

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 46: Customer Choice Awards

[Orchestra music in the background begins to slowly come up.]

Tara: On this episode of Inside Trader Joe's, we reveal the winners of our Annual Customer Choice Awards.

Matt: We hope knowing which products are this year's customer favorites might give you some ideas about something new to try.

Tara: And we're about to begin. Nikki is on the red carpet.

[Traffic, commotion under conversation...]

Matt: Okay, what's happening Nikki?

[Orchestra music and crowd noise in the background.]

Nikki: It's so exciting! I see Björk and she's wearing her white swan dress.

[Paparazzi flashes.]

Nikki: Oh wait. No, no, no. That's actually Trader Joe's All Natural, Antibiotic Free, Brined Fresh Young Turkey.

Tara: Oh, easy mistake.

Nikki: And here's probably the cutest couple in attendance. Organic Corn Chip Dippers is arriving with Chunky Guacamole.

[Paparazzi flashes.]

Nikki: Now I'm not one to gossip, but I heard Organic Corn Chip Dippers went to the barbecue last summer with Organic Thick and Chunky Salsa.

Tara: Oh right, Nikki! I think it's time to roll up that red carpet...

Matt: And go Inside Trader Joe's.

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

Tara: Your love of Trader Joe's products inspires us throughout the year.

Matt: And tonight we celebrate our very best as chosen by you, our customers.

Tara: And at the end of the ceremony, we get to eat the overall winner.

Matt: Not too many awards shows can say that.

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

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the marketing product guy. Welcome to the 13th Annual Trader Joe's Customer Choice Awards. Tara, how are these awards determined?

[Theme music ends. Light music begins.]

Tara: We send out at the beginning of January a call for votes. We send an email to the folks who have signed up to receive email from us on our website. We put out a posting on Instagram. We put some notifications on our website and anyone at all can login to that link and vote for their favorite Trader Joe's products.

Matt: Open, easy. And so then Price, Waterhouse, Cooper counted the votes?

Tara: Um, actually, no, uh, we create a bunch of Excel spreadsheets and we separate them out amongst the team in our marketing department and we count...we count them.

Matt: I love a good process that involves both Excel spreadsheets and manual counting.

Tara: It is how we do it.

Matt: And I hold in my hand, the envelopes and as a child of four can plainly see these envelopes have been hermetically sealed.

Tara: What does that even mean?

Matt: You can't open them.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Okay, we need to open them.

[Timpani roll.]

Tara: Our first category. The Customer Choice Award for Favorite Beverage goes to...

Matt: Non-dairy Oat Beverage!

[Orchestra ta-daaa. Large polite applause. Upbeat music.]

Tara: This was a surprise when it won this category last year, now it's a repeat winner.

Matt: Oat beverages, dairy alternatives, very much a thing these days. Very popular, relatively prevalent. People voted for this thing for their Overall All-Time Favorite Beverage, not just the non-dairy version. That to me is astounding. What's going on with aloe juice?

Tara: What *is* going on with aloe juice, Matt? (laughs) And where the heck did that come from?

Matt: No one knows and very few people care.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: But there's always hope for aloe juice.

Tara: It's not on the list. It didn't make the top five, Matt.

Matt: Again.

Tara: Again. So, okay, let's move on, shall we?

[Music ends.]

Matt: One of my favorite categories, cheese.

[Light music begins.]

Matt: There isn't a bad choice here whether it's the Baked Lemon Ricotta...

Tara: That finished in third place.

Matt: Okay, or the English Cheddar With Caramelized Onions.

Tara: Love that cheese. Second place this year.

Matt: Okay, in that case, I expect the winner to be...

[Music ends. Opening envelope. Timpani roll.]

Tara: That's right...Unexpected Cheddar.

[Orchestra ta-daaa. Large polite applause. Upbeat music.]

Matt: I think a lot of other cheddars are feeling a little wanting in comparison.

Tara: (giggles) It over delivers every single time.

Matt: Unexpected Cheddar, hats off to you.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Let's get to customers' favorite entrees.

Tara: Let's mention some of the other nominees, if you will. Other entrees that got a lot of votes!

Matt: Like Chicken Tikka Masala.

Tara: Or Butter Chicken with Basmati Rice.

[Music ends. Timpani roll.]

Matt: The winner, of course, (rips open envelope) is Trader Joe's Mandarin Orange Chicken.

[Orchestra ta-daaa. Large polite applause. Upbeat music.]

Tara: So Mandarin Orange Chicken has been on the list as either the Favorite Frozen Product or the Favorite Entree, the favorite of whatever category in which it fits every year, since we've had the Customer Choice Awards.

Matt: I feel like maybe we should just give Mandarin Orange Chicken a Lifetime Achievement Award and then open up space for something else.

Tara: You know, Matt, hold on to that thought because we are working on something special for, you know, maybe mid-year 2022 announcement and you might just have your wish fulfilled.

Matt: We've saved some room for sweets and desserts.

[Music ends. Timpani roll.]

Tara: The Customer Choice Favorite Sweet or Dessert is (rips open envelope) Hold The Cone! Mini Ice Cream Cones.

[Orchestra ta-daaa. Large polite applause. Upbeat music.]

Matt: So apparently no one could choose cuz they're all so darn great. But there are different flavors. There are different versions of those Hold The Cone! Mini Cones.

Tara: (laughs) Are there people who haven't tried Hold The Cones! yet? There might be.

Matt: This is really an open invitation. If you are among those folks who have not yet tried Hold The Cone! Ice Cream Cones, please do so.

Tara: Okay, let's move to produce.

Matt: And it's so nice to see such a variety of favorites in this category of veritable cornucopia from bananas to Persian cucumbers and Les Petites Carrots of Many Colors.

[Music ends. Timpani roll.]

Tara: The winner of Favorite Produce Product (rips open envelope) is Trader Joe's Teeny Tiny Avocados.

[Orchestra ta-daaa. Large polite applause. Upbeat music.]

Matt: They are so cute.

Tara: They're not just cute though, they're delicious and they're really convenient. I eat a lot of avocados and I didn't even vote here but I might have voted for this product as well. Thank you Customer Choice Awards voters for agreeing with me. Appreciate it. Okay snacks are next and this year, Matt, we have some salty competitors.

Matt: And beautiful cinnamontography.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Now my personal favorite, it didn't actually make this year's list. It's that Chakri Mix. It's so delicious and I'm holding out hope that next year it gets a little bit of limelight.

Tara: Those are delish, but the winner for Favorite Snack (timpani roll) at the 13th Annual Customer Choice Awards is (rip opens envelope) Peanut Butter Filled Pretzels.

[Orchestra ta-daaa. Large polite applause. Upbeat music.]

Matt: Of course. Delicious!

Tara: It's a perennial favorite, right? Okay, Home, Bath, and Beauty affectionately known in retail jargon as HABA.

Matt: Products like our various body butters, the ultra moisturizing hand cream, even hand sanitizers.

Tara: Yes, let's give those a hand, shall we?

[Rim shot. Timpani roll.]

Matt: And the winner for Customer Favorite Home, Bath, and Beauty Product is...

Tara: (rips open envelope) Trader Joe's Scented Candle Tins.

[Orchestra ta-daaa. Large polite applause. Upbeat music.]

Tara: Okay, well let's be clear. It's really the candles and not the tins. Folks love those candles. I'm among those folks. Are you Matt?

Matt: I do like them, yes. And I always have a hard time figuring out what my favorite scent is among all of those scents. It might be the Cedar Balsam, maybe.

Tara: All I know is that every single candle that we bring into the store, I bring into my house and it is well received. And let's just say it works wonders in teenage boys' rooms. That's all I'm gonna say. Just one more category before we award our biggest prize of the night. For the Vegan and Vegetarian Category, Matt, we are going into the kitchen with our friend Alex.

[Upbeat music begins. On location in the kitchen.]

Tara: As promised we're in the kitchen to announce the winner of Favorite Vegan or Vegetarian item.

Matt: And that is the product that tells you its name. It's our Soy Chorizo.

[Applause.]

Tara: Woohoo. But what the heck do you do with Soy Chorizo? We are here with our friend and crew member, Alex, who is going to show us a great way to make Soy Chorizo. Hey Alex.

Alex: Hi.

Tara: How are you?

Alex: I'm doing great. I love making potato and soy chorizo tacos. I call 'em the All Day Tacos because you can eat 'em for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Breakfast we throw an egg on it. Lunch or dinner we throw salsa, vegan cheese, whatever you like. Normal fixins it's delicious.

Tara: All right. So how do we do this?

Alex: I'm gonna start with some of my favorite potatoes. They are fingerling potatoes. We are gonna dice them up and then we're gonna throw 'em in an oiled pan and start crisping.

Tara: How much oil do you think, Alex?

Alex: A couple tablespoons. And then when we add the Soy Chorizo, it actually starts to absorb some of the flavor that comes out of it. You end up with this awesome, delicious flavorful, crispy potato. All right, so into the pan, we're gonna go. We've got some hot oil.

Matt: So you didn't like, boil, blanch, bake...these are raw potatoes.

Alex: They are.

Matt: So how long do you think you want to cook 'em in the pan before you add the Soy Chorizo?

Alex: We're gonna cook 'em for four or five minutes. We wanna make sure that they're tender, but not crunchy.

Tara: Okay, now I'm hearing sizzling.

[Sizzling potatoes.]

Tara: While we're waiting for the potatoes to be ready, you had mentioned that you had a really interesting, fun way to make Mandarin Orange Chicken, which was the winner in the entree category.

Alex: I do and I think it might be the greatest innovation we've seen in a long time.

Matt: That's a bold statement.

Alex: It is a bold statement. It's hard to make Orange Chicken better, but I think technologies have become available to us that might kick up an extra notch. And that is the air fryer. I know a lot of us now have them.

Tara: Mmm-hmm.

Alex: So I think we should make some air fryer Orange Chicken.

[Air fryer beeps, starts humming.]

Alex: All air fryers are different. They're kind of like microwaves. Sizes are different. Cooking power is different so you might have to adjust your timing based on that, but we're gonna start out at the highest ours will go, which is 400 degrees. And we're gonna give it about 10 minutes and check on it. And then if it needs a little bit more, we'll give a little bit more. You don't want it too crispy.

Tara: Note that I removed the sauce packets before I tossed it in there.

Alex: Sauce packet is removed.

Tara: And I bet those potatoes are getting close.

Alex: Yes, we have some real crispy potatoes over here.

Matt: Apparently fire works.

Alex: Okay, so Soy Chorizo has been removed from the tube.

Tara: So that's an important thing to note about the Soy Chorizo. That casing is not edible.

Alex: It is not.

Tara: Because like often with sausages, the casing is edible. This is plastic.

Alex: That is correct. So we're gonna break up the Soy Chorizo. We're gonna make sure it's mixed well with the potatoes. We want those potatoes to absorb some of the flavor while the whole mixture cooks.

Matt: So the Soy Chorizo has a little bit of spice to it. Do you add extra hot sauce? Salsa?

Alex: I like spicy, so I do. But then again if I'm doing it at breakfast, I kind of go a little bit more mild. I'll throw the egg and then sometimes I like to put a piece of avocado.

Matt: Oh, that'd be nice. That sort of creamy, creamy texture kind of offset the heat of the spice.

Tara: Or sour cream.

Alex: Oh, there you go.

Tara: But I guess that eliminates the vegan aspect from the dish.

Alex: So does the egg. But then again that shows how versatile this product is. You don't have to be vegan or vegetarian to enjoy it. It's got tons of flavor and it's amazing.

Matt: And I actually think it might be easier to use than "real" chorizo. Like it doesn't throw off as much oil when you cook it as real chorizo does. Now I'm thinking of a spicy lasagna made with Soy Chorizo.

Alex: I think we're just about ready to taste. We're just looking for a little bit of color on this chorizo. We've gotta make sure it cooks to 165 degrees and then we're good to go.

Tara: I think we should try this while the Orange Chicken is finishing up over in the air fryer.

[Light music begins.]

Alex: Matt, Tara, what do you guys think?

Matt: I love the sharpness of the smell and the taste of the Soy Chorizo. There's like this bright, tanginess that really comes through, like, especially when it's hot and steamy, you take a big whiff of that in and it's like, "Ooh, it opens up your sinuses in a great way."

Tara: And it's spicy, but not overwhelming.

Alex: Definitely.

Tara: And as you said, you can always make it spicier by adding your own sauce or tone it down a little with sour cream or avocado and the texture of the potato...perfect.

Matt: I'm thinking like a, instead of classic corn beef hash, a Soy Chorizo hash. If you had like a bunch of caramelized onions, a different style of cooked potato, then you put your fried egg on top of that. You could dice up a bunch of other squash or root vegetables.

Alex: I would also do the frozen diced roasted potatoes. Those have the peppers and onions along with the roasted potatoes. Talk about easy.

Tara: It looks like the Orange Chicken is almost done.

[Air fryer hum ends and air fryer beeps.]

Tara: Looks pretty crisp.

Alex: It looks really crisp. I think that's it guys. We're gonna go straight into the pan. So what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna actually take the sauce and I'm gonna put it in a cup of hot water. I'm gonna bring it from frozen to at least a squeezable consistency. And then depending on how you like it, either you can go directly onto the chicken or if you're like me and like to be a little extra, I add it to the pan, heat it up and then mix the chicken in the pan.

Matt: All right, we're gonna sauce it up.

Tara: Yeah, that's how I like to do it too.

Alex: And once the sauce starts to bubble a little bit, we're gonna add in the chicken and toss it around. For those of you that don't have an air fryer, a convection oven is very close. And if you don't have that, the main difference is time. You know, if you're gonna do it in the regular oven, it just takes a little bit longer. For reference, we just cook this whole bag of Orange Chicken in the air fryer. It took 10 minutes. In the conventional oven you're looking at 18 to 20 minutes. So all we're doing is saving a little bit of time and getting a little extra crispiness. There's many different ways to prepare it. And it's delicious just about any way you do it.

Tara: Ten minutes in the air fryer. I am impressed with that.

Alex: I think half the time makes twice the deliciousness.

Matt: As long as someone else has to clean up the air fryer, then I would totally agree with that.

Tara: It's so good.

Matt: Well, I can see why this is a favorite, favorite of customers.

Tara: I've tried preparing Mandarin Orange Chicken a whole bunch of ways over the years. That was definitely the easiest, the quickest. I'm gonna say maybe the best. Alex, we are so grateful for your kitchen expertise and for teaching us great ways to prepare two different Trader Joe's products. Soy Chorizo the winner of the Vegan Vegetarian Category and Mandarin Orange Chicken winner of the Entree Category. Just excellent!

Alex: Matt and Tara, thanks for having me. Thanks for coming to the kitchen. I think we're gonna have to work on a recipe and figure out how to make some Soy Chorizo lasagna for Matt.

Matt: Yes. I look forward to it.

[Music ends. Transition back to the awards show stage. Orchestra music begins.]

Matt: And now we present the highest honor we can bestow upon a product. The award for Favorite Overall Trader Joe's Product as voted on by you, our customers.

Tara: You know, Matt, a lot of really wonderful products received votes this year. It seems like we're doing a disservice to some of them by only mentioning the overall winner. How about we countdown the top five?

Matt: I think that makes a lot of sense.

[Orchestra music ends. Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Coming in at number five, a new entry into this category, Trader Joe's Butternut Squash Mac and Cheese.

Matt: Seasonally available and so good that it *still* made the top five. Fantastic. And coming in at number four, a classic, Everything But The Bagel Seasoning.

Tara: You know, a couple years ago, that was the overall winner.

Matt: Apparently things do change. The third product, Unexpected Cheddar. How expected? Of course.

Tara: We kind of expected it. And at number two, the ever fabulous Dark Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups. We love those. So let's get to it now, shall we?

[Music ends. Timpani roll.]

Tara: And the winner for Favorite Overall Trader Joe's Product in the 13th Annual Customer Choice Awards is...

[Rips open envelope.]

Matt: I knew it.

Together: Mandarin Orange Chicken!

[Wild applause. Orchestra swells behind...]

Matt: And paying tribute to our winning products is crew member David performing “Love Song from Customer Choice Awards.”

David: (singing) ☐☐☐ All the votes have been cast. We've got winners at last for the Customer Choice Awards. Everyone's made their pick with a tap or a click from their phones or their home keyboards. Some wins were familiar like an old and trusted friend. While Hold The Cone! and Oat Beverage surprised us in the end. And once again, you made the call for Orange Chicken overall at the Customer Choice Awards! ☐☐☐

[Orchestra ta-daaaa. Mad applause.]

Tara: Thank you, thank you. Wow, what a great way to end this episode!

[Closing theme music begins.]

Matt: And if you liked this episode, even the jokes, please rate this podcast and maybe even leave us a review.

Tara: And hit that free subscribe or follow button.

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

Tara: If you missed any of the winners, you can find the complete list at TraderJoes.com. Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.

[Music ends.]