

# Transcript — Episode 42: The Long and Wine-ing Road

Tara: Here's a preview of this episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

*[Fast upbeat music begins.]*

Matt: We're sitting here at (birds chirping) what I must say is a beautiful winery.

Courtney: If you look back at California wines, if you go back to the 60's and 70's and 80's, that's how we were making wine. We're making wine to age.

Tara: Right.

Courtney: And even the whites were made to age and now in the last 15, 20 years we're making them to...

Tara: ...drink now.

Courtney: ...drink now.

Raemy: You have to have 75% of the stated varietal on the label. So you have 25% of blending room.

Roy: Fortunately in California there's a lot of great grapes coming in. We're blessed.

Matt: Live from the Wine Country.

Tara: This is recorded.

*[Music ends.]*

Matt: Recorded from Wine Country in Sonoma County, California. 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.

Pat: And I'm Pat.

Tara: Pat is our special guest co-host, our tour guide here in Wine Country, and the crew member who represents Trader Joe's with many of our wine suppliers.

Pat: It's a dirty job, but somebody has got to drink it.

*[Theme music fades.]*

Pat: I mean, oops, do it, do it.

Matt: So where are we, Pat?

Pat: We're visiting a winery that I have to ...

Matt: (interrupts) Remember, what's the first rule of podcast wine trip?

Pat: Don't talk about the podcast wine trip.

*[Light music begins.]*

Tara: We joke, but there's a reason we're not going to divulge our location or even give the full names of the people we're meeting today.

Pat: Where we won't disclose their names because they do a lot of business with other people.

Tara: If we say who they are and then we offer this great price, the other folks they do business with they're going to want that same great price, right? And they might not understand all of the other pieces of work that go into us being on the receiving end of such a great price.

Pat: Exactly.

Matt: The setting of this winery is just absolutely breathtaking. That beauty is deliberate. This winery has an identity it's built and it needs to maintain. And that identity manifests itself in brands that they make and sell and put onto store shelves all over the place. Now Trader Joe's private label wine, wines with Trader Joe's on the actual label, they're made at places just like this. In fact, this winery has made many of those wines for us. The cost structure is different because in a Trader Joe's brand, that private label, it's absent. It's without all of those marketing costs, the brand building identity work that takes time and is expensive. We take on all the marketing and all the branding identity and the companies with whom we're working, they just get to focus on making great stuff. In this case, amazing wines.

*[Music ends.]*

Pat: This winery that we have had a relationship with for a number of years and had a number of great projects, has invited us over because they have some wine samples.

Tara: We're kind of fortunate, very fortunate I think, to be surrounded by winemakers, which is kind of a great place to be sitting.

Raemy: I'm Raemy and I'm the assistant winemaker.

Courtney: Courtney, and I'm the owner of (bleep) Winery.

*[Light music begins.]*

Matt: We're going to bleep the name.

Tara: We won't reveal any information that shouldn't be revealed.

Leslie: My name's Leslie, and I'm the winemaker at the (bleep) Winery.

Brian: I'm Brian. I work with this particular winery to bring wines to the marketplace specific to Trader Joe programs.

Courtney: Today what we thought we'd start with is the 2020 Napa Valley Cabernet that your panel approved.

Tara: OK.

*[Pouring wine, glasses clinking.]*

Courtney: Maybe you could talk about the 2020 vintage.

Raemy: Yeah, it was a great growing season. The spring was nice and warm and then a nice hot summer. So it was fairly early than normal. So we had no green characteristics or anything like that. And we're really happy with the quality level that we're getting from across the board mountain fruit, as well as valley floor and Napa. The base of the blend is some wine that we received from (bleep) and then blended it with some of our own very nice high-end mountain fruit to add some tannin and length and keep the ageability there. And then we kind of blended small bits of different other varieties, like in a Bordeaux blend, like Petit Verdot, Merlot, to just kind of soften. And then we put it down to barrel and we're checking on it now.

Matt: A lot of people might just think, "Oh, it's only Cabernet Sauvignon. It's only this one type of grape," but you talked about blending. What are the rules about blending and how do you use blending? I'd love your thoughts on that.

Raemy: You have to have 75% of the stated variety on the label. So you have 25% of blending room to augment wine and match flavors and do things like that. And then beyond that, it gets very complicated with vintage percents and all sorts of things. It's all just to prevent people from abusing what we want to say on the label. You want to be true to the consumer and tell them that this is a 2020 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. But you know, as the French do and many other Europeans have blended for centuries. So this is a thing that we should be allowed to do, but keep it, um, honest.

Matt: Sure. So you have the truth in labeling part of it, but then you also have, as a toolbox or a spice rack or any other analogy anyone wants to make, some flexibility there.

Raemy: Yes.

Tara: In the United States, we generally label wines by their varietal, but like not so in France or in Spain or in Italy. Is there a reason?

Leslie: A lot of it is because in Europe, like in France, different wines come from different regions, different regions grow things better than others. I think in California, especially because we can buy things from different areas, but if you were to just call it Russian River, it might not just be Pinot. It can be other things as well. Whereas European laws are a lot more stringent about what can be grown where.

Tara: All right. So we should try some of these wines, right?

Matt: Sure. It's not lunchtime but, you know, anything in the name of science.

Courtney: This is the blend program that you paneled and approved. And so this is the one that's bottling under...

Brian: Grand Reserve.

Tara: We already passed this. And that was around July when we tasted it and approved it.

Brian: And this'll be hitting the stores like January, February, kind of the first quarter of 2022.

Tara: Right after the holiday season.

Brian: Right after the holidays.

Tara: Yep.

Brian: And actually it's the third Grand Reserve label Cabernet we've done. The first one was the '14 vintage. So there's the 2020, we've done a '17. So we've historically have come back and had various Napa programs from this particular property.

Matt: I just learned we have special spitting glasses. I'm so excited.

Tara: Mmm hmm.

Matt: This is really fancy for us. Usually we just dribble down our shirts.

Brian: It's got some great fruit characteristic to it.

Tara: That's great.

Raemy: And it's only gotten better over time actually. It was a little closed and tannic and now like that's fading away and the fruit is shining through, really bright red fruit.

Tara: I would be very happy to drink right now. I mean that it, you know, it's incredibly drinkable.

Courtney: If you go back to the 60's and 70's and 80's, that's how we're making wine, we're making wine to age.

Tara: Right.

Courtney: And even the whites, whites were made to age and now in the last, I don't know, 15, 20 years we're making them to...

Tara: ...drink now.

Courtney: ...drink now, so we can turn our inventories and that's why Pat's here.

Pat: Most Americans don't cellar their wines.

Matt: You had mentioned them putting this Cabernet into barrel. Is it always into barrel? And what do barrels do? Cause there are other ways to store bulk wine or to age wine. Was it, what was it rather, about this wine that made you say, "Barrels are the way to go?"

Raemy: After pressing off the skins, you put it down to barrel to let it go through a malolactic fermentation and then age in oak. And so that's where you're picking up all the lactones and all these nice compounds that come from different types of oak, French, and American that add tannin, add some maybe sweetness, add length, it's a very traditional method to make Cabernet.

Matt: I have a trivia question. Is French Oak really from France? Or is it just a name?

Raemy: It has to be.

Matt: It has to be from France.

Raemy: Absolutely.

Matt: Okay.

Courtney: And there's various Limousin oak, various forests that it comes from and sourcing so that really brings a whole dynamic. And then American oak is kinda more of a dill, you know, kind of a, more of a stringency that it brings to it.

Matt: How does France feel about America's oak? Do they like it? Like, do they buy American oak to make barrels in France? No way?

Courtney: Are you kidding me?

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: I'm not kidding you. They won't even answer your call? All right.

Courtney: But we know it's, we know it's French oak when we get the invoice (laughs).

Matt: It's precious.

Courtney: It's precious.

Matt: Precious materials, okay.

Tara: What's now in this new glass?

Courtney: This is a blend that we put together as a possible follow-up.

Matt: This is smelling very different from the first one.

Raemy: More valley floor versus mountain influence. So definitely a little bit, even more approachable, a little heavier on the oak, even.

Matt: The valley that you're talking about is the Napa Valley?

Raemy: Yes.

Matt: Can you describe your basic expectations between those two parts of the valley and what kind of impact it would have on grapes or maybe on Cabs specifically?

Leslie: So typically the mountain fruit tends to be bigger, a little more tannic. Valley floor stuff is going to have a higher water table. So not typically as much concentration as you get with mountain fruit.

Matt: Is that literally because those vines have access to more water and the fruit is maybe more watered down?

Raemy: Maybe not watered down, but it's not as stressed, right? Because as the vine is more stressed, the fruit is more concentrated. You know, too much stress obviously isn't good, but you want to balance just the perfect amount of stress.

Matt: Those are words to live by.

Tara: That's true of humanity and wine. That's good.

Matt: Now, if we're going to send something down to the tasting panel, I mean, from where we sit this afternoon, it literally is, I guess, down south of us to the Monrovia Trader Joe's headquarters, but it's sending it to the tasting panel, that tasting panel evaluation.

Tara: It's simultaneously lighter, but way more tannic.

Pat: Some really nice flavor components to it.

Tara: I thought it was like kind of chewy, which is, I love that in a Cab.

Courtney: Which makes it really good with food. Pat, how many cases of this do you want?  
(chuckles)

Pat: This is the best \$4.99 wine I ever tasted.

Room: (laughs)

Pat: Do you want to own it? Or do you want to sell it?

Room: (chuckles)

Brian: Not to kind of push the envelope, but that's kind of, this is the great opportunity.

Matt: As long as you push Pat's buttons, that's all we want.

Pat: I'd like to try it again in a couple of weeks.

Matt: I feel like it's kind of clipped, like it has a stopping point that's fairly definite, at least in my brain and on my palette.

Leslie: We talked about blending earlier and we will try adding potentially something like the Petit Shiraz, um, that adds a little more fruit and some length to it. And we'll also try blending in perhaps a different Cab. We sort of get, we have a tasting lab in the back and we just kind of pull out all the different candidates and try 2% of this, and 1% of that, and it gets kind of crazy. I mean, we actually have gone down to like one or a half of a percent of something and it really does make a big difference.

*[Small transition.]*

Matt: I feel like each wine is sort of a reaction to trends.

Pat: Generally more nuevo wine enthusiasts tend to like a wine that has a little bit more jammy quality to it, has a slight residual sugar to it, a little sweetness. The older, more senior generation such as myself, tend to like wine that has a little bit more of a chewiness to it.

Matt: With red wine, there's so many, I don't know how else to describe them, really sweet offerings in the marketplace and what is that all about? I mean, some people say that grapes grown in California are necessarily sweeter, they have a higher sugar content. I have no idea if that's real, maybe it depends.

Brian: Well, there's the adage that the consumer always says they like dry, but they really drink sweet. So that point to further your question, answer it, is that the generational pallet is stepping into the different varietals now. Red blends is a stepping stone to get them to drink Cabernets, Merlots, and so on.

Raemy: One thing I think that's really cool about what's happening now, and that Trader Joe's does a really good job of, is accessibility of wine. So we're being able to share high quality wines and maybe introductory sweeter wines to people at such a great price point. It's forever been a place that I recommend people to go check out for that reason.

*[Small transition.]*

Matt: 2020 is an annus horribilis as they might say. Why was it a bad year?

Leslie: Because everything caught on fire.

Matt: But did everything? Or, I mean, lots of stuff burned and I certainly did not mean to make light of what happened, but there were areas that were not as affected or maybe not even affected at all.

Leslie: One of the things that we've really learned after last year is that we know absolutely nothing about smoke taint or smoke damage with wines.

Raemy: It's a really complicated issue. And the research is emerging and you know, every study that comes out seems contrary to the one prior.

Leslie: The quantity may be lessened, but the quality certainly won't be. I would imagine that, honestly, a Trader Joe's consumer is going to really benefit from a year like 2020, because there's so many really highly regarded reputable wineries that decided not to produce their wine. They don't want to put their name on it and have a critic say bad things.

Tara: And we know that we're going to get a good product because we're working with sources with whom we have long standing relationships and reputation matters.

Leslie: So people are going to be selling these amazing wines for not a lot of money on the bulk market and that's what shows up at Trader Joe's. And it's just a value to the consumer.

Matt: We have a different set of critics that we answer to, those folks shopping in our stores, and so it is really different. It's not so much about getting a score out of a 100 by a certain wine publication.

Brian: And the other part of it is the TJ consumer is the brand ambassador. When they find a wine for the label, it becomes word of mouth, "Hey, have you tried the latest one?" And consistency is a good thing and treasure hunt.

Tara: You guys are awesome. Thank you so much.

Room: Thank you!

*[Glasses clinking.]*

Tara: Super appreciate this. This was fun and delicious.

*[Music ends.]*

Pat: Your Wine Country tour continues...

*[Beeping of car door unlocking.]*

Tara: Okay...

*[Car door opening.]*

Matt: Oh, man, it's a good thing. I've been spitting. I'll drive.

Tara: Next stop...other winery in Sonoma County.

*[Car acceleration. Faint upbeat music in background.]*

Tara: Oh wow. (brief ambient noise on her mic) It is beautiful here. Rolling green and gold.

Matt: Yeah, it is sort of at that, you know, harvest time, the grape leaves are turning golden. You know, the vines in wine growing country, they're fairly well pruned.

Tara: I just want to stop and pick some, but I know that's not allowed.

Matt: Well, there are lots of other creatures that want those grapes too. So you have to figure out how to deal with them so you can make use of owls and all kinds of stuff to help.

Tara: Well that just romanticizes it more. You just said, "You make use of owls." You make it sound like Hogwarts.

Matt: Well, it is a little magical.

*[Turning signal. GPS voice: "Your destination is on the left."]*

Tara: Okay. According to this, we're basically here.

*[Music ends. Transition to winery.]*

Roy: My name is Roy and I'm a jack-of-all-trades master of none.

*[Inside winery with a wonderful high pitched mechanical room tone. Music in background.]*

Tara: How long have you been working with Trader Joe's on wine projects?

Roy: 35 years, I would say.

Teri: My name's Teri, and I help make the wines.

Bob: Bob and I'm a winemaker also.

Roy: And you are the master winemaker.

Bob: I've been doing it for a long time. For Roy and I, when we've been working together, my whole goal is to make wine taste good. As long as somebody, a customer, tastes it and says, "Oh, that's good," then I succeeded.

Roy: You're making wine for other people. And if any artists, how are you going to balance your own style, such that the consumer would understand and appreciate it. That's a very difficult battle within yourself.

Matt: Do you work collaboratively on a single wine? Or do you each have separate projects? How does your work flow play out?

Bob: If you're doing a blend and you've got four wines in front of you, if you're doing it by yourself, there's a chance you'll miss something. And so, consequently, that's why we blend together. If you have a wine and it's almost right, but it isn't quite right, it's missing some element, then the trick is to figure out what that element is. If you're doing a Cabernet, it might be a different Cabernet. And you blend in a little bit to increase the flavor, or you put some wine that had a little oak aging on it, put that in there. So that's kind of what we do is just take something, ideally, something that's pretty good to start with and then just keep making it better.

Roy: You don't have to be a genius to make a great wine out of great grapes. Well, you gotta be genius to make a good wine from a bad grape. So fortunately in California, there's a lot of great grapes coming in. You want hot days and cold nights. That means the difference between temperature should at least be 20 degrees. There are very few places on earth that they have that consistently. You need to be close to cold waters and having a semi-desert inland. Here, New Zealand in one part, Cape Town, and some parts of Chile, or unless you're in Argentina at a very high platitude in terms of the difference of the desert, that's a really, really huge difference, they can get hail in summer. In all these areas, you have very, very, these micro-climates, which is good for Pinot Noir, you go 20 miles inland. It's great for Shiraz, you go 20 miles inland, then Cab. In Europe, they have vintages. In California, they say, which year was great. My answer is you should ask which year was not great, which out of 10 years, maybe we have one or two years mediocre.

*[Small transition to blending experiment. Music ends.]*

Tara: Teri is going to do a little blending for us and try to come up with a blend of...it looks like a little science experiment here. There's bottles, there's beakers, there's glasses.

*[Light music begins.]*

Teri: This is the control and it's a good wine by itself. But then I thought what we could do is show you what we add, which is not much, to take it from good to great.

Tara: Okay, great.

Matt: The control is your baseline starting point. It's the thing against which you compare all your experimental efforts. Sometimes you might return to that starting point as your end result goal. Hopefully you've learned something along the way.

Pat: What vintage?

Roy: This is 2020, which is a good wine.

Matt: You sort of get it right off the nose though, that green pepper.

Roy: Yeah, but let's see what we did with this wine.

Tara: So now Teri is pouring us the second version.

Teri: So what I did was I took this wine, I added a small amount of other wine and basically we just do it in this.

Roy: Can I tell them the secret, what we did?

Teri: I'm ok with it.

Roy: We added some Petit Verdot in there.

Matt: Mm hmm.

Teri: I make 50 milliliters. I put 45 of the Merlot and five of the Petit Verdot, 10% Petit Verdot, keeps it Monterey county. So still keeping it a Merlot, still keeping it Monterey.

Tara: Oh but you see it automatically in the color, if it's just a little richer colorwise.

Roy: That's the Petit Verdot.

Tara: Yeah.

*[Glasses clinking. Wine pouring.]*

Matt: And we've overtime tried different times to sell that as a varietal on its own. And it has to like a very vocal, but small fan base.

Roy: It's growing.

Tara: You guys have a fun job.

Roy: I don't know. You know when love starts? Is when romance dies. I love making wine. Cause I'm not, I mean, all the romance is gone.

Tara: I'll be sure to tell my husband that (love dies) love starts when romance dies.

Room: (laughter)

Tara: It was very, very nice to meet you. Thank you so much for chatting with us.

*[Closing theme music begins. Car starting again, accelerating.]*

Tara: Matt, we've learned a lot here in California's Wine Country.

Matt: I feel a little bit like Huell Howser.

Tara: And our California listeners will actually get that reference.

Matt: Everybody else, you'll have to search YouTube.

Tara: I have an idea. Maybe next time we do a podcast wine tour to...

Matt: Around the world.

Tara: We can start in Italy.

Matt: Go to France. The Loire Valley is nice, Burgundian regions.

Tara: How about South Africa?

Matt: I think we should.

Tara: If you enjoyed this podcast, make sure you get the next one. It'll be about Trader Joe's holiday products. So hit that free subscribe button.

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

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.