ann: Thank you. Although I can't take all the credit. We have many customers that come to our frozen section.

Tara: Let's talk about what has gone on over the last year.

Mary Ann: Yes, it was different. We definitely saw trends that we were not expecting. Overall frozen has seen great growth. Appetizers, huge growth there. More than just double digit growth. Everything from items we've carried every day for many years, like the Mac and Cheese Bites, our Samosas and new favorites like the Buffalo Chicken Poppers. Breakfast items...our croissants. Our Chocolate and our Almond Croissants, especially. You gotta take some time and prep. You gotta think about it the night before and in order to let that croissant rise and bake it the next day. And so people have time during the week. Many of us are working from home and why not just throw some croissants in the oven in the morning and after it's risen and have freshly baked croissants in your house and have your house smelling like a bakery.

Matt: Are people having cocktail parties and brunches more often? Is that why appetizers and things that need to be proofed like those croissants are growing? What are you hearing?

Mary Ann: Frankly I'd say it's the advent of the air fryer that's definitely moved the appetizer section.

Matt: I need to buy stock in an air fryer company.

Tara: Seriously.

Matt: What's happening?

Mary Ann: I'm very excited because, coming up, we have a new item...actually in February. Breaded Fried Ravioli...delicious! It's basically ravioli filled with cheese and breaded on the outside. And this'll be our first foray into having air fryer instructions on our directions for cooking.

Matt: And that didn't take us as long as it took us to get registers that scan barcodes. So we're on it, 21st century.

Tara: So you think that the air fryer is driving the appetizer sales and not the fact that people are home and want to eat things that they might normally eat in restaurants?

Mary Ann: Oh, sure. They can still bake these appetizers. Their temporary office might be near the kitchen. And so let me turn on the ovens, stick these appetizers in the oven and, you know, 20 minutes later my appetizer for my lunch or dinner is ready.

[Dinner bell ringing.]

Tara: Oh, Mary Ann, that's the dinner bell. Every now and then throughout our interview, we're going to be breaking away to speak with other crew members to find out what they're having for dinner.

[Slight transition to Jon.]

Tara: We are very fortunate to have with us today Jon Bassalone, who is of course a crew member, but also Trader Joe's president of stores.

Jon: Hi, I'm really excited to be here to talk about frozen food.

Matt: We can feel it.

Tara: If you're running around the house and it's almost dinner time and you're starving and you don't know what to make for dinner, you open your freezer. What is that go-to thing that you know you can always pull out of your freezer, cause you're going to have it there and it's going to make a quick dinner and you're going to be satisfied?

Jon: Well, without a doubt, it's the Penne Arrabbiata.

Tara: Mmmm.

Jon: We always have three or four bags in the freezer, but then when we're shopping in the store, you know, we should probably buy another bag. Last thing we want to do is run out of it. It's great. You can add stuff to it. Usually we add cut up some chicken Italian sausage or throw something else in there and just some, you know, grilled chicken to toss in there for some protein and it's great. I think it's vegan straight out of the bag.

Tara: Oh wow.

Jon: So that's pretty cool. I know that arrabiata means angry in Italian.

Matt: These are not angry noodles though.

Jon: No. The only time I'm angry is when we don't have any in our house. It's from Italy.

Matt: A little south..south, southeast of Rome in the Latium district.

Jon: Yeah. It's super authentic. It's got those little disks of sauce in there that, you know, you can snack on those if you want just frozen. (laughs)

Tara: (laughs)

Jon: They're pretty good.

Tara: Other than that, what is your favorite Trader Joe's frozen product?

Jon: I eat probably one Fruit Frenzy Bar every night.

Tara: Wow.

Jon: Three different flavors on one, easy to handle stick.

Tara: I think that's all we need.

Jon: Thanks for having me

Tara: I mean, I told you it'd be quick and I was serious.

Jon: Let me know anytime you want me to come in and talk about our food.

[Music ends. Back to Mary Ann.]

Tara: All right, Mary Ann, getting back into this. You said appetizers and breakfast are seeing gains.

[Light music begins.]

Tara: We noticed a trend when we were compiling the results for this year's Customer Choice Awards that pasta items, including gnocchi and all of the mac and cheese offerings in our case get huge love.

Mary Ann: It's true that many of our entrees are doing quite well. It's shown in the sales and the popularity of these items. I would say that mainly bagged items.

Matt: So larger, multiple serving offerings.

Mary Ann: I have to say though, the Mac and Cheese, as popular as it is, it's interesting because it was fairly flat as far as the sales are concerned and I think it has to do with those being more single serving type of trays, as opposed to the bag where you're serving meals for your family. And for many of us that have kids that are doing distance learning, you know, it's a convenient thing to prep.

Matt: Things that might replicate a restaurant experience, that stuff's growing by leaps and bounds.

Mary Ann: Yes, for sure. In fact, we have two great new Italian entrees that we offered up last year, they're new last year, and those are being the Cacio e Pepe and the Fiocchetti with Pink Cream Sauce. They're great sellers for us.

Matt: Pasta seems to be getting a "buck the gluten-free trend treatment" where people are returning to that carb that's so comfortable. That's interesting.

Mary Ann: Yes. It does seem to be about comfort food.

Matt: A lesson that I learned from my dad years being in the kitchen with him, "If you don't know what you're having for dinner, everything goes to hell."

[Dinner bell ringing.]

Matt: Well that sound means it's time to check in with Nikki and see what's for dinner.

[Music change to upbeat music.]

Tara: Crew Member Nikki from our customer relations department.

Nikki: Hey Matt. Hey Tara.

Tara: Do you have a go-to from our freezer case?

Nikki: I do. Okay. So let's start with our Trader Joe's Breaded Chicken Tenderloins. I take our Hawaiian rolls. I slice them long-way in half and I add my favorite Trader Joe's Marinara Sauce...whatever you have. You take some parbaked chicken tenderloins, so you want to bake those a little bit first, add them on top of the marinara sauce. And then you do a layer of Parmesan cheese and just like a little sprinkle of more marinara sauce. You put your Hawaiian roll layer on top, brush it with a little bit of butter, bake it for 10 minutes at 350°. Pull them out, cut them into sliders and you have Chicken Parmesan Sliders.

Matt: But like aloha style.

Tara: Nikki gave me this recipe idea, maybe like a year and a half ago, it quickly went into weekly rotation in my house and my kids who are teenagers still associate this recipe with Nikki. So whenever we have it, there is always someone at the table who says something along the lines of, "Oh, thank God Nikki gave us this recipe." Because it is so good. It's so easy.

Nikki: Those Hawaiian rolls, you can pretty much do anything with them. We add our Barbecued Pulled Pork and add a little bit of the Carolina Gold Barbecue Sauce. Brush the top with butter, sprinkle a little sesame seed on top, pop it in the oven. We've even done it for breakfast. A layer of crumbled sausage and your favorite cheese, a little bit of seasoning, throw in some scrambled egg at the very end and it is fantastic. You can't go wrong with stuff inside bread.

Matt: We have a whole separate show...stuff inside bread.

Tara: That's true. I think we need to write that down as an episode idea. Okay Nikki, before we let you go, do you have a favorite product from our freezer case?

Nikki: There are so many. I have to go with, you know, the masses though...the Mandarin Orange Chicken. After I put them in the air fryer and before I toss them with a sauce, I add some chopped walnuts to it and then toss it in the sauce. And it's just an incredible meal with a little bit of rice and some steamed broccoli. That's a staple that we pick up weekly.

Tara: How long do you cook those for in the air fryer? Same as you would in the regular oven?

Nikki: A little bit less. I like them just on the verge of deep brown.

Tara: Nikki, thank you so much for taking a few minutes to talk to us about freezer case finds at Trader Joe's. Appreciate it.

Matt: Absolutely.

Nikki: Anytime. Thanks for having me.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Nikki certainly had some great ideas for how to use our products.

[Light music begins. Transition back to Mary Ann.]

Tara: Okay, Mary Ann, the French Onion Soup that's in our freezer, it's kind of synonymous with our freezer case at this point. I remember when I first started working here, there was a *Fearless Flyer* article that somebody else had written that described it as an architectural marvel because it's just so perfectly constructed and you have all the different layers that are frozen together into this puck and you put it in the oven or the microwave and you get this perfect French Onion Soup and talk about restaurant quality.

Mary Ann: So good that it inspired our Mac and Cheese. Recently, this new item came out: the French Onion Mac and Cheese.

Tara: And it's basically French Onion Soup mixed with Mac and Cheese flavor wise.

Mary Ann: Yup. With the croutons on top as well.

Tara: Normally when we make that Mac and Cheese, we make it in the microwave and not in the conventional oven. Would you recommend making that one in a conventional oven to sort of crisp up those croutons?

Mary Ann: Yes, I would. Or I guess you could even put it in the microwave and then at the very end, maybe for a minute or two, stick it in the broiler just to make those croutons nice and crisp. Or if you have maybe like one of those mini flame gadget thingies, (laughs) you can sort of, what is it brulee? I don't even know what the proper...

Matt: You could. That is the verb. Yes, to brulee as in, "Lawrence, brulee me some French Onion Mac and Cheese, please."

[Dinner bell ringing. Music ends. Transition to Alex.]

Tara: I think we should go check in with Alex to see what he's making for dinner.

[Light music begins again.]

Alex: I think for dinner tonight is going to be Cauliflower Gnocchi. We keep like five or six bags of those in the freezer at all times. And if you're anything like me, I love tossing them in

the air fryer. So I'll add a protein on top. We'll add sauce. Sometimes I eat them alone, but they come out so crispy when you air fry them.

Matt: Now I've heard when using an air fryer, it's important to not overload the container basket thing. Are these in like a single layer or do you just throw them in there piled up willy-nilly? How does that work?

Alex: I try to keep them in a single layer. If you don't, they sometimes have the tendency to stick together. But I mean, who doesn't love a big bite of crispy cauliflower goodness? Another one that I think a lot of people might not know about is the Argentinian Red Shrimp. I actually had it for dinner last night and I tried it with our new Cuban Garlic Citrusy Seasoning. I was thinking I was going to toss it on rice and make a meal out of it, but I ended up just eating a whole bowl of shrimp and it was delicious.

Matt: And so those are raw if I remember and they are peeled and deveined and they're probably more akin to a rock shrimp.

Alex: Exactly. A little bit of butter, a little seasoning and it's good to go on top of rice, pasta. We also have a Grass Fed Angus Beef. It's \$5.99 a pound, which in my opinion is awesome. You don't find grass beef at that value at many other places, if at all. And because it's frozen in these awesome blocks, they stack really nice in my freezer. So I buy sometimes like five or six at a time. With the current climate in the world, I'm kind of reducing the amount of times I go to the store. So instead of going every other day, like I used to, I'm going once every two weeks or once every week. And so I'm trying to stock up on things like that and it's just so convenient the way that it all stores. I have a bunch on hand at all times.

Matt: Well, I don't think you're alone in that pattern shift.

Alex: We also keep a couple of the Burrito Bowls and the Rice Bowls in our freezer. Cause you got to have something that's all in one ready to go.

Tara: That's a good one. Okay, so put you on the spot here, Alex, do you have an all-time favorite Trader Joe's frozen product?

Alex: I'm going to sound like everybody else. I love our Mandarin Orange Chicken. We'll go out to restaurants, or we used to go out to restaurants, or get takeout, you get orange chicken and say, "This isn't as good as Trader Joe's." And so we probably have one emergency bag in our freezer at all times.

Matt: What constitutes the type of emergency where it's like, "In case of emergency break open Mandarin Orange Chicken." I'm just curious.

Alex: We break that glass often.

Tara: (chuckles)

Alex: Sometimes more often than I'm willing to say.

Tara: All right, Alex, thank you so much for taking a few minutes to join us today. Really do appreciate it.

Alex: My pleasure.

[Transition back to Mary Ann.]

Tara: Okay, so Mary Ann, thinking about the freezer case, are there sort of hidden gems in that case?

[Music change to upbeat music.]

Mary Ann: Well, I guess maybe the fact that we're in diet season, this has been on the top of my mind, but our Vegetable Foursome, the medley foursome, you can put that in anything. You know, what I actually do is I take our Organic Riced Cauliflower and I throw those veggies into it. And, you know, I can put some soy sauce and make it sort of like a stir fry or some garlic, or I threw those veggies into the Cacio e Pepe, you know, to give it some vegetables.

Matt: What's been happening with frozen vegetables, like just basic frozen vegetables? Are those seeing growth similar to some of the other things like the entrees?

Mary Ann: Yes, in fact, because of the fact that many people were probably wanting some vegetables that had a longer shelf life than in our produce section, they were buying a lot of our frozen vegetables just because you know, you can store it in there for a lot longer period of time.

Matt: You know, recently you were in the office and you were doing some quality control checks and I was just reminded of how great the roasted asparagus is. Beautiful asparagus, given that little bit of a grill, a nice char flavor, and you could throw that in anything, it would be better for it. That is a cool product. Anything else like that, that you have that maybe we need to share with folks?

Mary Ann: Roasted potatoes now that you mentioned it. We have these roasted potatoes and peppers that come from Italy. It's interesting cause I get a lot of good feedback and it could be the variety of potatoes that they're using, but people really loved that.

[Dinner bell ringing. Transition to Rollyn.]

Matt: And that's the dinner bell. Let's check in with Rollyn to see what she's got on her menu.

Rollyn: Lately it's been the Branzino Fillets.

Matt: I'm just so glad you said branzino. I'm so glad. I mean, no offense Mandarin Orange Chicken, but enough already, okay? C'mon branzino for the win. Oh, I love it. Thank you for saying that.

Rollyn: My husband is actually the one that cooks, but he does a hard sear on the skin. He uses coconut oil, just a little bit. You don't need too much. High heat until the skin gets a little bit crispy and dark and sometimes you'll need to apply maybe a press or he uses another pan and then when you hear it starting to sizzle a little bit, go ahead and turn it over. In the oven for the last couple of minutes.

Tara: I might try that.

Rollyn: It's in a pouch. There's four of them. They're not very thick so it makes it really easy to cook because you don't have to worry too much about it being undercooked.

Tara: Yeah, I've seen branzino on restaurant menus, but I've never seen it in a store before.

Rollyn: It's \$9.99 for four filets in the bag. I mean that's an amazing value.

Tara: What is your favorite product in the freezer case at Trader Joe's?

Rollyn: Orange Chicken.

Matt: I'm sensing a theme here.

Rollyn: I mean, I've always loved it. My kids love it. One of my kids actually is not into chicken or meat in general, as much as the other two. So we actually throw in some of our tofu. We fry it up first and add it with the orange chicken sauce and her portion is just as delicious as the other kids.

Matt: You can stretch out that pack of Mandarin Orange Chicken.

Rollyn: The three of them can finish one package to themselves with their side of, of course, our Frozen Gyozas. That's their favorite dinner and we probably have it at least once a week.

Tara: So in our house, instead of the Frozen Gyozas on the side, we do the Cha Siu Bao Pork Buns.

Rollyn: Those are great. Those pork buns...the first time we got them, the kids were really excited. So we bought them a second time and when I went into the freezer, I saw that

the package was open and I guess one of the kids put it in her palm and waited until it was soft to start getting into it.

Tara: So she just ate it without cooking it.

Matt: I mean, to be fair, it is a cooked product, yes.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: It was just like a frozen treat...of barbecue pork.

Tara: Yeah, it's like a porksicle.

Matt: Nice.

Tara: Rollyn, thank you. I do think you made Matt's day with the mention of the branzino. I really do. I don't think he's making that up.

Matt: We sell a good amount of packages, but nowhere near the amount that we should.

Tara: Maybe Rollyn will be solely responsible for the branzino revival.

Matt: The Branzino Whisperer.

Rollyn: I hope so. Because if we discontinue that...

Matt: Don't say it. Don't say it.

Tara: (chuckles) Don't say the words.

Rollyn: Don't say the words. (chuckles)

Tara: Rollyn, it's really nice to see you.

Rollyn: You too.

[Music ends. Returning to Mary Ann.]

Tara: Okay, Mary Ann, those sounded delicious. Let's get back to this conversation.

[Light music begins.]

Tara: Let's think from a restaurant style eating experience. You could go to our freezers and bring home a dim sum restaurant, right? I think you could also go to our freezers and bring home a Mexican restaurant or an Italian restaurant, but maybe most specifically you can bring home an Indian restaurant.

Mary Ann: Well, it's funny, you mention that, Tara, 'cause that's one of my go-to dinners. Usually what I'll have is our Garlic Naan that comes from India, our Butter Chicken coming from Canada. I also have our Palak Paneer and some Channa Masala both produced in New Jersey. And of course, our Vegetable Samosas. That's a great appetizer to start with. And if somebody is looking for something vegan, we have our Vegan Tikka Masala. If you want spicy, we have our Fiery Chicken Curry.

Tara: One of the favorites in our house is something we accidentally bought on one shopping trip. And now it's purchased on most of the shopping trips, which is the Paratha. My kids were like, "Oh, this is like Naan to a different level."

Matt: I think those two frozen Indian breads, the Paratha and the Naan that we have, they're really fascinating because it's hard to find product like that outside of India.

Tara: Yeah, I can tell you, there's a neighborhood Indian restaurant that we patronize relatively often, but everyone in my family likes the Naan at Trader Joe's better than the Naan from our favorite Indian restaurant.

Matt: Mary Ann, is there anything on your shopping list coming from that cuisine that you still have yet to find?

Mary Ann: From that cuisine...well, there's something that I like to order when I go to Indian restaurants...an eggplant...

Tara: Oh, the Baingan Bharta. We used to have that, but I think in the grocery section, right?

Matt: In the pouch?

Tara: In the pouch.

Matt: Yeah, Banging Bharta. It's like my new band name.

Tara: I don't think you're pronouncing it correctly but that's okay.

Mary Ann: Okay, I will get right on it, Tara.

Tara: There's such an appreciation for foods from all over the world in that section. It's such a great way for people to be able to travel without having to travel.

Matt: I mean, food is a point of instant common connection, and it's so easy to celebrate because we have to eat, we need the fuel and why not have some fun while taking care of that need. And the frozen aisle is kind of like the world's greatest neighborhood.

Tara: Because it's all the neighborhoods of the world and it's hopefully growing.

[Music ends. Small transition.]

Tara: What is your go-to for a fail safe dinner? Like if you really just need something that you know is going to make everybody happy, what are you reaching for?

Mary Ann: I have to admit it's Orange Chicken. (chuckles)

Matt: Okay, if I would've known this was an infomercial for Mandarin Orange Chicken, I would have worn a different outfit.

Tara: I think we're good Mary Ann, thank you so much. Appreciate the time tremendously.

All: (jumble of thank you's and bye's)

[Dinner bell ringing. Transition to Ben.]

Tara: That sound tells me it's time to go check in with Ben and see what's for dinner.

[Music begins.]

Tara: Question for you, Ben, is when you need dinner and you're out of ideas, like, "I just want food to taste good that's going to make me happy." What do you go for?

Ben: My wife is a fantastic cook. She is not good at planning meals, however. We thought we were going to eat one thing, but we ended up eating another thing. I'll start with our frozen fish cause I think our frozen fish is amazing. Our fresh fish, our fresh salmon in particular, is also really, really good, but it's not as flexible. Frozen fish comes right out of the freezer. It's amazing every time. Since I've started working at Trader Joe's, we have always had a good selection of fish, particularly the salmon in our freezer all the time. And it's great, even last minute.

Tara: Do you cook it from frozen? Do you put it in the oven from frozen?

Ben: We do often. In part, because we haven't planned ahead. So... (laughs).

Tara: It wouldn't have occurred to me that you could do that, but when you just mentioned that, I thought, well, maybe that's what you do.

Ben: Now, if I'm cooking, it has to be a little bit easier. And so, you know, I rely a lot on our frozen pizzas. The 3 Cheese Organic Pizza, which we have had forever, is still remarkably good.

Tara: The one that is on regular rotation in our house is the Margherita Pizza and there are generally four or more of those in the freezer and...

Matt: You have a big freezer.

Ben: So our gluten-free pizza is really good. The one with the cauliflower crust is surprisingly good. I wouldn't even know that it was a cauliflower crust unless I read the package. The other pizza that has been really fun is the new pizza. It's like garlic and pesto with the...

Matt: The fried crust?

Ben: The fried crest. Like that thing is amazing. (laughs)

Matt: A little State Fair going on there. It's like, you know, Italian State Fair maybe.

Tara: Any others while you're here?

Ben: Our ice cream is amazing. We have some really great selections. I, you know, I personally really, really liked the coconut, the chocolate, Coconut Chocolate Ice Cream, the small pint, you know, it's just, it's a very, very good, you know, non-dairy product. Our vanilla half gallon it's so, so tasty, so rich, so full, like it is, it's gotta be one of the best quality ice creams, I think for the price. It's quite good.

Matt: I think that that vanilla ice cream rivals most desserts in the world. Like you can be on the Île Saint-Louis, that little Island in the middle of Paris, and there's some famous ice cream shops and darn it, that vanilla ice cream is just as good. I mean, the scenery's different at home, but, you know, it's just as good.

Tara: Actually the best ice cream in our freezer cases, the Mint Chocolate Chip.

Matt: Cage match.

Ben: By looking at what sells and what ends up in our freezers at home, anything that is in a small cone seems to be doing very well, right? Like the little Hold The Cone things are amazingly popular.

Matt: Yeah, it turns out what's for dinner? Ice cream.

Ben & Tara: (laughs)

Matt: It's the theme of the show.

Tara: What is your favorite Trader Joe's frozen product?

Ben: Ooh, my favorite. Boy, that's a tough one. Our frozen cheesecake is a fantastic product. I know that we, it's not out yet and we're still working on it, but we tasted a new version of that with the strawberry swirl, which is also, I think, going to be extremely good.

Tara: Alright, do we have anything else that we need to ask Ben while he's here, Matt? We have him on the spot.

Matt: I am so glad that something other than Mandarin Orange Chicken is a favorite here.

Ben: There is something that is newish that I like.

Tara: Oh, there's a new product? Okay.

Ben: The Mandarin Orange Chicken *Bowl!*

Matt: Ohhh.

Tara: It is good.

Ben: It's good. You don't feel as guilty when you eat the whole thing.

Matt: (laughs) Yeah.

Tara: All right.

Ben: Thanks for hearing me out on frozen.

Matt: Yeah, thanks for coming by.

Tara: Thank you Ben.

[Music ends. Transition to close. Closing theme music begins.]

Matt: I'd say it's time we poke a few holes in this episode and set the timer for three minutes. We're done.

Tara: We'll warm up another episode of Inside Trader Joe's soon. So please hit that free subscribe button to get it.

Matt: It *is* free and it's worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.