

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 104: Trader Joe's Goes Back to the Future

Matt: Here's a taste of what's coming up on *Inside Trader Joe's*.

[Light upbeat music begins. Highlights from past episodes.]

Tara: Why do you shop at Trader Joe's?

Customer: Because you have the most variety. I actually remember you guys when you guys just had nuts and cheeses (laughs).

Matt: We actually sold sandwiches by the inch. And I always wondered, did someone say, "Give me an inch-long ham on rye"?

Chris: There really are hundreds of thousands of wines available in the market. We carry about 500 in our stores. So we're tasting every day, literally every day.

Tara: There are people who work here at Trader Joe's whose job is to go out into the universe and find the foods we don't know we need.

Matt: I will cop to having eaten some biscuits intended for animals other than humans recently. But I can say with conviction, we taste everything.

Crew Member: (hushed tone) Yeah. Tasting Panel's meeting right now, so follow me.

Xavier: I'm a marketing person. You guys are marketing people. So innovative, interesting, engaging.

Matt: And in hindsight, we probably should have known that some of those products were going to be misses.

Tara: Like what?

Matt: We thought chunk pilchard in a can would be great.

Rosalio: We're in the people business. We sell groceries, but we're in the people business.

Tara: We'll even hear from Joe himself.

Joe Coulombe: The demographics were changing in the United States, and I thought that these people would want something different.

Matt: Why is everybody so nice? Because they are.

Bryan Palbaum: Because they are.

Music: 🎵 Smile, smile, smile in advance. 🎵

Tara: And that's how this podcast, *Inside Trader Joe's*, began back in 2018.

Matt: It's been all downhill since.

Tara: We thought we were only going to do five episodes and be done, but here we are more than 100 episodes later.

Matt: Wow. I think I remember them all.

Tara: Really?

Matt: No.

Tara: That's why it's fun to go back and listen to a few of the oldies but goodies. I find myself listening like a listener because they're all kind of new to me.

Matt: Well, we should play those first five again.

Tara: All 92 minutes and 14 seconds?

Matt: Oh, wait. If there's one thing that hasn't improved since then, it's my attention span.

Tara: Okay. So let's see if we can edit them down to less than half of that.

Matt: That's worth a try. 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: Episode One of *Inside Trader Joe's* was called...

Matt: "The Sound of Chewing"

Tara: No, no, no, no, no. It's called "It's About the Product."

Matt: Well, that was my next guess.

[Tape rewinding to highlights from Episode One. Busy customer noise in the background.]

Customer: Trader Joe's has a lot of products that I don't see at other stores that I really like. Also, I'll try stuff that they have at the samples stand. I'll try stuff and it's actually worked on me. So in that way, I get to experience new things that I wouldn't find at another store.

[Light music begins.]

Tara: So Matt, how does a Trader Joe's product happen? How does it go from idea to shelf?

Matt: Well, it really is about that. It's about making something in your head real, about making something that's an idea into a tangible thing that we can show and offer and hopefully people want to buy. It's often best for us to get out into the world and not just wait for things to come to us. And so, once upon a time...

[Transition to light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Once upon a time someone who was out looking for products for Trader Joe's was visiting a place in Canada outside of Montreal that makes great frozen soup. And they make the soup in this very specific way. It's actually sold in little pucks. You might even think about the French Onion Soup that Trader Joe's has sold for so long in that format. And this person from Trader Joe's, this product developing type person, who happened to be me at that point in time, so it was me,...

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: ...I was there and watching them make the soup. And at this point I was thinking like, "Wow, what else could they do here?" They kept showing other soups and lots of soups, and I kept thinking, "We don't need any more soup." But at this time, steel-cut oatmeal was really popular. And the biggest downside to steel-cut oats at that point was how long it took to make it, like 45 minutes, you know the pot's going to boil over, it's going to make a mess, all this for breakfast. How can we make it simpler? So I asked the soup people, "Hey, you guys ever cook oatmeal in that giant machine over there?" And they thought I was nuts and they thought it was crazy. "I cannot do it," in your Québécois accent.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: But we started working on it and we started working on cooking steel-cut oats and putting them in these portioned pucks, if you will, and selling them. And we're actually still selling that product now. So it's often just thinking about how to solve a problem and looking at the immediate situation of where you're at, a frozen soup factory, and thinking like, "Wow, can I actually use these resources to solve this other problem?" So you took the soup situation and used it for breakfast.

[Music transition.]

Tara: What are the attributes that make a Trader Joe's product a Trader Joe's product? Why are Trader Joe's products different than any others?

Matt: There's so much variety in terms of what goes into products, but there is a very consistent thing that is hit, we hope, product to product to product, it's great. It tastes great. It's enjoyable to eat, to drink. That's really important. Our products really are about what they are. So you can have a laundry list of what's not in them, like artificial red dye. We might use juice from a beet to do the same thing, to give a nice red color, but it really is about what that product conveys and what it is. Is it a great-tasting wine? Is it a delicious cheese? And to get there, there are a lot of things that we don't allow in our products, synthetic preservatives. We don't use any genetically engineered or genetically modified organism ingredients. And while those are really important and customers expect those attributes from our products, products live and die by whether or not they taste good.

Customer: I really like the Trader Joe's Vegetarian Chili, and right now they're out of it, (laughs) so they still carry it, but they're out of it (laughs).

Xavier: Favorite Trader Joe's product, all the produce. I constantly am on the Trail Mix.

Crew Member: I was really into that Almond Jalapeño Dip we were carrying, so I'm kind of waiting for that to come back.

Customer: My favorite Trader Joe's product would be that Orange Chicken, which everybody loves. It's so easy and it's so delicious and sometimes you just want something quick, fast, and you can eat and know it's going to be delicious and have it with some of that jasmine rice and some of those peas. And that's a dinner for me. Yeah, I love that.

[Music transition.]

Jon Basalone: I'm Jon Basalone, president of stores for Trader Joe's and I've been with Trader Joe's for 28 years, held all sorts of jobs with Trader Joe's...

[Screech to a halt.]

Tara: Whoa, whoa, whoa, stop.

Matt: We interrupt this edited replay of Episode One to why?

Tara: Jon has a new title since then. Let's update. He's now Trader Joe's president and vice CEO.

Matt: And as Jon is known to say...

[Tape rewinding.]

Jon Basalone: Looks good on my business card, but we're all crew members.

Tara: Can you explain a little bit how we buy things has evolved over the years?

Jon Basalone: In the very early days, we were relying on outside sources to sort of give us a, "Here's a list of products to choose from," or "Here's some things you can look at." It might've been a little more curatorial in aspect when it came to what was in a Trader Joe's store, where Joe was maybe the curator of, "This is the kind of stuff we should sell." And he just found suppliers that had lists of products and he kind of chose what those were.

[Music transition.]

Jon Basalone: Over time, we sort of moved into, "Hey, we could probably do this and make this really interesting if we went out and tried to find the stuff ourselves, not be sitting around the office waiting for people to bring us stuff, let's send them out and see what they can find. Hey, we're not like anybody else. We don't need all your advertising dollars, your marketing dollars. You don't need to buy space in our store. By the way, we want you to take all those other costs out of it because you don't have that cost with us."

[In-store noises.]

Crew Member: The customers are very intelligent. They're very smart with their shopping and what they want.

Customer: Everyone's so friendly. The prices are wonderful.

Crew Member: Twenty-seven eighty is your total.

Tara: People talk a lot about value, and value means different things to different people. What does it mean for us?

Matt: A lot of times value is equated as necessarily meaning the lowest price ever with no consideration for what you get for that price. And for us, what you get at a price is what really matters. We're interested in great quality at a great price, and you can't separate the two.

[Music transition.]

Matt: Really, who doesn't love finding something new and who doesn't love a little bit of a treasure hunt? It's really just become expected from our customers of us to be out there finding stuff. We need to be actively on the road (car driving by on the highway) looking for things. And we're going to talk with someone whose whole mission is just that, being those boots on the ground in a place we didn't think we needed to go find something that we didn't know we can't live without, but now that we have it, we're so excited.

[French street café noises, French music begins.]

Lori: There are very few places I go that I haven't really enjoyed, but I love Paris.
(laughs)

Tara: That's Lori. She's a product development expert at Trader Joe's.

Lori: What I've done recently, which has worked really well, is I go online or I talk to different people in the country that I'm going to and say, "I'm really looking for somebody who's really an expert in food." And I don't want to take the normal tour of the normal places, but I want somebody who can show me the markets and show me really interesting, very traditional foods from that place.

[Car doors opening, closing, car starting. Distant voices. Car driving away.]

Lori: I've hired a couple of different people for a day or for two days in several countries, and that's turned out to be a really great way to do it. I tell them exactly what I'm doing, and we know where I'm from and such. And so far I've done really well that way. So that's turned out to be a really fun way to see cities.

Tara: Those are some highlights from Episode One.

Matt: What year is this?

Tara: 2026.

Matt: Oh, good. We're back in the present. I'm just making sure.

Tara: Episode Two is called "It's About Values." And we talked to Trader Joe's crew members about the Trader Joe's values guide.

Matt: Hey, cue the crew member montage from Episode Two.

[Tape rewinding to highlights from Episode Two. Light upbeat music begins.]

Crew Member: Number one is integrity.

Jay Jay: Our second value is product-driven company.

Rosalio: Well, customer service.

Crew Member: No bureaucracy.

Jay Jay: Kaizen.

Rosalio: The store is our brand.

Crew Member: We're a national chain of neighborhood grocery stores.

Jay Jay: The company values are so rich that they're not something that, and a lot of people may think this is corny, but are not just in the store for me. They transcended into my personal life and how I treat other people and how I expect people to treat me. And I think that's the biggest thing, integrity.

Tara: One of the things that makes Trader Joe's really different is that we taste everything before we decide to sell it.

Matt: While we're not secretive, there are some things that we do that are closed off and really among them are our Tasting Panels. We want the Tasting Panel to make decisions on behalf of our customers. So none of our vendors, our suppliers, can buy access or be present or help sway those decisions. It really is all about that product, and is it great to eat or drink?

Tara: We once let a newspaper reporter into the Tasting Panel. And photos were taken only if the Tasting Panel wore bags over their heads.

Matt: It was a great-looking group. The bags were just a necessary requirement.

[Ominous music transition.]

Matt: The tasting kitchen, as a place, shrouded in the secrecy that it is, is interesting. It's a harsh environment. Fluorescent lighting; gleaming white countertops; no fun, inspirational posters. There's no kitten saying, "Hang in there," although maybe we should put that in there. There's nothing in there that makes it comfortable.

[Music ends.]

Matt: It's like a Cold War interrogation booth because we want the products that succeed to go through this ultra Darwinian exercise to say that they could stand up even to that harshest light of critical evaluation.

[Transition to upbeat music. Bustling of people.]

Matt: We all love the glass of wine that we had on the Amalfi Coast after a long day traipsing up and down the Cinque Terre, (glasses clinking) but that same wine tastes differently at 10:00 AM under fluorescent lights on a Thursday. (glass bottle breaking, music ends) And if it's great at that Thursday, then we know we've really got something. So we want to remove the romance for a little bit. We want to remove that story that we'll so carefully tell and really just focus on the thing itself. Is that thing great?

[Noise of people assembling in a busy open room.]

Crew Member: (hushed tone) Yeah. Tasting Panel's meeting right now, so follow me.

Developer 1: Yes, it's one of my favorites too. It's made with lemon, cream, and Parmigiano Reggiano. Very simple dish. And this was the inspiration for what I'm proposing today. It's a shelf-stable pasta sauce in grocery. Our version is made with cream, Parmesan cheese, butter, lemon juice concentrate, basil, salt, and spices. So very simple ingredient deck. So we would be in this 15-ounce jar for \$3.49. This is served with spaghetti and a little bit of shaved Parmesan and Romano on top and a little bit of pepper. I have the sauce on the side, if you just want to taste it.

Panelist 1: The flavors are so bright. It's really a nice sauce. It's really good. It's heavy and creamy, but it still tastes light, which is magical.

Panelist 2: Did that pass?

All Panelists: Yeah, oh, yeah. (laughs)

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: So we have a group of people who convene on a regular basis and basically we eat, but we eat with intention.

[People conversing in background.]

Matt: Membership is granted and you are chosen to be part of this group and it's a diverse array of crew members.

Tara: And our intention is to figure out what tastes great and what our customers are going to love.

Matt: Does the combination of great quality and great price make itself so known that we have to bring this in? Because every time we bring something new in, we got to get rid of a thing or two to make some space.

Tara: Someone might say, "Well, you have dog treats. Who tastes the dog treats?" The dog treats get tasted by panel members' dogs.

Matt: I will cop to having eaten some biscuits intended for animals other than humans recently, but I can say with conviction, we taste everything.

Tara: Yeah.

Producer: (off mic) What does a dog biscuit taste like? (laughs)

Matt: Well, it depends. I actually tried this one thing recently. I was like, "Oh, I don't know if I should have eaten that." It was a Salmon & Sweet Potato Treat.

Tara: Ooh, those are bad.

Matt: It was pretty fishy. I haven't eaten the Tuna for Cats, just full disclosure.

Producer: (off mic, laughs) You got to draw the line.

Matt: You got to draw the line.

Developer 2: Well, thank you all. I think that's all we got.

[People murmur as they disband. Music ends.]

Matt: Up next, the history of Trader Joe's.

Tara: So, where should we start? How about at the very beginning?

Matt: That is a good place to start.

[Lively upbeat music begins.]

Newscaster: (vintage, tinny sounding) The king of rock and roll, Elvis Presley, checks into Camp Chaffee, Arkansas to begin his two-year Army hitch courtesy of the Memphis draft board. Meanwhile, in Washington, President Eisenhower meets with leaders of Congress...(fades)

Matt: So it's 1958, and Joe Coulombe, Joe, he takes over a small chain of convenience stores around the LA area. These are called Pronto Markets. The whole idea is fast. It's pronto, it's quick, right? And they're convenience stores before we really even know what convenience stores are. This is before 7-Eleven becomes the thing that it is. These are little, tiny corner markets.

Tara: The kind of place where you could get anything from, say, (music fades) a pack of gum to some pantyhose to a box of ammunition.

Matt: It's really a special assortment. It's like, "Who would make sense of this?" Nobody could, nobody did, so it changes.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: We'll let Joe pick up the story from here.

Joe Coulombe: I spent 10 years running Pronto Markets. Towards the end of that, I really did not like the convenience store formula.

Matt: Joe is the classic entrepreneur. Joe's really good at looking for, finding and developing opportunities.

Joe Coulombe: The demographics were changing in the United States because of the GI Bill of Rights, which was the largest experiment in mass higher education in the history of the human race. And I thought that these people would want something different.

[Music transition.]

Tara: But the first Trader Joe's store opened in 1967 in Pasadena, California. That store's still there. It's still operating. It still has the same parking lot. Back in the early days of Trader Joe's, they made sandwiches in the stores. They cut and wrapped cheese in the stores. It was almost like a deli counter kind of experience, but in a tiny little store, and they sold lots of wine.

Matt: We actually sold sandwiches by the inch. And I always wondered, did someone say, "Give me an inch-long ham on rye? Who ordered a two-inch sandwich?" But maybe someone did.

Tara: There weren't a lot of customers at the beginning, though.

Matt: And then in 1972, a total game changer for Trader Joe's, a new reason to love Trader Joe's was born.

Music: 🎵 One, two, three, four. (harmonica) 🎵

Tara: The 1972 breakthrough, not to be confused with the 1972 break-in. That was Washington. This was Los Angeles. Different story.

[Music ends.]

Matt: Granola.

[Harmonic music resumes.]

Tara: Not just any granola though. This was the first private label Trader Joe's product. And after granola, Joe never looked back.

Joe Coulombe: You don't have to worry about all of the soft drink salesmen coming in and the bread salesman coming in and the potato chip people coming in. You're just focused. And that solved so many problems. (laughs)

Music: 🎵 There ain't nobody going to it for you. Got to find your own way. 🎵

[Music ends.]

Tara: Enough of episode Two?

Matt: I think so, especially if we're going to get to three, four, and five before my nap time.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Episode Three is called "Informative and Seriously Not Too Serious."

Matt: Seriously. And being informative, that starts with talking to our customers.

Tara: And to do that, I went to the Trader Joe's in Sherman Oaks, California.

Matt: The original Sherman Oaks store.

Tara: Oh, that's right, because now we have two stores in Sherman Oaks.

[Tape rewinding to highlights from Episode Three. Store noises... cash register, beeping, people chatting.]

Tara: We're here at the Trader Joe's in Sherman Oaks, California. We are producing a podcast that's just all about Trader Joe's. And a big part of Trader Joe's are the people who shop here.

Rae: To be honest, I only started shopping at Trader Joe's this past year. So I always ask, "Hey, where's this or where's that?" And not only do they tell you where it is, but they show you. I really like that. Unlike when you go to (beep) and you say, "Hey, where's this?" They're like, "Aisle five." Here, you say, "Where can I find my Almond Butter?" And they'll direct you and walk you and give you recommendations on which is the best one. So I really like that.

[Upbeat music begins. Store noises.]

Tina: We're not going to sound silly? (laughs)

Tara: Well, you might, but that's okay.

Crew Member: Take two, take three, take four. (laughs)

Tara: But what we're trying to do is really just get a sense of what are the things that make Trader Joe's an interesting place to work. (ding of a store bell) Do you want to start, Tina?

Tina: I love being here. It's like with my friends. It's my other family. There's good food. I get a discount. I laugh every time I come. It is nice to help people. It's amazing how much some people don't know and some people do know.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tina: Some people don't know that our sliced turkey is ready to eat. They don't know that they don't need to cook it, for example, or like gluten-free, vegan. It's nice to be helpful to the customers that have diet restrictions or just started on diet restrictions, and we can help them because we have all the knowledge here.

Roberto: In every section, there's someone that's extremely knowledgeable. You got wine, you got cheese, the list goes on and on. And for produce, it's either me or Mateen, Lee, Roberto.

Tina: You can come to me for anything. (laughs) I know it all.

Matt: Our crew members do love to recommend products. Just ask them.

[Music transition.]

Randy: We have a new frozen item that's a baked chocolate chip cookie that is really, really good, especially with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top. It's amazing.

Mitch: We've made a huge improvement in our new fresh salmon, so that's certainly a favorite. I have that quite often.

Dan: And my favorite product at Trader Joe's is Charles Shaw Wine.

Producer: (off mic) Charles Shaw? Why?

Dan: And it's because it's our customers' favorite product.

Jason: I think my current favorite would probably be our spatchcocked chicken. I've been cooking that a lot lately on the barbecue. It's very good.

[Music transition. Store noises.]

Jay Jay: We do try just about everything in the store, so our crew are very knowledgeable about our products. We try to have a tasting once or twice a week. And our crew get an opportunity to not only fill their bellies, but their minds, so they're able to pass on that information to our customers.

Tara: So we're at Trader Joe's Store 49 in Sherman Oaks, California, and we're talking to this store's captain. I'll let her introduce herself.

Jay Jay: Hi, I'm Jay Jay.

Tara: How long have you worked for Trader Joe's, Jay Jay?

Jay Jay: I've been with the company 25 years. The best thing about it, and I'm going to get choked up here, um (voice wavering) is that no one ever told me that there was an obstacle (choking back tears) or I couldn't do it. It's so weird.

Tara: It's okay. This is okay. This is real. This is how you feel.

Jay Jay: That I was pushed and made me feel like I can accomplish anything. They promoted me, pushed me on, gave me direction, and always, always said, "Keep going." And that's the direction I went.

[Music transition.]

Jay Jay: It's not easy. None of it's easy. It shouldn't be easy if it's worth it. It's definitely worth it.

Matt: Then, of course, we also have to keep crew members informed about the products that are going away.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Yeah, it happens.

Tara: The Tasting Panel does such a good job choosing products to bring into Trader Joe's, but even they miss sometimes.

Matt: And in hindsight, we probably should have known that some of those products were going to be misses.

Tara: Like what?

Matt: Well, like all good things that sound great on paper, or even when you're thinking about it, Laplander cuisine soup just...

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: ...is necessarily tricky stuff. So we had a line of soups that were cuisine from the land of the midnight sun. And this is on-the-go Laplander cuisine for those of you pressed for time, but still wanting a bit of that authentic old country taste. And we had cream of venison soup. And it was in a very gold foil can. It looked fancy, but really no one wanted it.

Tara: We thought they might though, huh? Okay.

Matt: We really did. And a lot of times an opportunity will present itself, something that seems at the surface like a negative situation and you turn it around and you try to make it positive, and you still wind up in that awkward negative spot. There was actually a large peanut crop failure that led to a peanut shortage that led to a peanut butter problem. We didn't have enough peanut butter to sell and people love peanut butter. So what we found was cotton seed. Cotton seed actually is plentiful, abundant, and it produces lots of oil. And we thought, "Wow, if you just blend this up, whip this up, it's like a cotton seed butter. Who's not going to love this?" Apparently, no one loved this.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: So swing, miss. Another similar situation. Again, we're going back some time here into the late 70s, really early 80s. There was a shortage of what they call chunk light tuna. We needed more cans of tuna to sell. Well, there's another fish. It's sometimes known as an alewife or a pilchard. We thought chunk pilchard in a can would be great.

Tara: Yeah. (laughs)

Matt: And the rest is history.

[Music ends. Store noises.]

Tara: Can you just start off by giving us your name and what city you live in?

Xavier: Yeah, my name is Xavier Burt, and I live in South Pasadena, California. I just was telling the gentleman at the register that I read the Fearless Flyer cover to cover because it's super engaging and the writing is really great. And I gave it to another person I cook with because I was like, "You need to read this about food. It's really good." I came in last night and bought all the stuff I found in the Fearless Flyer that was interesting that I never had. So last night I made sunchoke. I never even had a sunchoke. And yeah, just nerding out on food.

Tara: Okay. Well, I write the Fearless Flyer, so you just made my whole day. Thank you.

Xavier: Yay, good job.

Tara: That's fantastic.

Xavier: This one's great. I just was sitting there, and my wife was sleeping and every time she woke up, I was like, "I'm still reading this thing." And she dozed off and I was like, "I'm still reading this thing."

[Flyer's propellers buzz overhead.]

Matt: So Tara, what is the Fearless Flyer?

Tara: The Fearless Flyer is Trader Joe's main way of talking to our customers.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: We call ourselves a store of stories, and the Fearless Flyer is that idea made manifest on paper.

Matt: But it's a specific set of stories, right?

Tara: Rather than just show people a product and a price, like a traditional grocery store or a circular would do, we tell stories about our products. We talk to the people who've developed our products. We want you to know a little bit about what's in it. We want you to know a little bit about what it tastes like and what a great value it is, so we tell you the price.

Matt: The usual grocery playbook says "Item, Price" or "BOGO" for you jargon fans out there... "Buy one, get one." It's none of that. It's a lot of words.

Tara: It's a lot of words.

Matt: But they are words that have a look, like you can spot it at 50 paces. Why does it look like that?

Tara: Originally, it looked like that because it was the least expensive way to put something on paper.

[Music transition.]

Tara: So our founder, Joe Coulombe, (manual typewriter pecking and "ding") would type it on a typewriter and make mimeograph copies.

Joe Coulombe: I wrote the Fearless Flyer for all those years.

Tara: Originally, it was for crew members. It was intended to give information about products, specifically wines, to crew members. It was called The Insider's Report, and he started doing that in 1970, and customers got wind that this was happening and said, "Hey, I want to see that. I want to know about that wine. I want to know what that's all about." The cartoons that are in the flyer, it's got these old-timey Victorian-era art pieces.

Joe Coulombe: We put in the cartoons, lighten it up. Don't take it so God damn seriously.

Tara: They were royalty free and Joe didn't want to have to pay anyone to create art to put in it and didn't want to have to put pictures of products in it because that was expensive too.

Matt: These old engravings, it was absolutely out of necessity to not spend money on it, and it became, over time, a look.

Tara: A cross between *MAD Magazine* and *Consumer Reports*. The initial cartoon image on the flyer was of someone who looked like he was flying. And I don't know if he looked fearless or terrified, but Terrified Flyer probably wouldn't have worked very well as a name, so...

Matt: No one wants that.

Tara: Fearless it was, and fearless it is.

[Propellers flying overhead.]

Matt: Is there any option for a paid placement? Can someone buy a spot in this?

Tara: No. It's not an option. That's just not part of how we do our business. We put things in the flyer that we think are interesting and hopefully our customers agree that they're interesting.

[Music transition. Store noises.]

Tara: I'm Tara.

Curtis: I'm Curtis.

Tara: I'm the marketing director at Trader Joe's. Why do you shop at Trader Joe's?

Curtis: I shop at Trader Joe's because I love the products. I love the staff. I love how helpful they are and friendly they are. And I love to sample their food. (laughs)

Tara: Do you sample products from the demo?

Curtis: Absolutely. And I get a lot of ideas for dinner and for lunches for my boys.

Tara: So what a lot of people might not know is the biggest marketing expense we have at Trader Joe's is actually just letting people try our food. Today, we're with Angel at the demo station in our East Pasadena, California store. What's for lunch, Angel?

Angel: Ooh, today we've got a little beef brisket. This is the corned beef brisket, on rye bread with mustard, a little cabbage, and Swiss cheese.

Tara: So you don't just put out the food, you actually make things that customers could make at home?

Angel: Yeah, that's what we're striving to do. We're looking for ideas, for inspiration, things that are easy, and that they could do for themselves at home real quick.

[Music transition. Lots of store noise. People walking past.]

Angel: I've got a tasty sample for you here. You're very welcome to try, guys, please. Have a taste.

Customer 1: I'm so full.

Angel: Good afternoon, Miss. How are you?

Customer 2: Fine, thank you. What is this?

Angel: This is actually a little sandwich we made with our corned beef.

Customer 2: Mm, really?

Angel: Not bad, huh? You want to try some grapes too because they're really crunchy and good.

Customer 3: That was very tasty. Thank you.

Angel: Thank you, sir.

Customer 3: You need a glass of wine next time.

Angel: Hey, I'll work on it.

Customer 3: All right.

Tara: Crew member Ray at the original Trader Joe's in Pasadena, California was a, you could say, demo station pioneer.

Ray: Well, in the early days, before we had potato salad, I brought out my potato salad, and I was quite proud of that. Unfortunately, it's not on the shelves, but I thought it was delicious. And the people used to love to have it when I would do that. At the demo station, you never know what you're going to be. You may be a nurse, you may be a secretary, you may just be a counselor. We are many things back there because everybody come to the table, as the bishop would say, from a different place of enlightenment, and we just have to deal with the situations as they come, you know? (laughs).

[Music fades.]

Matt: I really like that episode. That's number three?

Tara: Number three.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Well, as you said at the beginning, these are all new to me. It's kind of been a while.

Tara: Episode Four begins with Jon Basalone.

Matt: He's back, our president and vice CEO.

Tara: This episode is called "The Store Is Our Brand."

[Tape rewinding to highlights from Episode Four. Light upbeat music begins.]

Jon Basalone: The store is our brand. People can't understand, "Why aren't you selling products online? How come you don't just sell wholesale to China? They want a bunch of your products. Why don't you just send truckloads and shiploads of products to other countries and make a bunch of money?" It's like, "Well, because that's not what Trader Joe's is. For us, the store is our brand, and our products work the best when they're sold as part of this overall customer experience within the store. We're not ready to give that up. For us, the brand is too important, and the store is our brand.

Tara: More than 80% of the products we sell at Trader Joe's are private label. Keeping things in our label as opposed to the brand name label or a supplier's label helps us keep our costs low.

Matt: We don't collect slotting fees. (music fades) We don't have the producers of the stuff that we sell pay for privileged space or any space in our stores.

Tara: And that happens everywhere else, by the way.

Matt: Totally normal grocery store stuff. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me, and yet there it is.

[Soft, dark, ominous, futuristic music.]

Matt: There aren't a bunch of flat screen TVs and monitors and electronic signs, and why don't we have those things in our stores?

Mitch: That's not who we are.

Tara: That's Mitch. He started out as a part-time box boy and now he's senior EVP of stores.

Mitch: When you walk into a store that has a big screen there and you can see yourself on camera, the immediate feeling is, "Someone's watching me and they must be watching me for a reason."

Matt: And just to be clear, we are not spying on you.

[Transition to upbeat music.]

Matt: Do you like cats? Do you buy a lot of chocolate bars, a lot of Belgian chocolate bars? We don't know that about you. We wouldn't share that information with someone if we had it, but we don't have it. That was weird. It's still weird.

Tara: (laughs) No, it's actually kind of funny.

Matt: We don't know what we don't know. That's a problem.

[Music transition.]

Mitch: God, we have so many great products and they're so unique and people come to our stores for that product, but what they really get excited about and what they write in about, a lot of times is the interaction they had with the crew. A 93 year old man wrote in about, he got to the check stand and they surprised him. It was his birthday and they surprised him with a cake.

Crew Members: HAPPY BIRTHDAY! (applause)

Mitch: Grocery stores just don't do that.

Matt: I don't think anybody does that.

Mitch: But we do, and it's not something that we tell our crew to do. It's just something that we just do.

[Store noises.]

Customer: Oh, you put it there. Okay. Thank you.

Rae: My name's Rae. I am purchasing level five colored bananas. They have green tips, almost ripe, but not too ripe. I like to ripen them myself. And we're going to be making banana bread. There's about 100 bananas in there.

[Music transition.]

Rae: And I spoke to Josh, a sales employee, and I called him every day within the past three days, and he gave me an update on how the bananas are looking, when to come by, when to pick them up. So I really appreciate him. Thank you, Josh. Oh, he said, "Ask for me because I don't want anyone else to think you're crazy."

Tara: (laughs)

Rae: So I appreciate it.

Rosalio: Hi, my name's Rosalio Medina. I've been with the company 23 years.

Tara: What's the part of being a Trader Joe's captain that you enjoy the most?

Rosalio: Talking to people. We're in the people business. We sell groceries, but we're in the people business. The absolute best part is I get to come to work every day and talk to people and smile and meet new people. I'm really lucky. I'm really blessed.

[Music transition.]

Tara: Ever wonder what it's like to interview for a job at Trader Joe's?

[Store noises.]

Rosalio: When we do interviews, I'll say, "So what questions do you have for me?" And they say, "Well, what do I not know coming in?" I said, "Well, the work part, we could train

you to do, that's easy, but it's all about the people, just your ability to talk to people." We've got interview questionnaires and I'll start with that. And then I tend to get off base a little bit. One of the best questions is, what do you like to do in your off time? And then you'll see their passion. And then from there, you could talk about food and see how that works out.

Tara: You're not just trying to find someone who can fill a slot on your crew roster. You're interviewing a person to get to know a person because you're hiring a person, not a widget.

[Music transition. Store noises.]

Tara: Do you want to start, Tina? Just a little bit of your story as it relates to Trader Joe's. What brought you here and how long have you been here and why have you stayed?

Tina: Okay. (ding from a store bell) I've been with Trader Joe's for probably 10 years. I have worked many jobs since I was 15 and I see my other friends that don't work for the company and the things they complain about or how they don't have friends at work and they don't get to drink wine at work and eat cheese. (laughs) And that's when I was like, "Yeah, I fit in, right?" I fit right in.

[Music transition.]

Roberto: Yeah. Same here. I worked for the company 12 years. Maybe a couple of months into me starting here, they had me face paint. I'm artistic somewhat, so for them to just ask me, "Why don't you start face painting some of these kids?" And I was like, "Wow, I could totally dig this."

Tina: Be yourself.

Roberto: That's what helps, the fact that we could be ourselves. So that translates with our energy, with the people, with our customers.

Tina: I could talk like myself. I could just be myself. I've never, ever felt out of place.

[Music ends.]

Tara: And that's episode number four.

Matt: Wait, that's it? That's all?

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: No, remember, these are the Reader's Digest versions.

Matt: I don't know what that means. I'm too young.

Tara: Episode Five is titled, "Please Won't You Be My Neighborhood Store."

Matt: Every store is different. They're designed to really reflect the communities they're in, and we hope that they're really, truly part of those neighborhoods.

Tara: That's why customers will often refer to the store where they shop as, "My Trader Joe's."

Matt: I'm glad we saved some time for Episode Five.

Tara: It starts with Trader Joe's CEO Bryan Palbaum explaining what our Neighborhood Shares Program is.

[Tape rewinding to highlights from Episode Five. Light upbeat music begins..]

Bryan Palbaum: We have this product that maybe it's past the code date, maybe it's got a blemish, but it's perfectly good and wholesome for people to eat. We know there's a lack of food for a lot of people. We came up with the idea to call this Shares, which means exactly what the term says. We want to share this with the neighborhoods within which our stores are located.

[Street noise. Pickup truck door closes.]

Tim Nistler: Okay. Hey, Andrew.

Andrew: Good morning. It's good to see you.

Tim Nistler: You too.

Andrew: Yeah.

Tim Nistler: I'm Tim Nistler. I'm the program director for the Friends In Deed Food Pantry. My buddy, Andrew, here is a volunteer and he picks up the Neighborhood Shares from a local Trader Joe's. All right. Looks like a good load. What do you got?

Andrew: Well, we got a huge load today. Lots of flowers, lots of bread. And then the usual variety of salads. We have meats, we have eggs, fruit, veggies, the usual ratio.

Tim Nistler: Nice.

Andrew: But lots of flowers.

Tim Nistler: No, that's beautiful. Thank you. Thank you, guys, for everything.

Tara: Tim, can you tell us about what you get from Trader Joe's and how that impacts your program?

Tim Nistler: We get, I guess you guys call them Shares now, meats, fruits and vegetables especially, desserts, things that are in the fresh section of the Trader Joe's stores. The folks that come here, they're us. They are working, they are retired, they have grandkids, they have aunts, uncles, they have baby brothers and sisters, they have dogs and cats. They're just like all of us. They just happen to need some assistance. So what I've learned in the years I've been doing this is that they're lovely people.

Customer: This place is a blessing to my home. Sometimes I run short, well, all the time I run short, but just having this place available in the neighborhood, it does wonders in my house.

Volunteer: It's a great thing. Thank you so much, Trader Joe's.

Tim Nistler: I get to tell people, "Please, have some food."

[Music transition.]

Matt: Wow. And that's another reason we're so proud to be part of Trader Joe's.

Tara: And proud to be part of the neighborhoods where our stores live.

Matt: We started this podcast with the goal of answering some of the questions we often hear about Trader Joe's. We hope we've answered some of yours.

Tara: But there are two or three more we haven't gotten to yet.

[Incoming email message ding.]

Chloe: Hey, I'm Chloe and I wanted to know whatever happened to the Raspberry Macaron Cake. I miss it so much.

Matt: We get this one a lot, but it's a democratic process, right, Mitch?

[Music transition.]

Mitch: Recently, one of my favorite products, our Canned Chicken Noodle Soup was discontinued.

Matt: After years.

Mitch: After years. And this was a big favorite in my house.

Jon Basalone: Oh, my favorite stuff gets discontinued all the time. A long time ago, I just craved and I used to love buying the Pickled Green Beans that we sold, and those got dropped pretty quick.

Jason: I always go back to one of my favorite juices. It was called Sir Strawberry.

Lori: Okay. There are some that are seasonal, and I'm really sad when they go, but there was a Light Greek Salad that you guys used to have, and I miss it.

Robert: We used to have a turkey sandwich that was handmade. And that was one I truly miss. And then the other ones were, we had our little hamburger sliders, ugh!

Tara: Uh-huh.

Tina: Oh, I remember those!

Robert: The cheeseburgers. Oh my God, I missed those. Yeah. But that's it. (laughs)

Sheena: I was really into that Almond Jalapeño Dip we were carrying, so I'm kind of waiting for that to come back.

Jay Jay: I think somebody the other day asked me for a Pomegranate Glaze, which the funniest thing is I still have a bottle in my cabinet that's expired three, four years now, and I refuse to get rid of it waiting for it to return.

Mitch: God, there've been a (chuckles) number of surprises.

Matt: That we thought would work that didn't.

Group: (laughs)

[Music transition.]

Mitch: I think when we explain that customers vote with their dollars, it does help them understand that they're a partner in this and unfortunately not as many customers like that product as they did, and hopefully we'll find something else that would replace that.

[Incoming email message ding. Light traffic in a parking lot.]

Customer: I love you, but what's with the parking lot.

[Someone in the background laughs.]

Tara: Let's have Jon Basalone take this one.

[Music transition.]

Jon Basalone: For us, sometimes we have to make decisions based on, well, this is the only way we can have a store in this neighborhood is in turning this old armory into a Trader Joe's. This is the space that's available and here's the parking that comes with it. Certainly, we have minimums that need to work. A lot of our parking lots in Southern California are just older store sites that now are just incredibly inadequate for the business that we do. The way cities work, it also causes some issues for us where the number of parking spaces is based on your square footage of your space, not how many customers you expect you're going to have. That doesn't match up with us because we run pretty small stores, so we're not allowed to have as many spaces as we would like to have.

[Incoming email message ding.]

Customer: How can I get a Trader Joe's in MY neighborhood? That's what I want to know.

Matt: Now that's a good one for Bryan Palbaum. He works a lot on figuring out where to put new stores.

Bryan Palbaum: We always appreciate the passion of some of the neighborhoods that do send in their requests, and they can be very creative at times.

[Music transition.]

Bryan Palbaum: Always consider distribution. How far our warehouses are going to be from the stores in which we're opening, make sure that we can supply those stores on a regular basis. Population is really important. We certainly have certain numbers of households that we

think we need to have that can support a successful Trader Joe's. And well, when we get to those numbers and it makes sense, then we'll open a store.

[Finale music.]

Tara: We did it, Episode Five.

[Light music begins.]

Matt: But we left out the part about how we don't open new stores unless we have enough crew members and captains who have spent years creating "wow" customer experiences at other stores.

Tara: We did, but you just got it in.

Matt: And we left out there are 624 Trader Joe stores around the contiguous United States, with more on the way.

Tara: Well, there are now, but these episodes came out eight years ago, so no.

Matt: So I guess we couldn't mention last year in 2025, the Trader Joe's Neighborhood Shares Program donated millions of pounds of food to our neighbors who needed a little help.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: No, we couldn't.

Matt: Ah, well, that's too bad. I wanted to mention that.

Tara: We hope you enjoyed our rewind to the first five episodes of *Inside Trader Joe's*. More than 100 episodes later, we're going to keep going.

Matt: Until they stop us.

Tara: 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.

Customer: Really, that's it? That's the end? I want more. You didn't even mention hummus.