

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 109: Trader Joe's 2026 Store Recipe Contest Winners

[Energetic upbeat music begins.]

Matt: This has been the most exciting competition I think I can remember. I mean, it's just so fun.

Tara: 100% for sure.

Matt: I mean, it's historic, really. I mean, it's emotional, it's exhilarating, heartbreaking at times, but wow, what a finish.

Tara: Yes! I have become such a huge World Cup fan this summer.

[Tires screeching to a halt. Music ends]

Matt: Oh, I was talking about the Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest.

Tara: Oh, yes, that, too.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: And we're about to meet the crew members at the winning store.

Matt: All right then. Let's GOOOAAAL *Inside Trader Joe's*.

[Theme music begins with two bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.]

Tara: Back of the net. 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: Around this time every summer, we announced the winner of the Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest, and today is the day.

Matt: Yes. And that means tomorrow I'm going to be busy in the kitchen.

Tara: So, the winner, and the runners up are now posted at [traderjoes.com](https://www.traderjoes.com).

[Theme music ends. Transition to upbeat music.]

Matt: All right, everybody listening, just take a moment, and pull that up.

Tara: Well, not if you're in traffic.

Matt: What's the winning recipe?

Tara: Not yet. Patience. We'll meet our winners and have them explain their recipe in a moment. But first, with us to reveal the four runners up is Crew Member Kathleen.

Kathleen: Hello.

Matt: Hello.

Kathleen: So happy to be here.

Tara: You were perhaps the person most intimately involved with the operation of this contest.

Kathleen: Yes.

Tara: Give us the elevator pitch of how this works.

Kathleen: Call to stores. Send us your best five ingredient recipe. Go.

Tara: How they come to that recipe at the store is up to them.

Kathleen: We have a very hands-off approach. "Hey, this is what we'd like. Figure it out and bring us your best."

Tara: Some stores did a whole contest within the store.

Kathleen: It was, everybody has a recipe, let's narrow it down in store, let's vote, and then we'll submit a recipe. So, we're getting recipes the day the contest is closing with that store's winning recipe.

Matt: So, a contest to enter the contest.

Kathleen: Yes.

Matt: No elimination process.

Tara: We didn't mandate that, but stores took that upon themselves to say, "Hey, we have a lot of people here who love to cook, and who love to create new, and interesting things. Let's open it up, a competition before the competition."

Kathleen: Yes. Some stores opted to, here's the one recipe where everyone just loved the idea and ran with it. But then some stores were just like bracket style to the death recipe submissions before sending them our way.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Brutal.

Tara: But given the results, I'm going to say rather than to the death, I think it was to the delicious. Every year that we've done this store recipe contest, the recipes have been better.

Kathleen: And we were all so pleasant about supporting all of the recipes during the voting process.

Tara: How do we come up with the top 10? And then what is the process of the actual voting?

Kathleen: Buckle up, Tara. Here we go.

Tara: Sitting back.

[Music transition.]

Kathleen: We have 400 plus recipes. We go through every single recipe checking, do they meet the recipe rules? Are there five ingredients plus the freebies? Yes. Yes, they do. They meet the rules. From there, everyone on the team chooses their top six, and everyone had different top six votes.

Tara: Yea.

Kathleen: And from there, we get together in a room, and we go, "This is why this recipe rocks." And then we just have pleasant, but combative arguments about why we should vote on that recipe.

Matt: Are those recipes sort of conceptual at this point? This is more just how they read on paper, or how maybe the image looks because has anyone made any of the recipes at this point?

Kathleen: At this point, no.

Matt: Hmm.

Tara: It's not possible to taste and make all 400 plus recipes. We have a feel for what our ingredients taste like, and what they might combine to become, but it's a tough process, because you have to use your imaginations. And I think the results of this particular contest show that we were open to lots of different kinds of flavors, because there is not a single consistent theme that runs through them all.

Matt: I get that. That's like perusing a recipe, and how it strikes you in that moment is the deciding point. That actually tracks with how real people work with actual recipes.

Tara: Okay, so we've gotten our top 10, then what happens?

Kathleen: Then we test.

[Music transition to light upbeat music.]

Kathleen: The same group of people who have voted on the recipes are the recipe testers, but then we've expanded the voters to a bigger group of office crew members from all different departments. So, we get to see other people try these recipes, get different perspectives.

Tara: And the group of people who voted on what the top 10 should be are the people then making those recipes for the assembled panelists.

Kathleen: Yes. So fun. We have our top 10, and then I assign recipes to each person. The person that I think will succeed with that recipe the best.

Tara: Just based on their skill level in the kitchen, and the kinds of things they like to cook.

Kathleen: And their enthusiasm level. This person does baking really well. Oh, this person loves the air fryer. Give them the air fryer.

Tara: That's me. Yeah.

Matt: Or this guy's a grouch.

Tara: That's your recipe.

Kathleen: You can vote.

Matt: Okay. Yeah, I can vote. Okay, thanks.

Tara: (laughs) Grouches don't get to actually make things.

Matt: Probably better for everybody.

Tara: Yes, correct.

Matt: All right. We have the lay of the land from how we set this thing up.

[Transition to brass heavy announcement music.]

Tara: Yeah, so we want to talk about the runners up first before we get to the winner. Our first runner up, and these are not in any particular order, we're just talking about this one first, is from Store 217 in Rancho Cucamonga, California.

[Transition to upbeat music.]

Matt: Oh, yes. Rancho Cucamonga, 37 miles east of downtown Los Angeles in what's often called the Inland Empire of Southern California. That store is about 25 miles east on the 210 from where we're sitting in the mothership in Monrovia. It's the 28th most populous city in the state of California.

Tara: Somebody's been doing some show prep.

Matt: No, I just happen to know this stuff.

Tara: Right.

Matt: Rancho Cucamonga's average high temperature on this date, July 27th, the day we're announcing these recipe winners 93 degrees Fahrenheit.

Tara: That is hot.

Matt: And that's the average. Now, of course, when it's that hot, you know what you get.

Tara: What?

Matt: Goodness gracious...

Tara & Matt: Great balls of fire.

Tara: (laughs) Okay, this recipe is so good it will shake your nerves and rattle your brain.

Matt: It's a catchy name, but what is in this recipe?

Tara: Well, the recipe starts with meatballs, just regular meatballs.

Kathleen: Kind of. They're Trader Joe's Homestyle Angus Beef Meatballs, which are...

Tara: Not regular.

Kathleen: Spectacular.

Tara: You're right.

Kathleen: And they are wrapped in Garlic & Herb Pizza Dough.

Tara: Delish. Okay.

Matt: So...

Tara: Where's the fire?

Matt: Yeah.

Kathleen: Bomba.

Tara: Oh, I love the bomba.

Kathleen: Italian Bomba Pepper Hot Sauce.

Tara: It's a little jar in the grocery aisle. It's fermented Calabrian chilies basically, correct?

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: It's so good. It's really hot.

Kathleen: So, this is an assembly recipe.

Tara: Okay.

Kathleen: And that's the fun of it is grab some friends, build this appetizer, air fry, and you have a party.

Tara: Okay.

Kathleen: But it starts with these meatballs that are wrapped in the Garlic & Herb Pizza Dough, but before they're laid down, there's a mixture of the bomba mixed with cream cheese.

Tara: Okay.

Kathleen: So, a hot cream cheese spread.

Tara: Delightful.

Kathleen: Wrap it all up, and air fry it so you kind of get a stuffed garlic bread vibe.

Tara: So, garlic bread with a meatball in the middle.

Kathleen: Yes.

Tara: Yeah, I'm in. (laughs)

Kathleen: Yeah. But wait, there's more. And then drizzle it with garlic, and herb, and Parmesan compound butter.

Tara: Love it. I'm going to shout out to the crew members who were involved in creating this recipe at Store 217 in Rancho Cucamonga. Madison, Hillary, Peyton, Emily, Keegan, Stephanie, and Christie. Kudos to you. Welcome to the world of store recipe contest runners up. (crowd cheers) Awesome.

Kathleen: You guys rocked it.

Matt: Great work.

Tara: Great stuff. All right, let's move on to the next runner up from Store 788 in Crestview Hills, Kentucky.

Matt: Ah-ha, Crestview Hills. It's so named because from up in those hills, there are great views of downtown Cincinnati, and the Ohio River Valley.

Tara: And do you just happen to know that?

Matt: What's the recipe?

Kathleen: Cocoa Sugar Shells. So, picture frozen dessert tacos that employ the use of our Toaster Waffles in the frozen section as the shell. But there's more. They're filled.

Matt: With?

Kathleen: With Fleur de Sel Caramel, Super Premium French Vanilla Ice Cream.

Tara: Delish.

Kathleen: Topped with some pecans, and then a crispy chocolate shell on the outside.

Matt: There's like a taco version of an ice cream sandwich. It's this elusive thing that used to be on ice cream trucks way back in the day. Hard to get now. Maybe this is a little nostalgic reference to that.

Kathleen: That's certainly the vibe that I got. They're so dang fun.

Tara: The shout-out for this recipe goes to Crew Member Leanne in Crestview Hills. (crowd cheers) Really great job, Leanne.

Matt: Nice work, Leanne.

Tara: Okay. For our next runner up, we head back here to Southern California for Orange Chicken Pizza from Store 20 in La Jolla.

[Music transition to upbeat music.]

Matt: Oh, yes. La Jolla's beautiful, just at the northern end of San Diego.

Tara: So, now you're going to act all smart about La Jolla.

Matt: Well, if I were really smart, I might actually live there like Dr. Seuss did for more than 40 years. La Jolla has one of the highest concentrations of Nobel laureates anywhere in the world.

Tara: I did not know that, but this is one smart recipe.

Kathleen: Orange Chicken Pizza.

Tara: It kind of speaks for itself, except it was even...

Matt: But what does it say?

Tara: It says, "Oh my gosh, I am delicious."

Kathleen: Duh.

Tara: (laughs)

Kathleen: Of course put orange chicken on a pizza. Probably our simplest recipe, but everyone was so blown away because yeah, orange chicken on pizza.

Tara: Yeah.

Kathleen: Oh, and drizzle it with Crunchy Chili Onion at the end.

Matt: Mmm.

Tara: Right?

Kathleen: No notes.

Tara: Shout out to crew member Eli (crowd cheers) at Store 20 in La Jolla. And Eli was apparently assisted in the prep of this recipe by Crew Members Rebecca and Erica. So, they did a great job.

Matt: You said no notes, but I'm trying to keep up, and take notes. And so it's hard to remember all these recipes.

Tara: They're on our website.

Matt: Fantastic.

Tara: I feel like we might've said that at the beginning, Matt.

Matt: I wasn't listening.

Tara: Okay. All right. Let's see what you know, Matt, about Kirkland, Washington, home to Trader Joe's Store 132.

[Music transition.]

Matt: Kirkland, Washington on the east side of Lake Washington. Up until the floating bridge was built in 1940, the fastest way to get to Seattle from Kirkland was by ferry boat. Now it's just an 11-mile drive.

Tara: Huh. The crew at our store in Kirkland came up with a great recipe for Parmesan Tapenade Arancini.

Matt: Ah, arancini. Little oranges in Italian. (crickets) And that is the party killer line.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: (crickets) You're welcome.

Tara: (laughs)

Kathleen: No little oranges here, Matt.

Tara: So, what do we have?

Kathleen: Arancini, more popularly known as the little rice appetizer that are often...

Tara: Little rice balls.

Matt: Rice balls. And there's always something inside, like a special treat?

Tara: Sometimes. Sometimes...

Matt: Secret treat.

Tara: But they're breaded, and they're usually fried.

[Music transition.]

Kathleen: This one was really cool because it used our Frozen Brown Rice as the rice part of these arancini.

Matt: That was brown rice?

Kathleen: A huge time saver.

Matt: Yeah.

Kathleen: Flavored with my new favorite product, Parmesan Tapenade.

Tara: Yeah, great product.

Kathleen: Have you tried it?

Tara: Yes, I have. I love it.

Matt: Who knew that we needed this thing as much as we do? It is so great. I like it as is, if truth be told, it's delicious on its own. But I've not yet found a thing that wasn't made better by having this with it.

Kathleen: And these arancini are no exception.

Matt: Okay.

Kathleen: Parmesan cheese, little briny olives, lots of oil. Using that as the binder with an egg, and the brown rice, that's the base of the arancini. These are then breaded in panko.

Tara: So, you just roll them. Yeah.

Kathleen: Yeah. And air fried.

Tara: So good.

Matt: Not a low impact treat. This is a treat kind of thing.

Tara: If you really wanted to, you could deep-fry these, or you could put them in a hot oven, but they'll be faster, and crispier if you put them in the air fryer.

Kathleen: I think the air fryer was a great way to make these.

Tara: I want to give a shout-out to Crew Member Christine at Store 132 for creating the Parmesan Tapenade Arancini. (crowd cheers)

Matt: Thanks, Christine. That's using your noodle.

Tara: Or your rice.

Matt: That's right.

Tara: Really.

Matt: Are we there yet?

Tara: To our overall winner?

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: Where is it from? I'm on the edge of the seat here.

Tara: Okay. Store 701 in Chicago, Illinois.

Matt: Oh, yeah, Chicago. I think I've heard of it.

Tara: I think we know about Chicago. It's my kind of town. The winning recipe in the 2026 Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest is...

[Tympani roll.]

Kathleen: Strawberry Speculoos Rolls.

[Crowd applause and cheers.]

Matt: Whoa, this sounds really good. I know it is good.

Tara: Through the magic of podcasting, we have with us now from Store 701 in Chicago, Crew Members Stacia and Elias.

[Music transition.]

Stacia: Hi. Thanks for having us.

Elias: Hi. Thank you so much.

Tara: Welcome to *Inside Trader Joe's*.

Matt: Hey.

Tara: Stacia, tell us all about it. Where did this come from?

Stacia: I always get pressured to enter the contest, because I'm a part of our tasting team, and demo team, and the crew likes when I'm involved in anything that we're eating in the store. So, I felt a little pressured. (laughs) Everybody was like, "What are you doing?" I wanted to come up with a cookie to make with the cookie butter, but then when I lined up those ingredients, it fell outside of the guidelines. So, I had to think of something else, and I thought of the Cinnamon Rolls. I was short an ingredient, so I had to walk the store to figure out what I was going to pair, and it came together.

Matt: What was the last ingredient? If you had room for one more, what was the last thing that you added to the recipe?

Stacia: The last ingredient was the Freeze Dried Strawberries.

Tara: That's an important ingredient here because it really makes it pop visually in a way that it wouldn't otherwise, right? It adds some flavor, sure. But it really is that really beautiful pink color, and the frosting that just, it really brightens the whole thing up. You came up with this recipe for this contest.

Stacia: Yeah, I did.

Matt: Now I'm wondering, there are people who are bakers, and then there's just everybody else, because baking is its own special form of cooking. So, when you think of recipes, does your mind always go to baking?

Stacia: No. When I first entered the contest the year before this, I think I entered something savory, and it didn't bring us the win.

Elias: (laughs)

Stacia: So, I tried to pivot, and I'm like, "Maybe I should just go sweet." But I am a baker. I bake cakes from scratch and bring them in for the crew. I do think my lane is baking.

Tara: Okay. It sounds like you might have a lot of lanes.

Elias: She's not completely telling a whole story because she's excellent when it comes to making anything if we're being perfectly honest. And she did quite a lot of research. She and I talked about looking at the website, thinking about what types of recipes pop on the website, but also what ingredients pop on the website. She made a very astute observation by the end of this, which was that we believe that the tasting panel might have a little bit of a sweet tooth.

Matt: Mmm.

Tara: I think that is a very astute observation indeed. The tasting panel, and most of us in the office in general, we do like a sweet. So, do our customers, right? We can satisfy your sweet tooth like nobody's business.

Matt: So, what was so telling during the judging? I mean, we had eaten 10 different things, 10 submissions. Your entry was not the last. It was later. We had sort of saved some sweet things for the end, and we were getting kind of full, and people kept eating this Strawberry Speculoos Cinnamon Roll. "Man, I'm so full, but I cannot stop this darn thing." That was the indicator that this could be the winner.

Tara: Yeah. We didn't know who the winner was for about a day afterwards, because all the votes had to be tallied. But I can tell you true to what Matt said, most of the things you have a bite, or two, and then you just have to toss the rest of your piece in the trash because you can't eat all of everything, or else you might go into a food coma. This one, I took a couple bites of it. I wrote down my exclamations on the sheet, and then I put the little plate aside so that I could bring it back to my desk with me and finish it later. (laughs) And I will say that Emily, who's on the marketing team here, and who was the person on the team responsible for producing this recipe during the contest tasting, she reproduced it exactly. It looked just like your photo. It was really great. I'm like, "Oh, so this is doable." Sometimes you see a photo, and you're like, "I think that someone used AI for that photo. There's no way to make it look like that." But yours was a beautiful representation of this recipe, and also easily reproducible. How did the process in the store work for figuring out which recipe was going to be submitted?

[Music transition.]

Stacia: We had a contest in the store. It was four other contestants entered dishes. We as a store tasted all of our dishes, and mine won. But I have to be honest, I didn't want mine to win.

Tara: Really? Why?

Stacia: I thought it was creative, but I didn't think it was creative enough. And I was pushing for another crew member's recipe. She didn't win the votes among crew members, so I'm like, "Okay, I'll enter mine. Fingers crossed."

Elias: Because Stacia had won the tally, the vote, and she made a lot of really good points about the other crew members' entry because it was like a crepe that incorporated our protein powder pancake mix. And Stacia made the good point that a lot of our customers are really interested in upping their protein intake. And so Stacia is really a crew member's crew member, truly day in, and day out.

Matt: Just for some context for folks listening, so you're tuned in from Chicago from Store 701. Tell us about your store.

[Music transition.]

Stacia: Our store is in the South Loop. Very busy time for the area, all the festivals, and concerts. We're in a very high traffic area.

Elias: We're walking distance to Millennium Park where there are a lot of events. We're walking distance to a Soldier Field where the Bears play, and where there are loads, and loads of concerts. We just recently had this Pokémon GO events that was held in Grant Park, and it just brought people from all over the world playing Pokémon GO, the Field Museum...

Matt: Are you finding Pokémon near the store?

Tara: (laughs)

Elias: Yeah.

Matt: Cool.

Elias: So, yeah, it was a lot of fun. So, as to Stacia's point, it's great. We live in a part of the city where we see people from all over the world.

Matt: And then how about each of you? Have you always worked in the Chicago area?

Tara: How about you, Elias? What's your Trader Joe's story?

Elias: In August, it'll be 18 years that I've worked for Trader Joe's. I started as a crew member at the River North location, which is the other downtown location here in Chicago.

[Music transition.]

Elias: And I was there for 13 years as a crew member, and then a merchant. I've been a mate for about five years now in Chicago. And then for one year I worked in Massachusetts at a store there.

Matt: Which store there?

Elias: I worked at the Hadley store.

Matt: Oh, cool.

Stacia: My Trader Joe's story, I worked at the store before I worked for the store. I used to be a security guard here, and everybody that encounters with me at the store like, "You should work here. You should be a crew member here. We need you here." So, I applied, and I interviewed, and I've been here for three years.

Matt: Okay.

Tara: Thank goodness for that because now we get this fantastic recipe, and we get to meet you, which is really cool.

Matt: For sure.

Tara: I love this.

Matt: So, what's something about Chicago that everybody needs to know?

[Music transition.]

Stacia: That it is a great city. The scenery is amazing. You can see the skyline from far south.

Tara: I also lived in Evanston for four years, and you can see the skyline from really far north too.

Stacia: You're going to always be tied into downtown no matter where in the city you are.

Tara: That skyline ties everything together. I love your city.

Stacia: It's very beautiful.

Tara: Especially right now. This is that time of year when it's just blue sky and green grass, and the beautiful lake, and yeah, it's remarkable.

Stacia: Yes.

Tara: Anything else you guys want to share before we let you get back to the real work that we know you need to be doing?

Elias: I'd like to shout out Ryan N. He's the one that took the beautiful photograph. He's a crew member here.

Stacia: And shout out to everyone who entered the contest.

Elias: Yeah, we have an incredible crew here, and just their interest, and excitement, and nudging Stacia a little bit to be a part of the contest, even though she might've been a little reticent.

Tara: I'm glad that you decided to create this recipe. I think our customers are going to love it, and it will live forever on traderjoe's.com.

Stacia: Yes.

Matt: How cool is that?

Stacia: So, great.

Elias: Absolutely.

Stacia: 100%.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: Big congratulations to all of our runners up, and our winner, and big thanks to every store that entered the recipe contest. The judges had a really tough job because all the recipes looked really good.

Matt: Now you know the moral to this story, right?

Tara: I do but go ahead.

Matt: Whenever you need great ideas on fun ways to prepare Trader Joe's products, just go to traderjoe's.com, and look at the recipes. There are so many. Even better, get yourself to your neighborhood Trader Joe's, and talk with a crew member. Nobody knows these products better, and they're always ready to help.

Tara: Hey, thanks for your help, Kathleen. Not only today, but with the contest in general. Seriously, it got done because you made it happen. So, true gratitude.

Kathleen: I'm already looking forward to next year, Tara. Bring the recipes.

Tara: Hey, we'll share more about Trader Joe's products, and the stories behind them on future episodes of *Inside Trader Joe's*. So, please 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.