

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 101: Trader Joe's Gets Fresh (and Deli) for 2026

[Light upbeat music begins. Traffic noise in the background.]

Matt: Picture this. You're heading home from a long day at work. You're tired, you're hungry, and you're not the only one. You have a family to feed.

[Car door closes.]

Tara: So, you make a quick stop at Trader Joe's (automatic store doors open) and pick up something from the Deli section like Chicken Caesar Salad.

Matt: Well, actually, salads aren't considered Deli. That's the Fresh Department because it has a really short shelf life.

Tara: Or you could pick up something else from Fresh, like Organic Oven Roasted Turkey Breast.

Matt: Well, that's actually from the Deli Department because that has a little bit longer shelf life.

Tara: Okay. Fresh, Deli, it's all in the refrigerator at Trader Joe's and it's all tasty and easy.

Matt: Two keywords right there.

Tara: There's lots happening in the world of Fresh and Deli in 2026.

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

[Theme music begins accompanied with 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 culture and innovation guy at Trader Joe's.

Tara: As usual, we're at the Trader Joe's mothership in Monrovia, California.

Matt: Clearly, we need to consult experts on Fresh and Deli.

Tara: To our far, far away.

Matt: I mean, it's only Boston. You make it sound like they're on a space station.

[Transmitter beeping, turning for signal.]

Matt: Coming to us live as it were in a recorded state, "Hello, folks. Who are you?"

Christine: Hi, Matt and Tara. I'm Christine. I'm the Deli category manager.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Taryn: And I'm Taryn. I'm the category manager for Fresh, as well as some of the non-food items, but that's not what we're talking about today.

Tara: That's another podcast, Taryn.

Taryn: (laughs)

Tara: We will do that. But right now we want to talk about things you find in the refrigerator at Trader Joe's. And specifically, we want to talk about things that are new, things that are trending. What's happening in this world at Trader Joe's? And also, why do we have two separate categories in the refrigerator, the Deli Section, or the Fresh Section?

Matt: So because we call this *Inside Trader Joe's*, this is a little bit of inside information.

Taryn: The main difference and what has always been the differentiator between Fresh and Deli is shelf life. At one point, it was anything under 21 days was considered Fresh and anything over 21 days would be Deli, mainly because anything less than 21 days, you have to have more frequent deliveries, like our fresh salads and sushi are made daily and delivered daily to our warehouses. Versus something like salami in Deli, we might get delivered once a week or every other week. We base all of our decisions on how the product's coming in, on what makes the most sense for our customers, not what works for our suppliers. So we want the freshest salad possible, so that means everyday delivery.

Christine: In Deli, our business has gotten to the point where we could fill full truckloads worth of product, but we don't, because we want to pass the shelf life onto our customers. So we write weekly orders for every single one of our products to be delivered on less than full truckloads weekly to pass the code onto our customers. As a category, we actually write the most POs on a weekly basis out of all of the categories at Trader Joe's.

Tara: All right. I want to do a jargon alert first.

[Retail jargon alert sounder.]

Tara: Matt, can you give us a little jargon alert for PO?

Matt: Sounds like you're PO'd, but we're not.

Girls: (laugh)

Matt: Actually, PO in this context, purchase order. That's a contractual agreement between Trader Joe's and one of our vendors where we agree to buy a product at a certain cost with specific delivery terms.

Tara: Thank you. Christine, I want to get a little deeper, a little more inside the idea of passing along the code to our customers. Can you explain that in layperson's terms, like you're talking to someone who doesn't work in the food business?

Christine: Yes. For example, typically most of our products have about one month shelf life to our warehouse. So today, if we were buying product, we would have 30 days of code to our customers, and then next week we would have 30 days of code. We want to continue the flow of the longer shelf life so that customers have that flexibility within their own refrigerator at home. We don't want to say, "Okay, we're going to fill up the trucks. With only 30-day's worth of code." And then three weeks from now, customers only get seven days.

Tara: Got it. All of those decisions are being made with best results for the customers in mind.

[Music transition.]

Christine: It's actually much harder to do it that way, and that's how we do it.

Tara: Okay. People have been making sandwiches for a really long time. Sandwiches are hard to do when you're a retail grocery store that doesn't make food in the back room. Matt's worked at Trader Joe's long enough to remember when we did make sandwiches in stores, yes?

Matt: I mean, I wasn't working when we did that, but we had in some of our stores a million years ago or so it feels a butcher counter, a sandwich counter. We used to squeeze oranges to make orange juice. We would put things into bags like almonds and pistachios, et cetera, et cetera. We certainly cut and wrap cheese at every store once upon a way back. And once we got to a size and a scale where we could do that differently offsite, more effectively from a cost and even a food safety perspective, we made those changes to give that sales floor and ourselves back to customers.

Tara: Question to you, Taryn. We've been trying to get meaningfully into the sandwich business again. Can you explain some of the challenges? Because it doesn't seem like it should be so hard to make a sandwich and sell it.

[Music transition.]

Taryn: One of the main challenges is really the bread. A lot of bread has to be made specific if it's going to sit in refrigeration for any meaningful amount of time, and we don't allow artificial preservatives and dough conditioners in our bread. For that reason, it's really hard to find a bread that's really going to taste great a couple days later in refrigeration. So that's the number one challenge really. As technology and food preservation techniques have improved, we have suppliers now who are making bread that is specifically made to hold up in a refrigerator. So, I'm really excited to share that we do have new sandwiches coming that we think are really great through that time period. We've had our Turkey Apple Cheddar for some time. We launched, this holiday season, the Chicken on Cranberry Bread, which customers and crew have been really excited about. And then we have another Ham and Cheese Baguette Sandwich coming soon as well. And we're looking at additional sandwiches. Our Homestyle Chicken Salad, we're looking to put that on a croissant, which is really delicious. There's a lot of exciting things coming on the sandwich front that holds up and tastes good all the way until the end of its shelf life.

Tara: What kind of shelf life are we talking about?

Taryn: It is made and gets about four to five days max. It's still a very short-coded product. Our suppliers are making it and delivering it to every warehouse that ships to our stores every day, with the exception of Christmas Day, New Year's Day, 4th of July. Otherwise, they're producing for us every day, including Sundays.

Tara: The sandwich that came in during the holiday season this year...

Taryn: It's a Chicken and Arugula on a Cranberry Seeded Bread.

Tara: I think that might be the best sandwich we've ever offered. The bread is perfect. It's not at all soggy and the arugula holds up so much better than, say, romaine. And all those flavors really worked well together, so kudos. But that's a holiday only product.

[Music transition.]

Taryn: Not holiday only. We're keeping it on for a little while longer. People have responded really positively, so we're keeping it on at least a little bit longer. And if the sales stay strong, we might look at making it every day. But I'm so glad you like it. We like it too.

Tara: This was only intended to be for holidays, but if it continues to sell strongly, we will consider having it all the time.

Taryn: Yes.

Tara: Love that. Because it's all about what our customers want. When it's a product that is made every day and shipped to our doors every single day, that's a much different challenge or lack of challenge. Whereas, if you have a product that's coming from overseas that takes 16 weeks to get here, you can't just turn it back on for everyday orders overnight.

Taryn: Yes. Fresh is lucky in that respect. We can have a little bit more flexibility and control over exactly when and how things get to our stores.

[Music transition.]

Matt: We're recording this. It's Monday. You come in to work on Monday. How do you start a week trying to understand what happened and what to do about it?

Christine: Great question, Matt. Where to begin? (laughs) As teams, we're constantly collaborating. We are going through our sales report. We're looking at our inventory reports in Deli, making sure that we have enough of all the things that our customers want and not too much of the things that they seem to be moving away from. We work closely with suppliers to chase exciting things. Deli has launched a few new products this year that have really had our customers excited. For example, our Protein Pancakes. We immediately start to work with the supplier, made travel plans actually, even saw them last week, talked to them about their capacity, grab somebody from our food safety team and our nutrition team to come with us, and just try to understand their business. Where do we fit in? How can we grow together? What else can we do for our customers?

Matt: So to chase an exciting thing sounds like a bit of code, different from code life. Code for something else. What does chasing an exciting thing really mean?

Christine: A lot of our suppliers are domestic. We can find out, "Do you have ingredients on hand? Do you have packaging on hand? Can we increase our orders if we'd like to? What does your capacity look like, so that we can keep up with the demand and pivot as things change?"

Matt: Keeping up with the demand is, I think, the really exciting part of this chase, right? Because, you and the team, you had a plan for Protein Pancakes, and these connected with customers in a way that was energized maybe at a higher level than we anticipated.

Christine: We thought that stores would order about 2,000 cases a week across our entire company. And week one, the stores ordered 5,200 cases. When we first place a buy, we come up with the weekly demand. When we start a new product, we tell the supplier, "Okay, we'll buy two weeks to begin with because we're setting something up. But we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves because we still have the code concerns." So we bought two weeks. The stores initially pulled the two weeks immediately and we were out of stock. So then, quickly go back to the supplier. "It looks like our original number may have been a little bit wrong. Our crystal ball was dusty that day. (laughs) How much more can you do?" To this day, we still don't know the number, but we are working closely with the supplier, understanding that they're bringing in more equipment, they're working to secure raw material deals on their end so that they can fill our orders. It's a lot of moving parts.

Matt: Absolutely. Yeah. At that scale, it's not so simple as, "Just make a bunch more pancakes."

Christine: Right.

Tara: Whatever you're doing on the Protein Pancakes, it's working. I was able to buy Protein Pancakes on a Sunday afternoon at four o'clock, and that hasn't happened recently. This extra work to get more product in stores is really having an impact. You talked, Christine, about how much stores pulled from us. Our stores place orders from our warehouses. We don't decide at a headquarters warehouse level what to send to stores.

[Music transition.]

Christine: It makes us so unique, Tara. We say, "Okay, stores, you know your customers best. You do what you need to do to satisfy your customers, and we will do everything we can do to respond accordingly."

Taryn: Yeah. I think it goes back to just our whole philosophy that we're a national chain of neighborhood grocery stores. Each captain and crew knows their neighborhood way better than us here in Boston could know their own neighborhood. And so, it really allows the store to have control over their own store. It's why every Trader Joe's you go into doesn't have the exact same look and feel. It gives it that really unique, fun atmosphere. It allows them to be responsive to what's working in their store and really have the right product there for their customer.

[Music transition.]

Matt: Taryn, I did want to hear from you about Monday morning Fresh category. What do you walk into? What do you see? What are you thinking about as you start each week?

Taryn: So I think the most important thing with Fresh is really quality. If you come and buy something that's your whole lunch and it doesn't live up to your expectations, it's really disappointing. So really, first thing for me is looking at reports that we get from all of our stores and see if there's any trends, go directly to the vendor if it's very clear, or we bring in the product. We are here in Boston, so we go to the store and get something from our local store. But if it's in a different region, we actually have products shipped into us so we can evaluate it and make sure that it's really what we expect. So that's probably the first thing that I do on a Monday and it's constant. That's never going to go away. It's not something that we can ever just rest. It's a new batch of lettuce every day. It's a new kettle of soup multiple times per week. We visit stores a lot to talk to the crew, see if there's anything they're hearing about. The sandwiches actually came up because it's one of the most requested things by our customers and crew. So it's something that we've really been doing a lot of work on.

Tara: Your products, they're made in multiple places to be shipped from a location closer to stores.

Taryn: Yes. Sometimes by completely different suppliers. Some suppliers have more than one location, but that's an additional challenge with Fresh. We want to have consistent, great product nationally wherever possible, but sometimes we don't have a supplier who can quite make it yet. Sushi is one example of that. We are really excited to have sushi in a lot of locations. It's not everywhere yet. I am excited to say that we're really close on getting a couple more locations added to that list, but we want to make sure that it's the right supplier, a supplier who can meet all of our ingredient and quality requirements to make sure that it's safe, fresh, delicious food every day.

Matt: On a business model basis, without planograms, without centrally controlled merchandising planning, without centrally organized allocations, the crew is open to buy what they want, if you will, order what they think they need. And that creates a lot of potential dynamic tension, because your two categories, Fresh and Deli, and Deli and Fresh, they exist together in that finite space of the refrigerator. So how do you work with each other? Because you don't control the shelf space necessarily, but you do provide the products that the crew use to fill those shelves.

Taryn: I mean, we're constantly communicating with each other and talk through our goals and how many items we want to have in our respective categories. We plan the year knowing that. We go into it thinking, "Okay, this is how many items I have right now. Here's a couple that aren't doing so well that maybe we need to discontinue. And here are the biggest opportunities in our category." Breakfast is a big one. We're seeing a lot more customers looking for easy grab and go breakfast options. And so, we're both looking at potential breakfast ideas, but we make sure that we constantly communicate with each other so that we're not doing the same work twice.

Matt: Mmm.

[Music transition.]

Christine: And in addition to that, we have what we call a subcategory review, which is where we would say, "Okay, let's take a look at all of the options that we currently have today. Take a step back and look at it from a customer's perspective to understand are we hitting all the trends? Are we getting everything that everybody thinks that we need? Have we swung the

pendulum too far one way or the other? And how does that all look from a customer perspective?"

Tara: Do your teams ever get together to try products in the kitchen?

Christine: Yes.

Matt: As an aside, I think the Boston mothership kitchen is amazing because of the people in it. Because on an equipment level, it's a boring kitchen, and it's not particularly fancy, and it is in no way chef-y.

Taryn: I think it's good though, because we're using ovens that our customers would have at home. We're using microwaves that are representative...

Matt: My oven doesn't break as much as the ovens that we use.

Taryn: ... Yes.

Tara: Yes.

Christine: We have to turn the oven on far in advance before we get started. (laughs)

Matt: It's like quest for fire.

Christine: (laughs)

Matt: I mean, you start it a week in advance to get warm. What's going on?

Taryn: Hey, and every year at Thanksgiving, we make a full, we call it, Crewsgiving meal, for all 70 something people in our office out of that one kitchen.

Christine: I think they came at 3:30 in the morning this year to start.

Taryn: To start the turkey so that we have other space for sides.

Christine: Not an exaggeration. (laughs)

Taryn: Those ovens may not be the most reliable, but they get the job done eventually.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Eventually.

[Music transition.]

Matt: So switching gears slightly, is there a development that you're really interested in that you think is exciting about the opportunities? If so, what might that be?

Christine: Snacking in Deli has been a huge trend. And so...

Tara: Snacking?

Christine: ...so grab and go, handheld most of the time with a higher level of protein right now as customers are looking for that. Sneak peek under the curtain, one of the things that we have coming is Chicken Breast Bites with a little bamboo fork inside the package. Take your fork, grab a piece of chicken breast and you can dip it into a honey mustard sauce that we have.

Tara: Those are good.

Christine: Those are going to be good, I think.

Tara: And we have all those salami and pepperoni with cheese and things like that. I think, those definitely hit the high protein snacking trend that's out there in the world right now.

Christine: And more to come on those too. We have a tray that we're working on. And actually, a shout-out to Alicia from nutrition. She came up with the name, Charcuterie Party of One.

Tara: (laughs) Fitting, it's fun.

Christine: It's salami, crackers, cheese. It's what our customers are looking for right now.

Matt: Cool. What's happening in Fresh on a developmental basis, something new, something that's exciting, Taryn?

[Music transition.]

Taryn: Well, besides the sandwiches, there's a Spicy Salmon Roll coming, which we are super excited about in the regions where we have sushi. We're also starting to look into snacking, so this is further off, but we are looking into maybe a chicken salad snack pack with some veggies, maybe something for holiday with some pumpkin dip and fruit. We also have done a little bit of revamping to our entrees. So, a long time ago, we had a Turkey Stuffed Pepper. We're actually bringing back a Beef Stuffed Pepper. We're also doing a Chicken Stuffed Poblano, which is really delicious. Similar trends across both categories, high protein, convenient, easy, ready to go, things. We're both moms. We have kids. We need to get fast and easy food on the table that we feel good about giving to our families that we know doesn't have all the artificial colors and flavors, and will taste good, and is a really good value.

Tara: It's all based on what our customers are telling us they want.

Matt: So what are you having for lunch?

Christine: We just tried all three meatballs together. We're actually selling more meatballs than protein pancakes right now. So go Chicken Meatballs.

Tara: So that's the regular Chicken Meatballs, the Teriyaki Chicken Meatballs, and the new Buffalo Chicken Meatballs?

Christine: Correct.

Tara: Fantastic. It's very good that we finally have a good blue cheese dressing when the Buffalo Chicken Meatballs came in.

[Music transition.]

Taryn: I've been loving the Korean noodle, the Bibim-Guksu in Fresh lately. I think the whole thing's only 250 calories and it's really delicious, feels more substantial than just a salad from the noodles. I'm a big fan of that one.

Matt: I totally agree, it is delicious. Does that make you look at anything else, Korean inspired cuisine for your category? Are you thinking about anything along those lines?

Taryn: Absolutely. We've been looking about different ways to incorporate Asian flavor profiles, including Korean, which does really well in our frozen section as well. We're potentially looking at some different spring roll flavors that might include some Korean flavors.

Matt: Cool. Excellent. All right.

Tara: Okay, folks. I really appreciate the insights. You made me very hungry. Thank you.

Christine: Thank you.

Tara: Thank you.

Matt: See you guys.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: Yeah, I'd say the Deli and Fresh categories are in great hands.

Matt: This podcast...it's in our hands.

Tara: Hey, we'll continue to do our best to bring you stories from *Inside Trader Joe's* throughout the year. So hit that free subscribe or follow button.

Matt: It is free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.