

Transcript — Episode 40: Trader Joe's Noodles Around with Pasta & Olives

Tara: Are you ready? Here's a preview of episode 40.

Matt: Forty? How did that happen?

[Preview montage. Upbeat music begins.]

Piero: I think the best pizza and the best pasta you can eat in the world is in Naples. And you know what I put in second spot? I put New York.

Jasmine: In fact, our number one selling pasta isn't really a pasta.

James: There still is kind of romance of the Mediterranean, your Italys, and Spains and Greece. The nice thing is California has a really similar climate, so really ideal for growing olives.

Tara: Olive this episode.

Matt: Pasta microphone.

[Music ends.]

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

[Theme music begins and two bells 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: What comes to mind when someone says Mediterranean diet?

Matt: Vegetables, fruit, beans, nuts, seafood.

Tara: And?

Matt: A glass of red wine.

Tara: What else?

Matt: Pasta and olives.

Tara: Today, we take a deep (splashing water) dive into the Mediterranean....

Matt: I see what you did there.

Tara: ...for everything you want to know about pasta and olives. Professor Matt, please start us off with a brief history of pasta aka the noodle.

[Theme music ends.]

Matt: (clears throat) Okay, settle down class. Let's see here.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Any discussion of pasta, of noodles, is of course, one of language. And while Yankee Doodle is absolutely the wrong place to start, since we're here, let's get on with macaroni. Now they were not talking about mac and cheese. While those British people were making fun of Americans, for sure, macaroni in that sense was a dandy. A late 1700s, let's say 1760s dandy, but really about sophistication, the height of British sophistication. I guess that's why they used a pasta term. Now macaroni and cheese usually means like an elbow shaped noodle, but what we're really talking about is what the FDA and other regulatory bodies call, "macaroni products." We're talking about pasta and there's all this mythology that plays out. And of course Marco Polo was involved, but I think most Italian people might say that noodles were around in Italy well before 1295, when Marco came back, supposedly with some Chinese noodles. Pasta has been all over the world since, who knows when? Think about couscous, think about noodles throughout Asian cultures. There's so much stuff happening most likely in parallel. It's almost impossible to pinpoint a place. Even if I do love a good game of Marco...Polo, it probably was not he who made lasagna what it is. In fact, lasagna in its proto Roman form was what noodles were discussed and talked about way before that guy showed up.

Tara: Whew, okay.

Matt: I'm just warming up.

Tara: (chuckles) Where the heck did noodles come from?

Matt: Probably what helped noodles travel around the world were those traveling people, nomadic peoples who liked the food and figured out how to dry early forms of pasta for easy transport and long-term storage. If you think about it, even contemporary pasta, it almost doesn't ever go bad once it's dried.

Tara: We want to know all about pasta and olives from Jasmine.

[Music ends.]

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

Tara: Jasmine, thanks for joining us again.

Jasmine: It's my pleasure. It's nice to be back.

Tara: How many different types of pasta do we sell at Trader Joe's?

[Light music begins.]

Jasmine: Oh goodness. I'm pretty sure it's in excess of 30.

Matt: Just in your category?

Jasmine: It's somewhere between 20 and 30. I haven't done the sub category review for that one yet.

Matt: We'll let it slide this time.

Jasmine: So the majority of our pastas are made from wheat semolina. So those are kind of the traditional pastas. And then we have a number of other products that kind of fulfill the dietary needs of some people who might be gluten free or maybe they're doing like a paleo diet or something like that. In fact, our number one selling pasta isn't really a pasta.

Tara: What do you mean by that?

Jasmine: Our number one selling pasta is the Hearts of Palm Pasta, which is actually made from a vegetable. We can't even keep in stock because that's how much people love it. And we have an amazing, amazing value. I think a lot of people are kind of doing the low carb thing.

Matt: But those good old classic Italian pastas, those do huge numbers in unit volume.

Jasmine: Yeah, we have, I think, five different types of spaghettis. We have a whole wheat, we have a semolina, we have a yellow lentil and rice one for people who are gluten free and then we have, oh goodness, for the semolina one we have a conventional and organic, and now we're going to have a third one, which is a tri-color.

Matt: So we have... and that's just spaghetti?

Jasmine: (laughs) We're working on that. That's just spaghetti. I think when the tri-color comes out, we'll have six spaghettis.

Tara: Explain the tri-color.

Jasmine: We were looking at some of our more successful pastas and we have this Radiatori of many colors.

Tara: Yeah.

Jasmine: But it's a pasta shape that's shaped like radiators. I guess they heat your stomach (laughs) sorry.

Matt: She's here all week, folks. I mean, this is incredible stuff.

Jasmine: (laughs) So that one is the same shape in four different colors. So we're kind of looking at some of our pastas to see, you know, where we could draw inspiration from and we said, "Wait a minute, we don't have anything multi-colored for long cuts."

[Electronic news flash sound.]

Matt: Let's break in with a retail jargon alert. A long-cut pasta. Think of spaghetti, fettuccine, angel hair, pappardelle, long-cuts, literally longer. Short-cut pasta, penne rigate, fusilli, those little short-cuts of pasta.

Jasmine: When I got the first production samples, I emailed the vendor and I said, "How come this is all different colors? This one bag has more of the green than the red and orange." And he said, "I'm sorry, Jasmine, but this is like such an artisanal process that we can't even control." I said, "Why can't you make it, you know, 33% of each?" And he said, "That's impossible because this is such an artisanal process."

Matt: I use that excuse in the future when someone's like, "This report makes no sense." It was an artisanal process.

Jasmine: (laughs) It truly is. I mean, I lined up maybe 10 samples, took an overhead shot, I sent it to him and I said, you know, "Antonello, so what's going on?" He did say he was going to talk to his quality assurance people to see if maybe they could get closer to 33.3.

Matt: I'll let you know how that conversation went...Antonello walks over and he's like, "Can you believe these Trader Joe's people?"

Jasmine: He probably will, yeah yeah. (chuckles)

Tara: (chuckles)

Jasmine: You know, our customers are kind of gravitating towards more unique cuts. So we have some really fun shapes coming in. One of them is fusilli corti bucati, which is like a bucatini.

Matt: With a perm.

Jasmine: Like a spring, like curly hair.

Matt: It's like a telephone cord if anyone knew what telephone cords still were.

Jasmine: Yes. I don't think any other retailer in America has it. I haven't seen it. We also have a bucatini coming in as a limited opportunity because we have that really, really amazing Limone Alfredo that we introduced during the winter. So we thought this would be a really, really great pasta to eat it with. We also have the cascatelli which kind of looks like these beautiful waterfalls. The ridges are really thick and it eats really, really well.

Tara: Jasmine, this might be a good opportunity to talk with one of our other Italian pasta suppliers. Not Antonello but Piero.

Jasmine: Oh yes. I know him a little (giggles).

[Music ends. Conversation with Piero in Italy.]

Piero: Good morning, my name is Piero.

Tara: How are you Piero? Nice to meet you.

Piero: I'm fine. What about yourself, Tara?

Tara: So far it's a pretty good day.

Matt: Anything can happen, but we're off to a good start, Piero. Thanks for making some time with us.

[Italian music up and under...]

Tara: I think Piero, a lot of people, especially in the United States, they hear pasta and they think pasta is pasta, no matter what. That's not really the case. What distinguishes really great pasta from basic ordinary pasta?

Piero: Let me say that it's all about the ingredients and when you talk about pasta, the ingredients are really, really simple. We're talking about durum wheat semolina and water.

People and ingredients make the difference when you want to talk about a good quality pasta, for sure.

Tara: It's definitely a combination of art and science.

Matt: Piero, is there anything by way of involvement at the farm level, working with the people growing the wheat, is your company working closely with those growers?

Piero: Yes, the biggest relationship that we have are with the millers. Once we received from all over the world, we give it to millers to be able to make the transformation between semolina and wheat, wheat and semolina.

Matt: So many businesses are truly global things these days. So it sounds like you're sourcing wheat from all over the world. Do you have a particular point of origin that you try to go first or does it vary from year to year, depending upon each crop?

Piero: You may think that pasta coming from Italy is all made with Italian wheat. In this, as you said, 'globalized world' it's difficult to happen. The total volume of the Italian wheat could never be able to cover not only the Italian needs, but the worldwide needs of pasta.

Matt: I'm wondering what it is about the water that's special.

Piero: I think the best pizza and the best pasta you can eat in the world is in Naples. And you know what I put in second spot? I put New York. I put New York rather than any other places in Italy. And that's because I believe of the water. Water, it's to answer your question, doesn't need to be touched. It doesn't need to be, to be refined. It's just simple water. That, I believe, makes a big impact.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Sometimes when we're contemplating a new pasta here at Trader Joe's...

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: ...we'll hear something about this particular pasta: a bronze dye is used in making this pasta or a plastic dye is used in making this pasta. Can you explain what that means and what the difference is? And really most importantly, why would anyone eating pasta care?

Piero: Yup, yup. Again, let's go back from when we started, pasta is just two ingredients: durum wheat semolina and water. When water is mixed with semolina, the dough obtained is passed through a dye, as simple as that. The dye can be made of bronze and the second material, Tara, is not plastic but is Teflon. The two types of dyes create two very different products. Producing pasta with a bronze dye rather than with a Teflon dye is way more expensive. There are three main reasons. First of all, the production is lower. Second, the raw

material has to be, for sure, of a higher quality due to a higher pressure on the pasta dough. And then bronze dye wears out much quicker than Teflon dye. Bronze pasta is more as a more let me say porous texture while Teflon pasta is more smooth. Talking about color, probably bronze pasta is more opaque while Teflon is more shiny. Bronze keeps a strong aroma of wheat while Teflon has a lesser aroma of wheat. Bronze pasta I would say it binds better with sauce. If you are in a household and you have time to cook pasta, you're not in a rush, you may go with a bronze dye pasta. If you are, let me say, not in a rush, but you want to go faster, or you prefer maybe a shiny color of the pasta rather than opaque, you can go with Teflon. A white tablecloth restaurant, they prefer bronze pasta to give the user the experience kind to be at home at your own table. It's just a preference of the end-user.

Tara: Yeah and we sell an assortment of each at Trader Joe's. I know that your company supplies a lot of pasta to Trader Joe's. Do you know how many pounds you can fit into a container ship coming to Trader Joe's?

Piero: I would not doing my job if I didn't know how to answer this question. We do ship into the United States around 225-230 containers per year, 4,500 to 5,000 pounds per year.

Tara: That's a lot of pasta,

Piero: A lot of pasta, a lot of pasta.

Tara: Well, Piero, thank you so much for spending some time with us.

Matt: Absolutely and I have one more question...

Tara: Oh, sorry, Matt.

Matt: ...because I'm trying to teach some new card games to my kids. So I would like your opinion, Briscola or Scopa?

Piero: Wow, wow! That's the most difficult question I had today, but Matt, I'm a huge, huge fan of Scopa. It's an amazing game. You don't only have to be lucky, but you also have to use your brain and...

Matt: I'm out on both counts.

Tara: (chuckles)

Matt: So I'm going to lose on both of them, oh man.

Piero: Thank you very much, guys. I appreciate your time and I hope to talk to you soon.

[Music ends. Back to Jasmine.]

Tara: Okay, we're back with Jasmine.

Jasmine: Yes.

Tara: I would love to talk about olives and olive oil and olive of things that...oh, see what I did there?

Jasmine: (chuckles)

Tara: That was unintentional.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: We sell a lot of olives, Jasmine.

Jasmine: Mm-hmm. Interestingly enough, most of the olives we sell are Kalamata. Regardless of what we've introduced, Kalamata has kind of always reigned supreme to the point where we have a conventional and an organic offering. We're actually coming out with the sliced Kalamata and we have a spicy Kalamata. Most of our olives are from Greece. We have some from Spain. We have some stuffed ones. Some of the varieties that we have besides Kalamata are Chalkidiki, which is actually also from Greece. And then we have the Bella di Cerignola, which are these kind of huge green olives that have a firmer texture with the pits and those are Italian olives. We also carry some California olives. We have three versions. You know: sliced black olives, black whole olives, and then green ones, which are fresh packed. They're packed within 24 hours of harvest.

Matt: I used to get a can of those olives in my stocking at Christmas when I was a kid.

Jasmine: The green or the black?

Matt: The black ones.

Tara: You know, that'd be like getting coal when I was a child, but okay. I love these little snacking olives that we have and what's up with that vacuum sealed package? And how did that come about? Because it's kind of odd and I hadn't seen those before.

Jasmine: When our developer was kind of looking for some snacking options within grocery, these kind of resonated with us because a lot of people at the time were also pursuing that kind of paleo, low carb, kind of diet.

Matt: What if it's just people who like olives? Do you have to be a cave person?

Jasmine: (laughs) You don't have to be a cave person.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Let's talk about olive oil. Let's do that.

Matt: NOT the girlfriend of a particular sailor.

Tara: You had to go there, you had to go there (laughs).

Matt: Um, had to go there.

[Music begins.]

Tara: We're a limited assortment store.

Jasmine: Yes.

Tara: And I kind of feel like that's true for every part of the store except olive oil.

Jasmine: (laughs) We have 13. We realized there was some duplication so you'll see fewer.

Matt: Spain is, are they still the world's largest producer of olive oil?

Jasmine: Yeah, when I've surveyed people who...just friends and colleagues of mine...and I asked them where they think, you know, most of the world's olive oil supply comes from. A lot of them still say Italy or Greece; 50 to 60% of the global olive oil supply comes from Spain.

Tara: Interestingly to me is that the United States is currently like 15th in the world for olive production. And they...

Matt: Is that out of 15 countries that produce olives?

Tara: No, that's out of the whole world. And I was kind of surprised by that because you can't grow olives in most of the United States because the climate is just not right. So most of that is coming from California. We thought it might be a good idea to talk to the supplier of our extra virgin olive oil from California and you, once again, were kind enough to arrange that conversation for us.

Jasmine: You guys are gonna talk to James who is an absolute expert.

Tara: Jasmine, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Jasmine: I love talking to you guys.

Matt: As they say, pasta la vista.

Jasmine: (giggles)

[Music ends.]

James: My name is James. I run sales and marketing for one of the suppliers of the California Extra Virgin Olive Oil for Trader Joe's.

Matt: Hey, James.

Tara: California is a really great place for growing olives and making olive oil. Why?

James: There still is kind of romance of the Mediterranean, your Italys, and Spains and Greece. That's where, you know, for thousands of years it's been grown. The nice thing is California has a really similar climate, especially in the northern Sacramento valley. So really ideal for growing olives. You have dry warm summers and autumns and then cool wet winters. It started back with the missions. We're still putting groves in the ground today so we've had all the years of learnings and findings and we can now plant them on properties we seek out and aligned to be harvested mechanically. That gives us an advantage of being able to harvest them fast, get them into the factory fast and into oil as quickly as possible. That is one of the biggest advantages of California is how quickly we can do it with the modern technology versus having them sit around in trucks or bags or waiting for your turn at a co-op mill or whatever, we can get it through the process really quickly.

Matt: When you take sort of that new world leap, while you might just blow right past some of the more romantic notions, sort of these postcard images, it's fascinating to think about time as an enemy of good olive oil.

James: With the Trader Joe's California Extra Virgin on average, we're taking the olives from the tree and the groves and into oil in approximately four hours. Because as soon as you pick that fruit, it's going to start to degrade. It really is the juice of the fruit, the juice of olive. So just like an orange juice, if you pick nice ripe, fresh oranges, and you turn them into juice, you're going to have a great orange juice, same with olives.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Let's talk specifically about the Trader Joe's California Extra Virgin Olive Oil. What kinds of olives are used in the making of that oil?

[Light upbeat music begins.]

James: It's more built off a profile than a varietal that what we want to be able to do is create that profile over and over and be able to replicate it so we really don't highlight the varietals that are in there on the label because it limits us to provide the best oil all year long. But with that being said, it really is Arbequina and Arbosana are the two primary varietals that go into this. If there's another varietal that we can put in there, we're going to do that to hit that profile.

Matt: You want that same great flavor on a consistent basis and thank goodness for you and your team doing it.

James: (chuckles) Thank you, yeah. It's fun doing it too.

Matt: I just thought, you know, you get some olives and you squeeze them and that's it.

James: (chuckles)

Tara: Once the oil is in the bottle and you know, it's sealed and it's kept and it's on the shelf, will that flavor change over time?

James: Yeah, absolutely. It will start to lose some of the value, why we're buying it, why we're going for extra virgin, the benefits, the flavors. We do keep all of our oil in proper storage year round and bottle to order when Trader Joe's needs it at shelf, we're going to be bottling it there. We hold very little inventory in bottle. Once it gets into the bottle, those are kind of the three enemies of olive oil: it's heat, oxygen, and light. So those are what we're trying to avoid. Ours is in a dark greenish glass to block out as much light as possible. If it's kept at room temperatures, again, you're going to hold it longer. And then each bottle does get a nitrogen cap put on it. So while it's still sealed and hasn't been opened and exposed to oxygen, it's going to hold very good. Each bottle also gets a custom best by date. In-house we've got a third-party fully accredited laboratory who does testing for all of the batches of oil. And those best by dates are going to look at the state of the oil when it's being batched and it'll tell you how long until it's not extra virgin. They can rest assured that if it's sold and purchased by that best buy date, it's extra virgin and it's great.

Tara: So what do you do with Trader Joe's California Extra Virgin Olive Oil? What's your favorite way to use it?

James: Probably a little biased. I love using olive oil and I use a lot of it, but I really like to let the Trader Joe's shine. Topping salads, making gazpachos with the fresh tomatoes, doing a bruschetta. I like frying my eggs in it in the morning, it gives an alternative healthy fat to butter, and you get some of that flavor with your fried egg.

Tara: I'm getting hungry now.

James: It's at an affordable price now. Just kind of celebrate it, you know? Don't let it sit there and be a trophy item, use it in your every day.

Matt: Good advice

James: You did a video of our harvest.

Tara: So, everyone should check that out for sure. It's on our YouTube channel.

James: It's really cool to see the whole process. California now has a reputation for wine. It should have a reputation for olive oil.

Matt: That's a great ending line, James. You should do this more often.

[Music ends.]

James: (laughs)

[Closing theme music begins.]

Tara: As we wrap up, let's remind everyone that you can find Inside Trader Joe's on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, iHeart, Audacy, all the places you get your podcasts, even YouTube.

Matt: How do we look on YouTube?

Tara: We look great on YouTube and never better than in that video that James mentioned. Oh, and remember to hit the free subscribe button on your podcast app.

Matt: It *is* free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.