

Transcript — Episode 8: 'Tis The Season

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

Matt: Let's go... HO HO HO...

Tara: Already?

Matt: Yeah, I think it's time.

Matt: Inside Trader Joe's.

[Theme music begins, accompanied by sleigh bells.]

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, Director of Words and Phrases and Clauses.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the marketing product guy. So whether it's Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Festivus for the rest of us, the holidays are probably a big deal in your home, and it's certainly a big deal at Trader Joe's.

Tara: It really is. I mean we are busy as elves all year putting together special seasonal product and we're looking forward to sharing that process and some fun holiday ideas with you.

Matt: So here's a taste of what's coming up on this holiday episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

Jon: This year I think the product that's really going to be amazing is the Dog Advent Calendar. (*Sound of dog begging*)

Tara: Pumpkin is a thing that just went out of control.

Marcy: At one point we were up to 80, 85 products?

Nikki: We consider any feedback, good or bad, an incredible gift.

Matt: "Hi. I am begging you, the Trader Joe's overlords to bring back the Cedar Balsam Candle this holiday season."

[Sound of paper shuffling]

Tara: This product?

Jon: Those are fantastic.

Tara: Those are dangerous.

Matt: My prediction? Those become an everyday product.

Stuart: The Platinum wines are pretty much my favorite holiday items.

Tara: There's plenty to drink at Trader Joe's this year.

[Music ends]

Tara: All right, I'll start. I'll introduce Jon and um, the ghost of holiday products. Past, present and future. So it's basically, you know, a Trader Joe's Christmas Carol.

Matt: Bah Humbug.

Tara: (laughs) That should come from Matt... Humbug personified.

Tara: We are here with Jon Basalone, President of Stores at Trader Joe's. Happy Holidays, Jon!

Jon: Happy Holidays to you too, Tara. Thank you.

Tara: Let's start with the past because it's in the past. What were some holiday products that you really enjoyed that we no longer carry?

Jon: Yeah. Well, this usually always makes me kind of bitter to even think about. I really loved the Peppermint Joe-Joe's ice cream. Ice cream isn't something that people usually think of when they start thinking of the holidays, but um, you know, that product I just loved. I mean I like the Peppermint Joe Joe's of course, and the Chocolate Covered Peppermint Joe Joe's and all the different ways that we, we do those, but I was heartbroken when we decided to try some other kind of ice cream or do something differently. So I'm, I'm still constantly talking to our frozen folks about maybe thinking

about bringing that back sometime in the future, you know, begging for it.

Tara: I think it says a lot about Trader Joe's that not even you can make that come back.

Jon: Give me time, and we'll see.

Matt: Jon, thinking about a holiday ice cream while this isn't peppermint Joe Joe's Ice Cream, we do have for this upcoming holiday season, we've got a Buche de Noel Ice Cream. It's that Yule log thing that I've always loved, and we've always tried to figure out what to do with, so we made an ice cream out of it. So it's like custard ice cream, a little bit of sort of a chocolate fudge ribbon going through that. I think there's a little bit of meringue pieces because they often make mushrooms or mushroom like decorations out of meringue on the Buche de Noel log, and then it's got pieces of chocolate cake in there.

Jon: Yeah. That, that's a great item.

Tara: I'm sold.

[Music changes to up tempo holiday strings]

Jon: The other item, too... It's another frozen dessert item just from last year that just for whatever reason, just didn't catch on with customers was (the, uh,) the sticky toffee pudding.

Matt: It looked kinda like a sticky blob, right?

Tara: I feel like we've tried sticky toffee pudding a couple of times as a product and everyone who tries it thinks it's the greatest thing they've ever tasted.

Jon: Conceptually, it just didn't sound like some... or it sounded too old fashioned or something? But man, that was fantastic. For me when I think of the holidays at Trader Joe's and I've been with Trader Joe's for almost 30 years now... When it comes in and I finally have the first taste of Pfeffernusse and the warmed up thing of the spiced apple cider, it just transports me immediately back 20 years in the past to a time when I lived in Tucson, and we served that at the botanical garden during their Luminaria Festival thing. You know, like... They have this really strong memory.

Tara: So let's talk about the present at Trader Joe's.

Jon: This year I think the product that's really going to be amazing is the (um,) the Dog Advent Calendar... or what I'm trying to say... it's the advent calendar for your dog. We're going to have to get two, because we have two dogs and everyday they get a little treat.

[Dogs bark]

Tara: I'm really excited about the Organic Cold Pressed Spiced Cider that's coming in that's going to be in the refrigerator instead of, you know, in a big bottle on a shelf. I love the idea that I could just grab it, and it's just single serve, and I can just drink it on the go, and it's really delicious.

Jon: Really fresh tasting, almost feels like it was kinda just pressed at the apple orchard.

Tara: Yeah, I think it's a Fuji apple.

Matt: We have some great returning hits, like our sipping chocolate, which is just so good. It's like the be-all-end-all super rich hot chocolate kind of thing. We have hot chocolate on a spoon that's like basically a chunk of chocolate with marshmallows and everything on a spoon and you just hot milk/hot water, mix it in. We have some hot chocolate sticks that are kind of, I think of as like a classic Mexican or South American countries' format for hot chocolate. These are sticks that are probably as good just to eat as they are to make hot chocolate. I'm looking forward to that stuff.

Jon: I have kind of a Top 3 of holiday products that we sell. (Um,) The first is our shelf stable, Tetra Pak, Turkey Gravy. I can pretty much drink it right out of the carton. It is so good. It's such a great product and such a great value, that is something that I always pick up during the holidays. Also, I'm very much drawn to our frozen appetizers section this time of year. Specifically like the Camembert and Cranberry Fillo Bites that we sell. And also, certainly Bacon Wrapped Scallops. You know, I don't know why those aren't here all the time. That's another thing I'm kind of lobbying for. It's one of those products where when that last one is on the plate, you really find out how selfless people are.

Tara: (laughing)

Matt: Not very.

Jon: Not very. And I'm like... OK, I'm going to eat that last one if nobody else is. I also like to pretty much set up a tent and live in our cheese section during the holidays. I mean there is not only the stuff that we carry all of round that, you know, you, you tend to buy more of during the holidays, but some of the stuff that we bring in.

Jon: The pumpkin spiced pumpkin seeds that we sell in the fall and you kind of smash them up a little bit and roll some goat cheese in that and then serve it with a little honey, and I can eat that pretty much for six weeks.

Tara: All the food groups are represented, so I think you're good.

Jon: Oh, you have to. It's fantastic. With a little honey, don't forget.

Tara: Okay. So let's move on to the future.

Matt: We have a cheese that we're slated to bring in for the winter holiday period. It's from the Normandy region in France. So that's northwest France. Think of Mont St. Michel, that like Disneyland castle on the seaside, but this is Norman cheese. Apple brandy is mixed into the curds, and they make a soft cheese. Then they wash the rind in it and age it, and it's this incredible thing. And it's visually interesting too. It's got like an orange-ish hue to the rind. It's called Grain Dorge. I think I might've almost said that correctly, but I know what it is. It's delicious. (Shuffling paper)

Tara: This product, which I forgot was a holiday product, is the Toffee Pretzels. Have you had those since... since we, since the tasting? Like did you try them at the meeting? The Butter Toffee Pretzels in the bag?

Jon: Those are fantastic.

Tara: Those are dangerous.

Matt: My prediction? Those become an everyday product.

Tara: Thanks, Jon.

Jon: Thanks for having me.

Tara: Thanks for coming back.

Tara: So while a lot of people think of Thanksgiving as just a meal, at Trader Joe's, we've kind of made it a season. Let's see how many Thanksgiving-themed products we can come up with (that we), that you'll find in our stores this year.

Matt: Okay.

Tara: All right. Ready?

[Game show music begins. A bell dings for each correct answer.]

Tara: Turkey and Stuffing Potato Chips.

Matt: Turkey Pot Pie

Matt: Turkey and Stuffing Potato Chips, Stuffing...

Tara: Stuffing Bread?

Matt: Stuffing Rolls.

Tara: Turkey Pot Pie Bites.

Matt: Turkey Stuffing En Crouete.

Tara: Oh, the Turkey Gobbler Wrap. Cranberry Turkey Meatballs.

Matt: Or the new Persimmon Cranberry Relish. Spiced Persimmon Cranberry Relish.

Tara: What else? What else do we have?

Matt: Gravy. In two different spots.

Tara: Everything else is just gravy.

[Game show music ends]

Matt: Alright. I'm thankful this is over.

[Up tempo fun holiday music]

Craig: My name is Craig, captain of the Trader Joe's in Louisville, Kentucky.

Rita: Hi, this is Rita Shepherd Gerdes, Captain from Danville, California.

Victor: Hi, this is Victor and I'm the Captain of the Charlotte, North Carolina.

Melissa: My name is Melissa Laufer, Captain of Trader Joe's at store number 725 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Ty: Hi. This is a Ty Poe, Captain from Littleton, Colorado.

Courtney: My name is Courtney. I'm a proud store Captain at the Trader Joe's in Omaha, Nebraska.

Voice: One, two, three...

Everyone: HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!

Voice: Thank you for your support and thank you for letting us be a part of your neighborhood.

Marcy: I can set my calendar by it at the end of August. The first emails start to come in. When are the pumpkin products being released?

Tara: Marcy Kopelman is Vice President of Merchandising in our Monrovia office.

Matt: So by the time you see a new product in your Trader Joe's, that merchandising team has worked really hard, tirelessly on getting it just right.

Tara: Pumpkin is a thing that just went out of control.

Marcy: It went out of control.

Tara: I think we started it.

Marcy: We did cause it. I, I believe we caused it. And at one point we were up to 80, 85 products?

Matt: So miracles really do happen during the holidays, but all of this holiday product at Trader Joe's now this time of year.

Tara: Oh, that's no miracle.

Marcy: It's a lot of homework. It's starting with the concept. It is seeing that concept through. It could be trying hundreds of variations. There are times we'll be, I'll think of a certain cookie, the Pumpkin Joe Joe's... I think it was maybe take 36.

Marcy: It has too much pumpkin flavor. It doesn't have enough pumpkin flavor. What are we using for Pumpkin flavor? It's too sweet. It's not sweet enough. And it is looking at current trends for products, like... what people were looking for years ago was "I don't want fat in my product." Now it's, "I don't want sodium. I don't want sugar. I want lower sodium, I want higher protein." It's really following, following the trends, which are many times dictated by the diet fads.

Tara: I think by the end of that whole tasting process we're all kind of tired of tasting cookies, which sounds, you know, who's tired of tasting cookies? Everybody loves tasting cookies! It's cookies! What I'm trying to say is we work really hard to get to the point where, oh, this is the right version of this cookie. And it took a long time.

Marcy: We taste and we taste and we taste relentlessly. I don't know how much weight I put on that month before the holidays where we are tasting every 30 minutes. It's back and forth with the, with the supplier over and over again, just ensuring that we have it exactly as we want it. And then going back to make it even better.

Tara: How many specifically seasonal holiday products do we bring in to the stores?

Marcy: Between 150 and 200.

Tara: Wow.

Tara: Do you have, do you have favorite holiday products?

Marcy: Yes. As soon as the Pumpkin Biscotti comes out, I've been known to maybe buy 10 buckets of those to get me through the year. I like the Peppermint Slims, the Almond

Kringle, the Pumpkin Bread Mix, Spiced Cider... Goes on and on. The list goes on and on.

[Room laughter]

[Busy office sounds... Phones ringing, people typing...]

Tara: Okay. Let's head over to our customer relations department, and talk with Nikki again. This will be what, the third time we've spoken with Nikki for the podcast? And the great thing about talking with Nikki is you always know that you'll get the answer when you have a question.

Nikki: You're giving me too much credit, Tara, but thank you.

Tara: You've got mail. (laughs) I just proved how old I am.

Matt: I know I'm constantly amazed at how prepared people want to be for the holidays. Like it seems like the moment you clean up the dishes from Thanksgiving, people are wondering like what they're going to have the next Thanksgiving.

Nikki: Our customers are very prepared. They want to see their old favorites return. And so a lot of their preparation sort of starts and ends with having certain holiday products available. So they want to know now.

Tara: So I want to read this first one because this one really resonated with me because this kind of thing happens in my household. "Hello. Will Trader Joe's be carrying the warm vanilla body butter this holiday season as last year? It's wonderful and I'm coveting my last jar from my purchases from 2017."

Nikki: So that, that resonates with you how? Do you have a jar left?

Tara: This is what we do in my house with the holiday products. We buy a whole bunch of the things that we love, and we try to make them last throughout the year.

Nikki: I think all of our customers are sort of chomping at the bit to get their hands on the warm vanilla body butter. And the good news is, it's coming back this year, so I was able to let this customer know that she'll be able to pick up or stock up, in your case.

[Mail delivery sound]

Matt: Okay. So this just in from someone looking to be prepared for the holiday season, and I'm just going to read the note. "Hi. I am begging you, the Trader Joe's overlords, to bring back the Cedar Balsam Candle this holiday season. My mom bought me one as a present last year, and it may be my favorite candle scent of all time. I'm down to the last couple of burns! Please, please, please consider bringing it back this year. All the best, Jesse."

Nikki: We're ready. We're in stock, we're ready to ship to warehouses, so Jesse and the rest of our customers will have to wait no longer than November.

Nikki: ...and I hope that she stocks up properly so that she can burn with complete abandon.

Matt: Scented candle speaking.

Nikki: Right.

Matt: When you're listening to this, we've probably just about sold out of our fall season, honey crisp apple candle. I'm still amazed at how popular that was. The good news is in addition to that Cedar Balsam Candle, we've got a Gingerbread Candle coming out soon too, and I think people are going to be really excited by this. They can just burn away.

[Mail delivery sound]

Matt: So I'm going to read. "We love this tea having just finished our last box. Are you planning on bringing it back this holiday season? Please say yes." How do I know which tea they're after?

Nikki: Um, you know, it's actually on the subject line.

Matt: Geez. Okay.

Nikki: For those of you who can't see the subject line, it's Vanilla and Cinnamon Black Tea.

Matt: Got It.

Nikki: It's always difficult to deliver bad news, especially during the holiday season and especially when you're talking about tea, right?

Nikki: And the bad news is, it just didn't perform year after year the way we'd hoped. (Um,) and so unfortunately we're not offering it in our holiday tea selection this year.

Matt: Oh, hopefully we'll have something that will be even better.

Nikki: We have some great and new exciting teas coming out.

[Mail delivery sound]

Matt: And this from someone interested in tablescapes apparently, and I quote "Last fall, you carried these beautiful olive wood serving boards. I gave some as gifts and everyone loved them. I've had requests from other family members for these boards. I need to start stocking up on my gifts for this holiday season. Thank you in advance."

Nikki: So great news here. The olive wood serving boards are coming back. We even have a salt cellar that is an olive wood that it's fantastic. They are personal favorites of mine. They make amazing charcuterie boards. They're perfect gifts.

Tara: I have to say I'm quite impressed by people who are buying holiday gifts already.

Nikki: It's a year round sport.

Matt: Nikki. It's the holidays. Happy Holidays.

Nikki: It is. Happy Holidays, Matt. We are so grateful. We consider any feedback, good or bad, an incredible gift. So I thank our customers so much for reaching out to us, and happy holidays to all of you.

Tara: So with all this great food around for the holidays, how do you keep from really overdoing it?

Matt: Well, that's a good question. And it's for a smart person, a nutrition specialist like Sabrina.

Sabrina: (chuckle)

Sabrina: Taste everything. I'd say that's my favorite thing about that time of year is you get to taste a little bit of everything. And if you want to try something you can just take it to a party or a friend's house and say, "Hey, share this with me," and then you don't feel quite so bad about eating a whole box of cookies by yourself. Every weekend seems to be jammed with things to do. So if I want to try some stuff, grab a bunch of different things and bring them over and share them with everyone.

Tara: Do you have a favorite Trader Joe's product?

Sabrina: I would say my favorite, and I eat this throughout the year even though it's holiday one, is peppermint bark tin. I stock up at the end of the year, so I have peppermint bark for several months and chip away at it. I like anything peppermint. So our peppermint pretzel slims are also really yummy treat. I'd say another one... This is a newer one, but it's tasty because I love stuffing in general is our rice cauliflower stuffing. It's also Vegan. So for those that, you know, want to have Vegan holiday season, it's a great option.

Tara: Thank you, Sabrina.

[Sound of Champagne bottle popping open, pouring]

Tara: We caught up with Chris Condit and Ryan Scholtz at our annual Captain's meeting.

Matt: Now Chris Conduct is our category manager for the wine business, so he makes sure that you'll have enough great wine for Thanksgiving dinner. And Ryan Scholtz is our category manager for beer and spirits. These guys are like the engineers of cheers at Trader Joe's.

Tara: (laughs)

Chris: This is like holiday central here. You are at the show that kicks off the holidays for us, the Captain's meeting. Um, That Moon X Cabernet that we just pointed out a second ago, uh, that's going to be in our October flyer. That is a great brand for us. The cabernet's brand new. Um, I expect a lot of action there. I pointed out that large sparkling wine, the L'eclat. Um, we introduced that last year. It was a huge hit. We doubled our bet on it this year. I expect that to be super popular.

Ryan: Hi, my name is Ryan. I am the category manager for beer and spirits at Trader Joe's.

Tara: Awesome. What, what's coming in for the holidays this year for beer and spirits?

Ryan: So for beer and spirits this year we have three holiday Scotches, a 10-year from Ardmore Distillery. We have a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old that I'm pretty excited about. We have a new winter wheated Bourbon. We have some Tequilas. We have a Mezcal. We have some liqueurs. We have, uh...

Tara: There's plenty to drink at Trader Joe's this year. Do not go thirsty into that good night. Okay, thank you.

Tara: I'll tell you who else is looking forward to some wine and spirits during the holidays... in moderation, of course. Stuart Bassett Powell works in our Royal Oak Michigan store. I recently got to hang out with Stuart and some of his customers at this Trader Joe's just north of Detroit.

Stuart: My name is Stuart Basset Powell. I've been with Trader Joe's for 18 years. The Platinum Wines are pretty much my favorite holiday item. The Trader Joe's Vintage Ale, the cheeses, the accoutrements, the salamis... There's no product that I don't like during the holidays.

Linda: My name is Linda Bruder, and I live in Huntington Woods, and I shop at the Royal Oak Trader Joe's.

Tara: Do you, do you shop when we have all the products that come in for the holiday season?

Linda: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh that great big... what's the thing comes in the box? I was buy four of them because I give them to people, too.

Tara: Oh, the Panettone?

Linda: Yeah. That one has more flavor, and it's the best thing ever. So I always get a bunch of those.

Jennifer: My Name's Jen and we love Trader Joe's

Tara: Nice to meet you. What are your names?

Quinn: Quinn.

Tara: And...

Conrad: Conrad.

Tara: Awesome.

Jennifer: We love the little carts when they were little. Now they're bigger and they kinda miss coming to Trader Joe's when they're at school. I do the shopping now. I should mention we like the European influence. My husband happens to be from Germany, so we do buy a lot of the holiday-inspired products, like the gingerbread house (we do often) and then the seasonal-like cookie things and sweets, you know, it's like there's always great sweets at Trader Joe's, so yeah,

Tara: We do have a lot of the European-influenced cookies at the holidays.

Jennifer: Exactly.

Emily: My name is Emily and I've been a long time Trader Joe's customer.

Tara: Do you have favorite holiday products at Trader Joe's, things that come in at the holidays that you look forward to?

Emily: For the past 10 years, this is where I get my Christmas gifts for people because most people don't need things, so I like to get them nice chocolates and coffee and my grandmas love our nuts, so yeah.

Emily: The exciting thing is just three and a half weeks ago, I crossed the threshold and now I'm an employee of Trader Joe's.

Emily: It reminds me of working at a coffee shop with the changing of the seasons.

Emily: People say food is love, and it's so much a part of who we are and everything.

Matt: We have a favor to ask. If you would hit that FREE Subscribe Button on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts... It is free and it's worth every penny. That way you will receive notice of each new episode as they come up.

Tara: Next time we'll take you around the world in search of Trader Joe's products. If you like discovering new flavors as much as we do, the next episode will be for you.

Matt: It's a busy time of year, we're heading into the holidays, and it's so easy to get caught up in the work to be prepared for your friends and family...

Tara: We just want to say thanks.

Matt: Thank you to our Crew who work so hard to bring great things to your neighborhood every day.

Tara: We love that

Matt: And thanks to you for listening, and thanks for shopping in our stores.

Tara: Happy Holidays!

Matt: Same to you, but more of it.

Tara: (laughs)