

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 110: Expect the Unexpected at Trader Joe's

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: I'm so excited, I just can't hide it anymore. I'm just going to say it: I'm a proud cheesehead.

Tara: You're a Green Bay Packers fan?

Matt: Well, sometimes, but I'm really a bigger fan of cheese.

Tara: Oh, okay. I have a hard time picturing you in one of those cheesehead hats.

Matt: Oh, you mean the ones invented by Ralph Bruno? He made the original cheesehead out of yellow seat cushion foam, and he thought, "Hey, people from Illinois always call us people from Wisconsin cheeseheads like it's a bad thing. So why not be a proud cheesehead, wear it proudly?" And the first one was worn to a Milwaukee Brewers game against the Chicago White Sox in 1987, and it just totally caught on from there.

Tara: Wow. Thanks so much for sharing. We've actually been selling Wisconsin cheese in our stores since even before that.

Matt: Oh, smooth segue. Well done. Let's go *Inside Trader Joe's*.

[Theme music begins with two bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's. Driving in a car. Another vehicle passing. Car noises from driving on the road.]

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. And sorry to say, this is going to be another cheesy podcast, but really, nothing unexpected about that.

Tara: But hey, Unexpected Cheddar? I don't think anyone at Trader Joe's expected just how popular that would become.

Matt: And now we have Shredded Unexpected Cheddar, Unexpected Cheddar Snackers, Spreadable Unexpected Cheddar, Unexpected Cheddar Cheese Spread with Hatch Chiles, Buffalo Blue Unexpected Cheddar Spread, Unexpected Cheddar Chicken Sausage, Unexpected Cheddar Egg Bites, Unexpected Cheddar Broccoli Soup.

Tara: Okay, okay, okay. You sound like Bubba Gump talking about shrimp, we get it. And right now, we're on the road in Wisconsin, the birthplace of Unexpected Cheddar.

Matt: Oh, yeah, just take the next exit right there for the Unexpected Cheddar birthplace monument.

Tara: Well, there ought to be one, right? We're actually headed to the town of Plymouth, Wisconsin, known as the Cheese Capital of the World.

Matt: And that's over by Sheboygan, don't you know?

Tara: And that's where we're going to learn the story behind Trader Joe's Unexpected Cheddar.

[Car traveling down the road. Transition to upbeat music.]

Tara: Matt, we are in Wisconsin.

Matt: But more importantly, we're around a table that has been expertly set with cheeses about which we'll talk in a bit.

Tara: Tell us who you are and what you do here that helps bring cheese to Trader Joe's.

Bert: I have a very exciting job. So my name is Bert, and I'm the fourth-generation leader of my family's cheese business here in Wisconsin.

Tara: Fantastic.

Pam: I'm Pam, I'm a master cheesemaker.

Tara: Also here, our trusty cheese expert from our mothership in Boston. Kim, welcome.

Kim: Thank you.

Tara: I understand that Wisconsin is the only state that has a certification for a master cheesemaker, and that's an official title. You're not just saying, "I'm really good at this. I'm a master cheesemaker."

Matt: It's the only state.

Pam: Yes.

Tara: So what does that mean?

Pam: I'm a certified master cheesemaker as are three other people here. We're in Wisconsin. We take dairy very seriously. Our license plate cries it out loud and proud: America's Dairyland. To become a master cheesemaker, first you need to become a licensed cheesemaker, which typically takes two-ish years or more. After being licensed for 10 years, you are eligible to apply to the Master Cheesemaker Program. Some people apply and are accepted, some are not. If you're fortunate and you're accepted, there's another three-year apprenticeship, the cheeses which you want to be certified for, they get evaluated. And then at the very end, there's a very extensive test. It's take home, they give you four weeks, that sounds great, until you actually see it and then you realize why you had four weeks to do it, so.

Matt: Are you being tested, if you will, on basic cheeses, or is this an opportunity for creative flair?

Pam: A little bit of both. There's some rules around it. For example, one of my first certifications is an open hard, and the cheese that I used for that was Unexpected Cheddar. So I couldn't become certified for Unexpected Cheddar because that's not a standard of identity kind of cheese.

Matt: So open hard cheese. What other kinds of cheeses that we might know by name are part of that grouping or that category?

Pam: Cheddar is a hard cheese because it's under 39% moisture, but cheddar is a known variety. When we have contests, so there's a scorecard for what cheddar should be, and Unexpected Cheddar is unexpected. It doesn't meet that scorecard.

Matt: As it doesn't pass that test.

Pam: It doesn't pass that test. But it's...

Matt: Sorry, cheese, that's tough, I mean...

Pam: I mean, and that's a really neat thing. My maternal grandfather was a very good cheesemaker. He made cheddars, as did many people in Wisconsin at that time. Wisconsin had the first grading standards for cheddar and other cheeses because back then it was a wild west. One of his struggles was he was controlling steam with a wood-fired boiler. We have dual loop temperature control.

Matt: It's very, very, very different.

Pam: Very different.

Matt: The tools are much improved.

Pam: Yeah. So back in his day, it took a lot of skill. What happened out of that is cheddar became very uniform. It weeded out creativity too. And we're all about innovation and being creative, so we made a cheddar that's very unexpected, right? It's not the flavors you expect.

Matt: I'm curious if Wisconsin is so focused on standards and maintaining those standards, what does a place like England have to say? Because doesn't cheddar come from England at some point?

[Music transition.]

Pam: Yes. And I would say Wisconsin was very focused on standards back when it was sort of anything goes kind of place. But right now, Wisconsin leads a nation in artisan cheese and creativity. Where I work, we're just super big on creativity too. I've been here since January of 2005, and I'm doing my orientation and I'm going around to the plants, and person take me around is like, "Okay, Pam, we want you to try things. If one thing out of 20 works, we're taking that. That's a win." I still look back and I marvel because I've been given permission to fail 95% of the time, who does that? Well, a company that's very focused on creativity and innovation does that.

Tara: It's a really appropriate thing for a company that has a long-term relationship with Trader Joe's because it's what we do. I mean, we hope we don't fail 95% of the time, but we understand that not every product that comes into our stores is going to live forever and be a huge hit. But getting back to Unexpected Cheddar, it's so popular that it was one of the initial inductees into our Product Hall of Fame. It was winning so many of our customer choice awards that we're like, "Okay, we have to stop. We have to let other cheeses have a chance."

Pam: Yeah.

Tara: Because as long as Unexpected Cheddar was in the running, it won every single year, which was great. And so now we have it memorialized on our website in the Hall of Fame. It has its own plaque. It's a little cheesy in one way, but it's a real indication of how much love there is for this product that is not typical. And it's that spirit of creativity of coming up with something slightly new in a category that's very established really makes a difference. So kudos to everybody involved in Unexpected Cheddar because it's fantastic.

[Music transition.]

Bert: The parallel I always like to draw is that you think of German brewing, some of the best in the world. You can have the same beer at a different brewer and taste very similar, and it's amazing, but you didn't see any craft brewing coming out of there, any innovation. And when you think of cheese, there's over 2,000 cheese varieties in the world. And so it's a real challenge to say, "Okay, let's take something and do it differently and better and more unique." Essentially, that's how Unexpected Cheddar was born.

Matt: It makes me think of so many other creative efforts, this endeavor to do something new that is rooted in tradition or understanding the basics. And so it sounds like what every piano practicing kid hates to hear, but you have to know the basics, the rules before you can break them, adjust them, or riff on them, so I get it. Why Wisconsin? Bert, you said you're the fourth generation. A lot is riding on you, so let's keep it going.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: No pressure. Why did your family come to Wisconsin in the first place?

[Music transition.]

Bert: Yeah, so it was my great-grandfather in 1939. He was 52, 53 years old when he founded the business. He looked all over...

Matt: That gives hope to some of us.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: You don't have to have it figured out. Okay, that's good.

Bert: Average life expectancy of a male I think was 58 at the time, so really kind of a crazy gamble. He looked all over the Midwest. He looked in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and eventually settled here with a cheese plant, a bankrupt brewery. When you think at the time, there were a lot of breweries that didn't have a lot of money to get started, and that's actually the building we're sitting in right now.

Tara: Oh, really?

Bert: Very poor immigrant, took any job, but he ended up working for Italian American cheese company starting in the late '20s and met his cheese making partner there who founded the business with him. And then my grandpa came along and actually had a dairy science degree and trained alongside the original cheesemaker as a business transition.

Kim: I think it's such an unexpected fun fact about Unexpected Cheddar. Sorry, how to say it. That the cheese caves where Unexpected Cheddar is actually aged as an old brewery.

Tara: Yeah. We've visited cheese caves in England that are not technically caves, but they have that same feel and it's the climate control. It's going to be cool down here when we need it to be cool down here. You start to understand how they were able to make cheese when they didn't have the temperature control things that we have now.

Matt: What makes a room or a building a cave? I mean, we're not literally talking about caves, are we?

Bert: Not literally, but because of the time period that they did it in, it was essentially dug like a cave.

[Music transition.]

Tara: Let's go back to when you started working with Trader Joe's in 2011.

Bert: It was really exciting because Trader Joe's was looking for innovative things. We were trying a bunch of different new things, and really needed a partner that got excited about how good the cheese was rather than what do you call it? How do you position it? All those things that often get in the way of launching a great product. It's been a really fun ride because it started with the brick.

Tara: The original version.

Matt: It's a customer favorite.

Bert: But then it transitioned into people asking for, "Hey, it's a great cooking cheese. How can I use it more frequently?" And so we launched a shredded version of it and then transitioned to a cheese spread. "So how can I entertain? How can I get more occasions to use it?" And maybe the most exciting one now is our Snackers, the Unexpected Cheddar Snackers. It's 80 calories, five grams of protein, and you can eat it in your car, you can put it in your kids' lunch, you can put it on a cheese tray if you're going out on a picnic. And that's what a lot of people are looking for today.

Tara: And right before we sat down to chat today, somebody mentioned this trend of using the Unexpected Cheddar Spread as a mac and cheese starter, which I just think is a brilliant idea and it's on my list of things to do once I get home, so yeah.

Matt: What's the shape you're going to use? What's the cut?

Tara: My favorite pasta that we have, and I don't know if we have it at this moment, is the fusilli, the Corti Bucati, the little tight fusilli. My mom always made mac and cheese with

elbow macaroni, and while it was good, and sorry mom, I like a pasta that has more grooves for cheese to stick into. We're getting off into the weeds and I apologize.

Matt: Maybe we can revisit this idea of how to get started, how to position something in the marketplace. How much does any of that matter if the thing is great? Was it you on a call, someone on the team who says, "Trader Joe's, we have this great thing. We just need you to taste it." How does that happen?

Bert: I think it really started on the innovation end and trying a lot of different things and then realizing you have something special and then looking at, "Hey, who's a company that does it well, that has good communication with their customers?" Trader Joe's was just a natural fit for that.

[Music transition.]

Matt: How many things didn't make the cut to get to this product to get to Unexpected Cheddar? Is it really one in 20 that was working? Were there things that didn't become Unexpected Cheddar that it becomes something else that's really good?

Pam: Bert doesn't want to hear this, but in the beginning it was not one out of 20, it was much smaller.

Matt: Okay.

Pam: But we'd try something and it didn't do what we wanted. Okay. But then someone would come up with a new challenge and it's like, "Oh, I have a pretty good idea how to do that."

Bert: And there's also a lot of different vats that you're making to prove that you can do it consistently. So if it's one out of 20 attempts, is that times 10 vats, 100 vats?

Matt: Sure, sure.

Bert: It depends how you look at the iteration of the process.

Matt: Yeah, and the name notwithstanding, people absolutely want this to be consistent. They don't want to be surprised with an unexpected result. Cheese ingredients, they kind of all look the same. If you read cheese labels, there's not like, "Oh wow, this is the secret ingredient," so how do you leverage these very basic ingredients into making such different resulting cheeses?

Pam: It's about being creative, and if we do what everybody else has always done, we're going to get what everybody else already has. So taking things apart and thinking about them, and putting them back together, if that makes sense.

Matt: It does. And are there dairies and sources of milk that you use for particular projects, or do you start with the same milk pool for everything? How does that happen?

Pam: We're really fortunate in that we make cheese in Wisconsin where there's tons of dairy pride. We work with specific farm families. We're very family orientated, very generational. They care about making good quality milk. They care about taking care of the land where they grow the feed to feed the animals. They're not going to make a short-term decision that would

jeopardize their future generations being able to make milk as well. So we don't segregate milk. We work on getting every drop of milk to be the very best. We have a great partnership with dedicated farm families who have this same goal in mind.

Bert: All of our milk for Unexpected Cheddar comes from Wisconsin. Most of it typically within 30 miles of where we're sitting today.

Tara: How often is it delivered here?

Bert: All day and night.

Tara: Really? Like every day?

Bert: Every day.

Tara: It comes in every day.

Bert: Three hundred and sixty-five days a year, because the cows are getting milked every day. You want to use milk as fresh as possible. It's really important that you start with the highest quality milk. My grandpa used to say, "You can give me good milk, and I can make bad cheese, but you can't give me bad milk and I make good cheese." So it really starts with that foundation of what our family farms are doing every day.

Pam: Dairy cultures, the starters we use, as a cheesemaker, I still love my children more, but they're right up there.

Tara: (laughs)

Pam: They're like your kids. And Unexpected Cheddar is a very interesting cheese to make. It's not an easy cheese to make. We do some things that most cheddar makers will not do, and that's part of magic. And then the cultures that we've used is a big part of how the milk speaks through Unexpected Cheddar.

Bert: Aging is also very important as well.

Kim: When it comes to cultures, is it similar to, say, a starter for bread, for sourdough, or for vinegar, a mother for wine? You just always keep it, and it continues to fester or grow?

Bert: Fester is...

Tara: Not fester. Fester sounds bad. (laughs)

Kim: Bad word, sorry.

Matt: Develop.

Kim: Develop, grow. Sorry, cut that.

[Music transition.]

Matt: I mean, children might fester.

Bert: (laughs)

Tara: (laughs) Yes.

Matt: Not the culture.

Kim: Yeah.

Pam: We start in the same place with our cultures, and we grow them. And different cheeses will do things a little bit differently. There's a lot of craft there.

Tara: Is it accurate to say that Unexpected Cheddar would taste different if you use different cultures from the beginning?

Pam: Absolutely.

Tara: So that's one of the main factors.

Pam: And if we think about Toscano, which is very related to Unexpected Cheddar, we use very similar cultures.

Kim: But it comes out a totally different cheese.

Tara: I'm really interested in that to understand how Toscano is related to Unexpected Cheddar, because from an eating experience, it's a very different cheese.

Matt: But for those of you keeping score at home, we've just revealed that this cheese making place, this amazing company makes both Unexpected Cheddar and the Toscano cheeses, so that's cool. It wasn't enough to have customers' total favorite cheese, like their second and third favorite cheeses.

Tara: My favorite cheese is one of the Toscano cheeses.

Matt: Which one is that?

Tara: It's the one that's not available right now. Fall cheese, the cinnamon. It has been my favorite cheese in our stores since the minute it walked in.

Matt: I think that cheese is one of the more unexpected offerings. It makes such flavor sense, and it is the greatest cheese with green apples. How the heck did that thing happen? Did someone drop it in a giant pile of cinnamon?

Bert: (laughs)

Matt: And it was like, "Oh, actually that's a great idea." I mean, how did that happen?

Pam: We try a lot, a lot of things. And the experimentation is bigger than the people sitting at this table. We've got a whole team of people.

Matt: Now, that was really heavy, Pam. I just need to process that for a second.

Pam: Yeah.

Matt: It's bigger than the people doing the work?

Pam: It's bigger than the people represented at this table.

Matt: Okay.

Pam: We have a culture of creativity and innovation. And as we've grown, that's created more opportunities to hire more team members who can be creative and innovative and it just multiplies it.

Matt: So it sounds like there's no limitations on good ideas that can come from anyone.

Pam: Yes.

Bert: I think we get a lot of them from your team at Trader Joe's pushing us to do new things that we're not thinking about. And sometimes we scratch our head and say it won't work, and it does. And you don't always know.

Kim: The one piece that I think is very interesting between both the Unexpected Cheddar and the Toscano is that they're natural cheeses, so you can't blend them with seasonings.

Matt: Jargon alert.

[Retail jargon alert sounder.]

Matt: Kim, I need help. It's jargon alert time. What is a natural cheese? Aren't they all?

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Kim: Well, there's the blended cheeses and natural cheeses. And actually, you know what? Pam, we have our master cheesemaker.

Matt: Well, you're phoning a friend. I was looking at you. I was like, "I think we have an expert right here."

Kim: I'm going to call her. We're going to tag in. I'm just the category manager and cheese at Trader Joe's. Let's turn to the expert.

Matt: You're not just...

Tara: You're not just that.

Matt: All right, Pam, take it away. Help us out.

Pam: Our ingredient statement is milk, salt, cultures, and enzymes. So we're starting with milk and we're making cheese. We're not starting with cheese and melting it and adding stuff to it like a processed cheese, we're starting with milk.

Matt: Is this an oversimplification? And if so, does it still make sense? Natural cheese is created to be cheese. Maybe processed cheese, you start with cheese and you process it to make it into something else?

Tara: I think that a more processed cheese doesn't have to be something yucky. We have English Coastal Cheddar, and we have Caramelized Onion Cheddar. That would be a processed cheese because they mix the caramelized onion mixture inside the cheese curds and then mold it and put it into shape.

Matt: Sure. These days we're going to have to do a whole separate show on this idea of the word process or processed and what it can or cannot mean.

Kim: Yeah. So there's really three ways to really change the flavor of the cheese. We can rub it, which we do with the Black Pepper Toscano. We can soak it like we do with the Syrah-Soaked Toscano as an example. The other way is we're exploring and working on right now with Unexpected Cheddar is smoking it in different type of smoking woods to try to bring out different flavors. Because both the Unexpected Cheddar and the Toscano are such flavor bombs of cheese, and I think you both have seen this in our tasting panels, we've tried different rubs and soaks and different alcohols, but you don't always get that flavor because it's such a flavor bomb. You really want to call it if we're saying it's a cinnamon-rubbed cheese, you want to get the cinnamon. So that is why that works so well with it. A cinnamon is such a potent and flavorful seasoning or spice.

Tara: Thinking about the different variations of Unexpected Cheddar that we currently offer, we have the classic original Unexpected Cheddar. We have the Spread, we have the Shreds, and we have the Snackers. Where's that innovation coming from? Is that coming from Trader Joe's to you? Is that coming from you to Trader Joe's?

Bert: Usually, it starts sitting around a table just like this. In fact, I think just three years ago, two years ago.

Kim: It was.

Bert: We have ideas. Kim brings ideas. We go back and talk with the team and say, which ones do you think will work technically speaking? And then we try it out.

[Music transition.]

Kim: The Shreds came to be because Unexpected Cheddar just being the type of cheese it is and it's with the Parmesan influence to it is very crumbly. So it's very hard to grate and shred on your own. We went with a thicker cut on it because if we went too fine, it would just be all breakage, so we wanted to offer our customers a shred that would be intact for all their applicable usages, whether they want to put it in a salad, on a pasta or pizza, or in a macaroni and cheese. That's really where that came to be. And similar with the Snacker, that one took a lot more work. I think one thing that's really interesting about the Snacker is the texture almost changes on the Snacker. Even though it's the same exact cheese and it's aged for the same amount of time, it really comes across creamier.

Matt: Definitely.

Kim: I'd love to defer to the experts on why that is.

Pam: It certainly is creamier, and it's part of the process we use. You get the cheese into that Snacker size, that Snacker bite.

Tara: But it ages for the same amount of time as the classic Unexpected Cheddar.

Pam: Yes.

Matt: I'm fascinated by that because I would've thought it was younger.

Kim: And how long has it aged for?

Pam: About a year.

Bert: And yeah, to get it into the, I think 0.75 ounces, that process intensifies certain flavors more so than you get with the brick.

Tara: Point in that...

Matt: So you have Fort Knox of cheese because if it's got to sit and age for a year...

Bert: Yes. (laughs)

Matt: ...biding its time to become the thing that we love because you can't just ship it the moment you make it.

Bert: Absolutely.

Matt: If it's aging a year, that's incredible.

Bert: When you think about innovation cycles going fast, the fastest you could go is a year if you got it right the first time, and then you got to get it right multiple times after that to confirm that it's repeatable.

Kim: Which makes innovation that much more exciting, but challenging, because we're working so far out.

Tara: I want to go back to the Snackers. At what point in the aging do they go into the little Snacker pouches?

Pam: Same time as when we brick.

Tara: So after the aging is...

Pam: Because we want to have shelf life on the Snackers.

Tara: Right.

[Music transition.]

Tara: I'd love to switch over to just a little bit of discussion about the Toscano.

Kim: Which one came first?

Tara: That's my question. Which came first?

Matt: I thought Toscano came first.

Bert: From a go-to-market, I'm pretty sure it was Unexpected Cheddar.

Tara: Okay.

Bert: They are distinctly different cheeses.

Tara: Yeah. If you had to classify Toscano as a style, a type of cheese, where does it fall?

Pam: It's American original.

Bert: An American original. (laughs) Close to the Parmesan family, but different enough. I would say inspired by a lot of Italian Swiss kind of alpine cheeses.

Kim: In Italy, I think they would call it like an Italian table cheese. Italian inspired in this case, but an easy cheese to serve on a table and cut, serve with your Italian meals, put it on with bread, crack toast, what have you.

Pam: And Toscano is so versatile, right? It's got a lot of flavors going on there. Plays well with others. That's why we've had such success with hand finishes. There's many flavors that will compliment it.

Tara: Talk about the hand finishing. What does that hand finishing process look like?

Pam: We have a dedicated team. They'll take it on a wheel, and they will hand finish it. They will rub the spice onto the surface of the wheel. For Syrah, we have tanks of wine that we...

Bert: It's a beautiful bath.

Pam: Yes.

Tara: How long does it soak for?

Pam: It varies a little bit because like cheese wine is a biological process, we go based on color.

Tara: Okay.

Pam: It will vary a little bit from batch to batch.

Tara: And what about the rubbed version? So like the black pepper or the cinnamon, is the cheese the wheel of cheese aging prior to it being finished with the seasonings?

Pam: Yes. Our goal is to get the cheese right first.

Tara: Okay.

Pam: Then hand finish it.

Kim: How long has the Toscano cheese aged for?

Pam: About a year.

Kim: About a year as well. Okay.

Tara: It's aged for about the same amount of time as the Unexpected Cheddar, but the flavor profile and the texture is so different. Where the Unexpected Cheddar is on the crumbly side, the Toscano is really creamy. Completely different eating experience. Like the Unexpected Cheddar, the Toscano has evolved into a number of different iterations in Trader Joe's. Kim, where has it gone outside of the wedges that you see in the cheese case?

[Music transition.]

Kim: Our first expansion on it was with the pizza shreds, the pizza flavored or seasoned shreds that are in our cheese case on an everyday basis. You can use it on a pizza. You can use it just in the pizza flavoring and salads. From there, we expanded onto a Toscano Spread that is only available during our holiday season typically. That's personally one of my favorite cheeses, and it's very interesting in texture versus our Unexpected Cheddar Spread because Unexpected Cheddar Spread, you have some of the crunch that you get in the regular blocks of the cheese, but the Toscano is actually shredded Toscano blended with some Syrah wine and some other garlic and some additional herbs. Those are really the two areas that we've expanded. Beyond that, we have a salad in our produce case that contains our Black Pepper Toscano Cheese, and from what I understand, that does very well.

Tara: It's a great salad.

Kim: It's a great salad, yeah.

Tara: Are there new Toscano iterations?

Kim: Yes, we have a chili onion crunch.

Tara: So it's Crunchy Chili Onion?

Kim: Yes, Crunchy Chili Onion. So similar to the black pepper, it's rubbed on.

Tara: I'm a big fan of our Crunchy Chili Onion in the jar. I also really like the seasoning that we have in our spice section, just the sprinkle, which is dry. How is that rubbed? Is it dry or is it with the oils?

Pam: With a little bit of oil.

Tara: Okay.

Pam: Just for the stickage.

Tara: The stickage.

Kim: So it's hand-rubbed?

Tara: That's a technical term, right? The stickage?

Pam: It's hand-rubbed. The stickage. Yes.

Tara: Okay, good. I like it. Okay.

Pam: Just the right amount of stickage too, I mean.

Tara: (laughs) Right. And that one's also hand-rubbed.

Pam: Yes.

Tara: Okay.

Pam: Everything we do is by hand.

Tara: That's a lot.

Bert: At one point we counted how many times a wheel of Toscano is touched, and I think it was well over 20 times before it gets to the end, so really a craft.

Tara: It's a human-intensive process.

Bert: Yes, it is.

Tara: Yeah, which is pretty cool.

Kim: So we're always working together and partnering on different ideas behind innovation. We're really excited that we have a new Unexpected Cheddar Spread that just passed our tasting panel that we'll see in our stores for spring-summer of 2027. It's a (beep) Unexpected Cheddar Spread that is absolutely delicious.

Tara: And it might be that we don't reveal what that is in this podcast.

Matt: We have to beep, beep you out.

Kim: Okay.

Tara: Because we don't want to give a year's advanced warning that we're going to have (beep) coming in because that's an invitation to copycat. I want to tell everybody about it because it was delicious.

Bert: It's why my kids can't take stuff to school around here.

Tara: Right? Because then everyone would know.

Bert: They asked me the other day, they're like, "Dad, is this lunch?" Which meant, "Can I put it in my lunch?" (laughs)

Pam: You don't want to ruin the surprise either.

Kim: Not just with that, but we have things we're working on that haven't gone to panel. But our ideas start with Kim's big ideas (laughs), that they look at me with these crazy eyes. And then five versions later, we have the perfect item. But it gives us a lot of creative liberties to be able just to have fun with the cheese because it starts like most of our Unexpected Cheddar Spreads are at least 90% cheese, Unexpected Cheddar Cheese.

Tara: We're 13 plus years into Unexpected Cheddar, and we're all still innovating around it. The same thing with the Toscano. We're still innovating on that. Is the Crunchy Chili Onion a trend? It doesn't seem like it's going away. It's something that has a lot of stickage. I like stickage.

Kim: Stickage. I like that too.

Bert: We're also excited to bring you some new cheese types in the coming years that redefine what specialty cheese is.

Tara: Thank you all so much. I think that our listeners will be just as excited to hear all about their favorite cheeses as we are.

Matt: Indeed.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: Okay, now we can say we've visited the Cheese Capital of the World.

Matt: All right. I don't want to be cheesy, but...

Tara: Well, you know you do. Go ahead.

Matt: People in Wisconsin are some of the nicest you'll meet anywhere.

Tara: Hey, we're planning more adventures to bring you the stories behind your favorite Trader Joe's products, *and* the nice people who make those products possible. 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.