

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 102: This Blonde Chocolate Walks Into Trader Joe's

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Good news, Matt. Trader Joe's is finally releasing the new Blonde Bar.

Matt: Oh, the Blonde Chocolate Bar from Italy.

Tara: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We have been so excited about this one that we even went to Milan and recorded conversations with the chocolate makers for this podcast.

Matt: Oh, that was a while ago. I don't think I remember what I said. Should I be worried about this?

Tara: You? Nah, never.

Matt: Okay, then. 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.

Alison: And I'm Alison, Trader Joe's category manager for candy.

Tara: Welcome back, Alison.

Matt: We're excited, but you, you actually put a lot of work into developing this new Blonde Chocolate Bar. So how excited are you?

Alison: I am pretty darn excited. It's been a long time in the making, and it is finally here.

[Theme music ends. Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Okay, next question. Why didn't we name it This Blonde Walks Into A Bar?

Tara: Okay, Matt, strawberries, apples, pumpkins, they don't mind being the brunt of jokes, but...

Matt: As far as you know.

Tara: Alison, this chocolate supplier near Milan, they were all just amazing people.

Alison: Aren't they? I love them. It's a family business, several generations now, and they really know their chocolate.

Tara: Hey, you want to eavesdrop on our conversation with them?

Alison: Of course.

Tara: Okay. The first person we talked to was the president of the company. His name's Giovanni. His grandfather started the business in 1946.

Matt: Oh yeah, I remember.

Tara: You remember 1946?

Matt: No, I remember when he told us about his grandfather.

[Transition to conversation with Giovanni. Italian music begins.]

Giovanni: (strong Italian accent) The grandfather started just after the end of the Second World War. He started in 1946, and so we are close to 80 years.

Matt: Unbelievable.

Giovanni: He was a young and brilliant entrepreneur, and he had this vision to make chocolate. And the first products, he launched in the market, was a cake made with the cocoa powder and chestnuts. Then he decided to start building a factory. And so in the early '50s, started the company on an industrial scale. But unfortunately, just after the launch of the factory, he died. And so the grandmother took the board of the company with six sons, and two brothers of the grandmother helped her in managing the company. And so the story continued and we grew.

Matt: Do you have the recipe of the cocoa chestnut cake?

Giovanni: Not exactly written, but we have an idea of that. (laughs)

Matt: I'm so curious, what is it about cocoa or chocolate that you think was interesting for your grandfather? Did he have a sweet tooth?

Giovanni: In a moment where basically the basic food was difficult to have, chocolate was something unbelievable, was a super luxury food. His idea is, I would like to make chocolate for everyone, not only for super rich people. That's the starting point of view.

Tara: That's fantastic.

Matt: There's so much history. The forward-looking vision starts with your grandfather.

Giovanni: Yes. So the idea to make chocolate purchasing the cocoa beans directly from the farmers, all the vision, all the idea, all the values of the grandfather, our main goal is people. The farmers, the people working our factory, coming to our supplier, our customer. When I joined the company, while they working, they sing. I remember many occasion when some people came to the office and say, "Hey guys, I started working here 45 years ago when I was a children. I found my husband or wife in the company. We had kids. And so I'm grateful to the company, to be honest to everyone, felt not only part of the company, but be part of a community, be part of a family." Nowadays, it's not so often to have people to stay for the entire working life in the company. That's a turnover and it's normal. Let me say from our perspective,

we would like to keep exactly this type of relationship with our people, even if it's more difficult because the culture is changing and the people is moving around more than...

Matt: More than before.

Tara: More than before.

Giovanni: Yeah, yeah.

Tara: Yeah.

[Music transition.]

Matt: You hear a lot of people use the phrase from bean-to-bar. And it sounds like that's always been a part of your approach, and that's not normal.

Giovanni: We fell in love with cocoa coming from a generation to another. And so we have the pleasure to control every phase of the process, starting from the selection of the best quality of cocoa beans and managing each phase of the process until the final bar.

Matt: Some companies, and this isn't to say that it's bad, some companies offer chocolate or they make chocolate available. Your company actually makes chocolate. Does that make you more interested in trying new varieties or new sources?

Giovanni: After 80 years and three generation, we knew a lot. We understood a lot, but the more we understand, much more to learn, much more to discover, much more to understand. And so it's really a super fascinating world where, for example, Peru, we thought to know everything about the Peruvian beans of each area, is every profile, every texture. A few years ago, we discovered different variety from an area of the northwest of Peru in the Amazon forest, completely different to all the others. And we started making new bars with this quality that was totally different. Also, not only in finding a certain quality of beans, but on the process and especially on the first stage of the process, so fermenting the beans in a way or in another can express more texture, more flavor than other.

[Music transition.]

Tara: It sounds like coffee to me.

Giovanni: It's similar. The plenty of production is really a tough job.

Matt: Absolutely. And I'm thinking the comparison to coffee, to wine, because you want that second piece of chocolate, that second bottle to be as the first one was.

Tara: Well, he said 2,000 products coming through this factory. That's a mind-boggling number. I'm fascinated by the need for consistency with a product that is so varying just because of weather, really. If it rains a lot, it'll taste different. If it's dry, it'll taste different.

Giovanni: We have a big team of panelists, 30 people, their main responsibility is to grant that each batch of each bar has exactly the consistency, the texture, the flavor profile that has to have.

Matt: Sure, sure.

Giovanni: So we select the panelists who have the best people to do this, but on a rotation, because if you will keep the same panelists, 30 different recipe and the 30 tasting, his capability to recognize will decline. And so we have to change on a regular basis in order to don't stress too much people.

Matt: Mm-hmm.

Tara: I mean, it's similar in a way at Trader Joe's when we have our tasting panel, we don't do too many at once because after a certain number of things that you've tasted, everything starts to taste the same. The same with wine. We don't do too many at a time.

Giovanni: I'm a cigar smokers. I can't be never be a good panelist because of this smoked cigar don't helps. (laughs)

Tara: It's interesting to me. We buy chocolate from companies around the world. Can you pinpoint any specific differences between Italian chocolate and chocolate from other European countries?

Giovanni: Yes, there's some difference. For example, on the dark chocolate, we are, as a philosophy, try to preserve the original profile of each quality of the beans. And so our chocolates are not for every type of people. So someone completely fell in love for them, some other consider too strong.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Giovanni: On the milk, the Swiss invented the milk chocolate is, their milk chocolate is more smooth, is more sweet. We also in the milk prefer to emphasize more the cocoa part of the texture. The Belgian, again, the Belgian is another type of more indulgence chocolate and maybe less emphasis on the main texture characteristic of the different variety of the chocolate.

Matt: Yeah. Interesting.

Tara: That was great. Thank you.

Giovanni: You're welcome. I don't know if I succeeded in explaining.

Tara: Mm-hmm. Oh, yes, you did. That was really, really good.

Matt: You sound like you know some stuff, so that's good.

Giovanni: (laughs)

Tara: (laughs)

[Music ends. Transition back to earlier conversation with Alison. Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: As they say, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Matt: It's interesting how Giovanni and his family, they really maintain their traditions of chocolate making, but they also keep up with the times. So Alison, I'm wondering what are the changes that you're noticing about chocolate at Trader Joe's?

Alison: There's been a lot happening with the supply of chocolate and cocoa, specifically the raw cacao pods, and it's been impacting the entire industry. Fortunately, we've been working closely with our suppliers, so we've been trying to make not much change in our stores in terms of we haven't changed anything about the quality of our chocolates or the recipes and really trying to minimize the impact of the costs. I have noticed that milk chocolate has become more popular where we've always defaulted to dark chocolate when we're making something because our customers have been such dark chocolate fans, and they still are, but milk chocolate is definitely on the rise. I would say too, more interesting inclusions are something that folks are looking for and...

Matt: By inclusions, things to be put into chocolate.

Alison: Yes.

Tara: Like corn flakes.

Alison: Yes.

Tara: Right? That Cornflake Bar, that's fantastic.

Alison: I do think there's always room for the almonds and the standard things that you put in chocolate and you see everywhere, but we have been trying to expand our inclusions and it's been well received.

Tara: So branching out and finding new things that provide a slightly different experience with chocolate, I think that's always a fun thing to do.

Alison: Working with suppliers like this supplier that is bean-to-bar and really knows where the chocolate is coming from and the entire chain of the ingredients is really important and helpful.

Matt: Is that normal? Is that unusual?

Alison: It is rare. I think more companies are striving to do this as things get more complicated with the supply chain of chocolate. A vendor that's doing the work from bean-to-bar really cares about the chocolate and it really shines through.

Tara: We really got that sense from them when we were there visiting, when they receive the cacao, they do all of this sensory testing to make sure that it's matching their expectations.

Alison: I've never seen this level of care and as you say, sensory testing and not just of the finished product they're making, but of the ingredients they're putting into the chocolate.

Tara: Another member of the chocolate making family we met in Italy was Roberto.

[Music transition.]

Matt: And like Giovanni, he's part of the third generation of this chocolate making family.

Tara: It's like it's the Wonka family. (laughs)

[Transition to conversation with Roberto. Italian music begins.]

Roberto: (strong Italian accent) So I'm Roberto and I'm responsible of quality control. My role is to check, starting from the really beginning, the raw material. It means cocoa beans, starting from the origin till at the very end of the product. My team is working closely to guarantee the safety, the quality, and the complex with the legal regulation.

Tara: That's a big job, Roberto.

Roberto: We are doing something like 14,000 analysis per year.

Matt: Hmm.

Roberto: We have an entire supply chain traced, and thanks to the analysis, we can guarantee the highest quality chocolates for the final consumer.

Matt: Classic quality control is almost pass, fail. Is it acceptable or not? That sounds to me like it's beyond the normal scope of quality control. I'm really interested in that.

Roberto: The flavor profile is checked on a pre-shipment sample of the cocoa, but it's checked again on the cocoa beans and the arrival, is checked during the production and is checked in the final product. Thousands of tasting.

Matt: Your team says whether or not something can proceed to the next step.

Roberto: Correct. This is the way.

Matt: Do you know the show, *The Mandalorian*?

Roberto: Yeah, *The Mandalorian*, yeah.

Matt: This is the way. You just said that. You're a total Mandalorian. Fantastic. All right.

Tara: (laughs)

Roberto: Yeah. And we are buying cocoa beans from 20 different origins.

Tara: Is that 20 different countries or 20 different regions?

Roberto: Twenty different countries. For each country, different region. We create maps to define the flavor profile of each area of that country.

Matt: How predictable is the flavor traced to the growing region?

Roberto: Good question. It's a mix of good agricultural practices, but also the post-harvest processing. The cooperatives have to take into account the weather, the soil condition and many aspects. And we are helping also the local cooperatives giving feedback.

Tara: So having those relationships directly with the farmers is the most important part of that process.

Roberto: Correct.

Matt: It helps your business because you get the cocoa that you expect. It helps the farmers because they understand what to produce or how to process and handle it to meet those expectations as well.

Roberto: Correct.

Tara: I imagine your customers appreciate that as well.

[Music transition.]

Matt: Have you always been interested in chocolate?

Roberto: Okay, my grandfather was one of the founder of the company.

Matt: Okay.

Roberto: The first generation. So when there was the opportunity to enter in the company, when there was the selection of the third generation, I made study in the university in microbiological fermentation, which is close to cocoa beans fermentation. Growing in a family chocolate, it's not easy. You have additional pressure because you are part of the family. To provide the example, at the beginning was tough because there is a comparison. But if you share values, if you share passion, we love chocolate. At the end, we are like a big family growing together.

Matt: Yeah. Perfectly said.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: So if you go to a restaurant and you didn't eat too much and you ordered dessert, is it always chocolate?

Roberto: Chocolate is a mandatory.

Tara: I'm with you on that. It's very obvious that you care about your work and you're very invested in what you do here.

Roberto: Definitely.

Tara: Thank you so much.

Roberto: Thank you for your time.

Tara: That was terrific.

[Music ends. Transition back to conversation with Alison. Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: I really enjoyed meeting Roberto.

Matt: And I loved his candor. Even if you're a member of the founding family in a business, especially if you're a family member, respect has to be earned.

Tara: Sounds like he really earns it. One more person in Italy I want you to hear.

Alison: Okay.

Tara: Mattea, he's a food technologist.

Matt: Great. I love food. I love techno (untz, untz, untz, untz).

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: That was more house.

Tara: I know. Sorry.

[Transition to conversation with Mattea. Italian music begins.]

Mattea: (strong Italian accent) Nice to meet you and welcome here. I'm Mattea. I work here since nine years old and now I'm the R&D manager.

Tara: You've worked here for nine years?

Mattea: Yes.

Tara: Not since you were nine years old.

Mattea: No.

Tara: Okay, good. Okay. (laughs)

Mattea: But my boss, yes, probably.

Tara: (laughs) Because you look young, but you don't look that young, so.

Mattea: That's correct.

Tara: What does a food technologist do at a chocolate company?

Mattea: We have three things to do. New recipe development with new ingredients and combined ingredients we have or new ingredients we are sourcing. We have more than 400 recipes of liquid chocolate, then became around 3,500 recipes of final chocolate bars.

Matt: It's always challenging for us when we're working to partner to develop something, and we taste a bench sample and then will that match the fully scaled production version?

Mattea: That's sometimes difficult. Usually the customer doesn't have an idea how complex is a chocolate factory.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Mattea: Because we are bean-to-bar producers, so we have several passages in between from the beans to the final bar. Another thing that is not easy from our point of view is develop a product that is not good for me, for Mattea or for my colleague, Elena, but is good for the customer.

Matt: That sounds very much like our tasting panel when we're tasting things. We are the tasters and we have to balance that with our own bias or our own preference may not be what would make it successful. It can be really tricky. It's difficult to say that something's good without saying, I like it or I don't like it.

Mattea: Yes, that's the point.

Matt: It's thinking of the customer always. Yeah.

Tara: Were you involved in the development of the bar that we are currently working on now?

Mattea: Yes.

Tara: Oh, yay. We will be launching a Blonde Chocolate Bar.

Mattea: Correct.

Tara: Now, I had never heard of blonde chocolate, and now I can think of only blonde chocolate because it was delicious.

Mattea: Yes. Development starts two or three years ago. We take a creamy white chocolate, and the challenging part was to develop this caramel concentrate that mixed with the white chocolate base. So it takes, I think, 25 different trials in order to get to the final recipes. Changing the ingredients, so we start from standard sugar, then we finish using burnt sugar, then we put in milk, then we take out whey powder, we put a little cocoa butter and flavor. And so and so and so and so. Pilot trial, kitchen sample, the sensorial panel together with our marketing team and our internal sensorial panel, very challenging. And then at the end, we decide to this base to add some biscuits in order to give this crunchy feeling in the chocolate that is very, in my opinion, is very nice.

Tara: My opinion too. It doesn't taste like anything else that I've tasted and I've proudly eaten a lot of chocolate in my life. And that was a new experience, which as Giovanni was saying, it's all about discovery, whether that's something you find in the Amazon or it's something you develop. You're like mad scientists cooking up new ideas.

Matt: With the idea to include the biscuit pieces, so it's a textural counterpoint to what might be heavy textures from just the caramelized white chocolate, does that come from the sensorial panelists?

Mattea: We start developing this product plain, so with no inclusions. And then what we have seen from the market was that we have the necessity to add something to this bar in order to characterize it more and more. And so we make also here some trial with almonds, with cocoa nips, also it's quite nice, with biscuit. At the end, we decide to go in the biscuit because the biscuits delivered these very crunchy notes and was something that was not present in the market at that time.

Matt: You said if you have 400 recipes of liquid chocolate that might result in well over 3,000 different bar recipes, this company is focused on bars. Any other formats that you're working on?

Mattea: We have also some pralines and what we are seeing in the next three years is the decreasing of the size, not with the purpose to have a less price point, but also because the market wants not anymore the standard 100 grams bar or 300 grams bar like Swiss guys do, but bar more to snack, 30, 35, 50 grams, 60 grams, maybe also with different kind of packaging. So not the standard cardboard and aluminum thermoseal, but flow pack packaging that is also more easy to bring with yourself when you are at the gym or so on.

Matt: I like the idea of having chocolate at the gym.

Tara: (laughs) There is no bad time to have chocolate, let's just be honest.

Matt: Exactly. Yeah. It's energy.

Tara: It's energy. It's energy for a quick workout. And so a smaller bar makes perfect sense if you're going to use it as an energy source.

[Music transition.]

Matt: Now this, you don't have to answer because it could be too top secret. Is there a project that has been particularly challenging that you can't crack some flavor or format that is proven to be impossible?

Mattea: We have one that we would like to develop a white chocolate with pistachio, but in order to make it green, usually the producer of this pistachio butter add chlorophyll, but it's not possible to do it inside the chocolate for a regulatory point of view. If you add chlorophyll in the chocolate is a colorant, so you are not able to declare it as chocolate, your product.

Matt: It's a confection.

Mattea: Yes.

Matt: Yeah.

Mattea: And so we are struggling with finding something that can help us to guarantee this green color, everything from spinach extract to algae, spirulina.

Matt: Spirulina, yeah.

Mattea: And so on. But we are still work on that.

Tara: And it's that important that it's green because?

Mattea: For the customer important. Yes.

Tara: Because to me, I would rather have the pistachio cream without the color.

Matt: It's tricky though, because we were just working on a pistachio gelato.

Mattea: Okay.

Matt: The first sample when people in America looked at it, what's wrong with that? I don't know that I want to eat it. And it's like, that's what pistachios look like. So it's tricky.

Mattea: I personally prefer a product without this enhance of color because it makes the product more similar to what the pistachio color is. So sort of gray brown, but it seems that the market wants something different.

Matt: Sure, sure.

Mattea: I think that should we go down in the production, maybe something new will pop in.

Matt: Okay, great.

Tara: Can we record there?

Mattea: Yes.

[Music ends. Transition back to conversation with Alison.]

Matt: You went through 25 trials to get this new Blonde Chocolate Bar just right?

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Alison: Well, we went through several trials. The vendor took it upon themselves to go through many trials of their own.

Matt: Did we have any back and forth feedback for them after they went through all these iterations?

Alison: I think we did one or two back and forths. Something about salt level, something about size or number of inclusions, crunchiness levels.

Tara: Because it's not a salty bar. You wouldn't eat this and say, ooh, it's a salted caramel bar, right? But there's just a hint of salt that kind of amplifies all the other flavors going on.

Alison: You would be surprised at how much we talk about salt in the sweet categories. You have to hit it just right.

Matt: Absolutely.

Alison: Which they did.

Matt: When we were in Italy, we went down to the factory floor to see exactly where this bar was being made and how.

Alison: Ooh, I bet that was exciting. I did not get to see it.

[Transition back to conversation with Mattea in Italy. Italian music begins.]

Mattea: We go downstairs now. Pay attention, is quite slippery.

Tara: It's like a maze.

Matt: Mm-hmm. I could not find my way back here.

Tara: No. No.

[Loud factory noise in the background.]

Mattea: These will be the line on which we will produce your chocolate bar. So the process, we have tempered chocolate, we add the biscuit pieces, we will add the caramel concentrate. We mix all the ingredients inside a mixer and then we deposit inside the chocolate molds.

Tara: I don't think Lucy and Ethel could have kept up with this line either.

Mattea: And then the automatic box production, and then the product is done.

Matt: I think this Blonde Chocolate Bar will totally surprise people. And so many people think patently that they do not like white chocolate and I'm hopeful, and I believe that this will change a lot of people's minds.

Mattea: I love white chocolate because of the creamy taste and combine this creamy taste of the white chocolate together with the caramel notes and the crunchy texture of the biscuit, in my opinion, is incredible. Do you agree?

Tara: I agree. I think it's one of the most interesting bars we've developed in a long time. I hope people love it.

[Music ends. Transition back to conversation with Alison. Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: At the factory, our enthusiasm was genuine, but I think we're even more excited now. I mean, what an amazing job, Giovanni, Roberto, Mattea, their whole team of chocolate makers did to develop this. I mean, you too, Alison, everyone, all the other Trader Joe's crew members working on this.

Alison: Yes. I'm constantly going up to people's desks asking them to taste candy.

Tara: It's a hardship, let me tell you.

Alison: Yeah. (laughs) There's a lot of fans of candy in the office, so it's not hard to find people to taste. So definitely a team effort.

Tara: The Trader Joe's Blonde Bar, which I am holding in my hand, is in stores now, yes?

Alison: Yes. Go buy one.

Tara: You want to try it?

Matt: Please.

Tara: It's in a box. It just looks very fancy.

Alison: It's supposed to be like art deco-ey kind of.

Tara: Yeah. It's got a little foil wrap inside. (foil crinkling) It is a beautiful caramel color. I've never tasted anything that tastes quite like this before.

Alison: Mm, yeah.

Matt: I'm getting some flavors that are like dulce de leche, that slight scorch on the milk a little bit, in a great way. This really tastes like what caramel dreams of.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: We love sharing the stories behind the products here on *Inside Trader Joe's*. Be sure to 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.

Alison: And thanks for checking out the Blonde Bar. We hope you love it as much as we do.