

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 112: Time for Tacos at Trader Joe's

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Matt, you and I are based here at the Trader Joe's mothership in Monrovia, California. And from here, we love going around the US and around the world to tell the stories behind some of our favorite Trader Joe's products.

Matt: In effect, what we're doing is retracing the steps of our product development team. And if you think about it, their treasure hunt comes first and then our customers, and then we all get to discover new flavors at our neighborhood Trader Joe's.

Tara: And as we travel, there's something I've noticed about the perceptions of Southern California.

Matt: Oh, that we surf to work each day?

Tara: No.

Matt: That we know Marisa Tomei personally?

Tara: Not that either.

Matt: Well, what?

Tara: Southern California is really well known for having tasty street tacos.

Matt: And that is a fact.

Tara: Lately, Crew Member Alex and his team have brought some delicious new taco meats to Trader Joe's, the kinds of flavors we're spoiled to have every day here in Southern California.

Matt: Oh, please tell me he's outside firing up the grill right now.

Tara: He is.

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

[Theme music begins 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.

Alex: And I'm Alex.

[Outside, birds chirping.]

Tara: All right, Alex, let's talk about some ideas for the grill that we can share with our customers.

Matt: I'm in, we've got work to do.

Tara: You got a very hot grill here, Alex.

Alex: It is toasty. I am doing the two zone method. I have half the grill on very high heat and the other half on a lower medium setting. It gives me the ability to move the meats around as needed. If one starts flaming up on the hot side, I can move it to the cool side. We're going to grill some chicken thighs today, which is a thicker cut. It takes a little bit longer to cook. So I like to do that on medium. That way the exterior doesn't burn while we're waiting for the interior to cook.

Matt: Now, I don't think these are just any old chicken thigh situation.

Alex: No, these are our new Pollo Asado Chicken Thighs.

[Theme music ends. Transition to upbeat music.]

Alex: This is designed to be a taco filling, a topping for burrito bowls, salads, serve it with rice, serve it on its own, however you like it.

Tara: We had Pollo Asado for a long time, and it was made with chicken breast pieces, which to be honest, it tasted good. It had good flavor, but it would get pretty dry when you cooked it.

Alex: Yeah, it would. And we wanted to take this as an opportunity to improve upon something which we knew could use a little work. When it comes to tacos, you want a juicy, flavorful filling for them, not something that could potentially dry out like chicken breast. And traditionally, chicken thighs are used. And the other benefit of it is that chicken thighs are less expensive than chicken breasts.

Tara: True.

Alex: So our new retail is \$1.50 less than what it used to be.

Tara: Wow.

Alex: Per pound.

Tara: For a more delicious product.

Alex: I think so.

Tara: Let's get it on the grill.

Alex: Let's do it.

[Loud sizzling on the barbeque.]

Tara: How big are these packages, Alex, when you buy this product in the store?

Alex: It really depends on the size of the chicken thighs at the time. It changes throughout the year, but the package that I opened today is about a pound and a half and I have two fairly large chicken thighs in that package. I'm talking good size.

Tara: Yeah, no.

Matt: Wow. Wait, those are giants.

Tara: That's two giant pieces of chicken. That's just two chicken thighs, like full thighs there.

Alex: That's two full thighs and it's only \$10.42 for that package.

Tara: Wow.

Matt: I want to make all kinds of chicken thigh jokes, but I won't.

Tara: While these are cooking, you said you put them on the medium side on sort of the lower heat side so that they wouldn't cook too quickly on the outside. Yeah?

Alex: Yep.

Tara: So you just brought out a tray of marinated meat.

Alex: Yeah, this is our new Carne Asada. We took the opportunity to also improve both the flavor profile and the cut of the meat. So in this package as well, you're getting two large pieces of thinly sliced sirloin flap meat, which is also known as Ranchera meat or a Ranchera cut.

Tara: And our new label says Carne Asada Ranchera actually.

Alex: It does.

Tara: For customers who've purchased this product in the past when it was a different cut of meat, I think you'll notice right away it's a giant improvement on the quality of the meat.

Alex: It's absolutely a lot easier to handle on the grill. I can tell you that without a bunch of little pieces falling through, you got two pieces to work with. And depending on the package, you might get one big one or three small or medium-sized ones, but they're not going to be so small that they fall through the grate.

Tara: The packages are about a pound, a pound and a half somewhere in there.

Alex: Yep, exactly.

Tara: And the seasoning is a classic Carne Asada seasoning.

Alex: Yeah. Actually with both the chicken and the beef, our approach to the flavor profile on these new revamped items was to stay true to what we know here in Southern California as the essential taco meats. We have access here in Southern California to some amazing taco stands and carnicerias. When we developed this product, we searched high and low to try to figure out what is it that makes these products so good. We dug deep on this and

we came to find out that most of these recipes use something along the lines of a seasoned salt for a savory aspect and then a juice drink made from concentrate to give it some acidity and sweetness. So we kind of reverse engineered that. These products both use savory seasoning elements along with fruit juice concentrates like lime juice, orange juice, grapefruit juice to bring that zing and balance to it.

Matt: So we're talking about some variations on classic Mexican cuisine. You can't smell it through...

Tara: Smells so good. (laughs)

Matt: ... your speakers, but man, it smells great.

Alex: This is our twist on it, right? It's really hard to replicate the experience of getting a freshly made taco from a taco cart on the corner of the street next to a gas station, right? But I would say this is closest to something you'd find just south of the border here in California. So maybe Tijuana style.

Matt: Okay.

Tara: I'm all in on this. That Pollo Asado is only about halfway cooked and I'm just ready to dig in. How are we preparing the Carne Asada?

Alex: Carne Asada is going to go on the hot side of the grill. This is one of those items you want to cook hot and fast. You're looking to get some sear and some color on it. You don't want to overcook it and dry it out because it is a thin cut. We want to try to get as much of that browning and caramelization as possible.

Matt: It also looks relatively lean. And so is that another tip to maybe not overcook it?

Alex: You never want to overcook it in my opinion.

Tara: Yeah, I'm with you.

Matt: How much time on each side?

Alex: For the chicken, we're looking about six minutes on that medium heat per side. And then, of course, we'll add on a little extra as we need to make sure it's cooked through and reaches internal temperature. The beef is going to be quicker, probably three to four minutes per side.

Matt: Wow. Most of your time is going to be spent prepping, getting the grill hot, getting all of your accompanying things ready. And the cook time is just a few minutes really.

Alex: That's it. Yeah. Well, I think we're ready to put the beef on now and probably give our chicken a flip after we do that.

[Meat sizzling on the grill. Music transition to upbeat Mexican music.]

Tara: What you just put on the grill is one package?

Alex: That's one package.

Tara: Those two like very...

[Sizzling.]

Matt: Very large pieces.

Tara: Okay. A quick turn there on the chicken.

Alex: We're just going to give it its few minutes before we flip the beef.

[Loud bird chirping.]

Tara: That's all one bird. One bird up there on top of the light.

Alex: Very lonely and...

Tara: Yeah. Like where are all my friends?

Matt: Actually, I'll translate. He's saying that microphone is going to smell like Carne Asada.

Tara: (laughs) Let's see. (sniffs) Nope. It's impervious to aroma apparently.

Matt: Hmm.

Alex: These are everyday items great for making dinners throughout the year, tacos. And in fact, we felt like we were missing one very important meat when it came to our taco meat selection and that's pork. So we actually also are launching a new Pork Al Pastor, which is a little bit different. This product's diced. You cook it in a pan, but it's also equally convenient and perfect for the taco parties or dinner throughout the year.

Tara: Al pastor is really prevalent in Southern California where we are based. So you talked about those taco stands in the parking lot of a gas station or on the corner. Those are everywhere here. We're spoiled for really great Mexican food and really great street food. Pastor is at all of those little stands, but I think people in some parts of the country have no idea what pork al pastor is.

Alex: And it's something that I noticed in my travels throughout the US that it is hard to find al pastor in other places than maybe Southern California. And it's such a delicious cut of meat with a lot of historical background that we felt we could bring something to market that would closely replicate what you'd find here in Southern California that'd be very easy to do at home.

Matt: Classically, pork al pastor is cooked on a vertical rotisserie. It's called a trompo, which actually means spinning top. And that's because of what it looks like, kinda like Gyros or döner kebabs, Greek cuisine or Turkish cuisine. This is cooked stacked where the top of the rotisserie is larger than the bottom. It helps for cooking. It helps with the drippings going all the way through the meat. And I think tacos al pastor, it's really like how food travels and how people bring their culture through the food that they travel with. And so it's a great story that there was a wave of immigrants from Lebanon going to Mexico late 19th, early 20th century and bringing their foods with them and slowly, and maybe around Mexico City in the early 20th

century, this dish that was a type of kebab, more like döner kebab or shawarma, evolving into what we now think of as al pastor, starting to use more local Mexican ingredients. It becomes this thing. And I just think that that's so fun because there's this fluidity across all boundaries, cultures, and that food through line is what connects us.

Tara: That's fantastic. And I can't wait to try that one too. How are we doing on the grill?

Alex: I think we're about ready to pull this beef off.

Tara: All right.

Alex: And we'll take a look at the chicken. Yep, that looks good to me. So I'm going to pull it off. I'm going to let it rest.

Tara: Yep.

[Music transition.]

Matt: We hear this idea of letting meat rest. What's happening when a piece of meat's resting?

Alex: When you cook meat, it tends to tense up. The fibers kind of shrink up. And when you pull it off of the grill and you cut it immediately, all of the juices within it just typically pour out on your cutting board. When you let it rest, it gives the meat time to reabsorb and redistribute the moisture that's in it. So when you cut it, it retains the moisture in each bite instead of spilling out onto your cutting board.

Tara: So this is a good tip. Anytime you're cooking meat on the grill or anytime you're cooking meat just in general, give it a couple of minutes at least to rest after you pull it off the heat.

Alex: At least a few minutes. Yeah. It's even more prevalent and even more necessary with larger, thicker cuts of meat.

Matt: So like a ground beef hamburger doesn't need to rest necessarily?

Alex: Not necessarily, no.

Tara: But a roast or a steak or Carne Asada, you want to give it a few minutes to reabsorb all those juices. You don't want to lose them.

Alex: Yeah, if you want to have juicy meat, I recommend resting it.

[Music transition.]

Alex: So we're just finishing off the chicken. I now moved it over to the hot side of the grill just to give it some browning and a little bit of char for all the right reasons.

Tara: What are those reasons?

Alex: Maillard reaction.

Tara: Okay. We're getting into science now.

Alex: And because it looks pretty.

Tara: Tell us the Maillard reaction.

Alex: I'm not a scientist, but I can tell you my understanding of it is the chemical reaction that happens at a certain temperature that changes the structure of the meat and the flavor of it, and it releases more savory flavors from the meat when you get that reaction. That's why grilled chicken tastes better than boiled chicken.

Tara: Yep. 100% true, at least to me. So I have an idea. While we let these rest, and we could even bring them inside, why don't we cook up the pastor in a skillet because you said that gets cooked in a skillet, not on the grill. Yeah?

Alex: Yeah, let's do that. I think it's great idea.

Tara: All right. Let's do that and bring these inside.

Alex: I'm going to turn the grill off.

Tara: To save them from the birds.

[Music transition. Continuing from inside.]

Tara: So we moved inside.

Alex: Yep. I'm going to grab a 10 or 12 inch skillet.

Tara: Okay.

Alex: There we go.

Tara: Do you need to oil it? Do you need to do anything to it?

Alex: You want to have just a little touch of oil. There's a lot of fat in this product, so it's going to produce its own oil, but you want to get it started with the layer so it's not going to stick. So a teaspoon is probably all that you need.

Tara: Okay.

Alex: Really important with this product though, you want to start with a very hot pan. So we're going to preheat it over high heat. We're going to cook it the entire time over high heat, and we're just going to keep stirring it until it renders down, starts to brown. Think like bacon. It tastes a lot better when it has a little bit of crunch to it. That's what we're looking for here.

Matt: Kind of replicating that vertical rotisserie that cooked on a spit quality.

Alex: Yeah, where it's got that flame roast 180 degrees while it spins. It's exactly what we're trying to do here.

[Whooshing of a big flame.]

Tara: There we go. That is a big flame under that pan.

Alex: Perfect.

Tara: Okay. The torturous part right now is just standing here looking at the rest of this meat that's cooked but resting.

[Loud sizzling of meat hitting the pan.]

Tara: All right, I'm going to be honest, it looks like a big solid clump of meat, but it's not.

Alex: It's not. It's a bunch of little pieces, about a quarter inch. It kind of acts like it's ground meat or something like that. You do need to kind of break it up in the beginning, but you'll see. It'll be like the perfect taco cut when it's done.

Tara: Yeah. And that package, same, is it like a pound, pound and a half kind of varies.

Alex: This package is a little bit closer to two pounds, but at \$6.49 per pound, it's a \$12.40 package.

Tara: Yeah.

Alex: And we'll get about eight tacos from this.

Tara: Yeah, that's a lot of meat in that pan. And again, they're not what's referred to as fixed weight, right? They're going for an average of somewhere between a pound and a half, two pounds, somewhere in there.

Alex: Yeah. We target a pound and a half, but it can be anywhere from one pound to two pounds.

Tara: And you'll see it clearly on the front of the package, and the price will be right there.

Alex: Yep. And that's actually one of my favorite changes for these products is the price is now on the front of the package.

Tara: Right. It used to be on the back, yeah.

Alex: Yeah. So when you're looking for the right size, you don't have to dig through and flip them all over. You can just look at the front and find it.

Tara: It's cool. That sizzle is even louder than the grill sizzle.

Alex: So, I'm just breaking it all up right now.

[Sizzling louder.]

Tara: So you recommend really cooking this, use the highest heat your stove will get you.

Alex: Yeah, and just...

Tara: And you got to watch it. You got to stay with it.

Alex: It's going to release a lot of moisture. We really want that moisture to kind of evaporate and all that we want left is the meat, the rendered fat, whatever marinade is in there just to give it a flavorful, rich bite.

Matt: So tell us about the marinade, the seasonings in it, because aromatically it smells like chili peppers. It smells delicious. What goes into a classic al pastor recipe? Are we doing anything different with our version?

Alex: There are a lot of versions of al pastor, and there's a lot of family recipes. But there's some things that are consistent across al pastor, and that is like you mentioned, dried chilies. There is a sweet aspect. In our case, there's a little bit of brown sugar. There's also some pineapple juice concentrate, garlic, pepper, some other savory notes in there that help the pork caramelize and have a sweet, smoky, chili flavor to it. And my favorite part about a taco in general is, it's pick your own when it comes to toppings, but we're giving you a great baseline that has savory-sweet notes, it's balanced, but throw cilantro, throw onions. If you want spice, spicy salsa, if you want mild, maybe our Guacasalsa, you can really pick your own journey with these things.

Matt: I love the classic taco cart accompaniment of some radishes.

Alex: Yeah.

Matt: I love some crunchy radishes.

Alex: Maybe pickled onions?

Matt: Yeah.

[Music transition.]

Tara: I think one of the great things about not just the pastor but the Pollo Asado and the Carne Asada, they're so versatile, right? So of course you can make tacos, you can make burritos, you can make a quesadilla and load it up with protein. You can also make a salad. Slice up the carne asada into long strips instead of little pieces to put in a taco. There's a lot of things you can do with these from a meal prepping perspective that I think is super helpful and they're so quick and easy.

Matt: Yeah. We should try al pastor lettuce cups.

Alex: Hey, that would work.

Tara: So, that's looking really good. It's only been a few minutes in that pan, and I can already see there's brown bits on a bunch of it.

Alex: We're just going to let it cook down now. Again, still high heat. The moisture in a few minutes will fully evaporate, and it'll start finishing up a browning process and then we'll call it.

Tara: All right.

Alex: I think maybe...

Tara: Do you want to cut these?

Alex: Yeah. Why don't we cut some of the other meats right now? I think they've cooled enough.

Tara: Okay. You want to take the helm so that I don't mess it up and cut it in the wrong direction?

Alex: I can do it.

Tara: Okay.

Alex: But you can see which direction the grain of the meat goes, so it's really easy to cut against it, which I recommend because it gives you a much more tender bite.

Matt: If you're cutting against the grain, what are you looking for?

Alex: I am looking for the striation in the muscles, the direction of that the meat goes in, I guess.

Matt: So, like the lines or the grain of the meat going one way and you're going to cut perpendicular across it.

Alex: Yeah, it makes much smaller pieces of meat structure, which is a lot easier for you to chew.

Tara: Oh, it cuts so easily. Really good job on the grill, the meat's cooked perfectly.

[Meat continues to sizzle loudly in the background.]

Alex: No TV magic here.

Tara: Well, no one can see it, so I could be lying. I'm not. I mean, it is cooked perfectly, and we are going to eat it. So you're going all in here, you're cutting it for tacos. You're cutting it nice and small so you could just scoop that up and put it right in a tortilla and walk away.

Alex: I'm going to check on the pork. (sizzling) Look, Tara, see.

Tara: It really does do exactly what you said it would do.

Alex: Now that the moisture's gone, probably needs another minute or so. You want to keep it on it so you don't burn it, but we're just looking to caramelize it a little bit.

[Music transition.]

Tara: I'm going to start. I'm going to eat a little bit. I used to buy the Pollo Asado, and it was okay, but it was almost always dry. It just happened when you're cooking very thin pieces of chicken breast. It's very hard for it to not dry out, and you could balance for that in a taco by adding salsa and other stuff. This is so moist and tender and really flavorful.

Alex: That was our goal.

Matt: I think that while you could cook these in any number of ways on a grill with some fire, that char flavor is a really important component to the Pollo Asado or the Carne Asada. I like that a lot because it really helps with the other flavors in the marinades. They're very well-seasoned, but they're not so powerfully seasoned as to overtake anything else. Anything else that you put with this, fresh herbs, a cheese, a salsa would really work well and still shine with these flavors.

Alex: Yeah, exactly. With the marinated meat that you're buying at the store to take home, it might be a week before you cook it and as it sits in that marinade, it keeps absorbing flavor. So one of the things we did when we looked at these again was to address sodium because sodium and salt is something that you can so easily add at home if you want more of, but you can't take it out if there's too much.

Tara: Right.

Alex: So, they're not low sodium by any means, but they're not overly salty. And you'll notice as it goes through its shelf life, it's not going to ever reach a point where it's so salty that it's burning your tongue.

Tara: Neither of them tasted salty. They tasted flavorful. What I like about these so much, the chicken and the beef here, is that we took a product that we actually already sold. We saw an opportunity to make it better and we really made it better. Kudos.

Alex: Thank you.

Tara: And the pastor, brand new, we've never sold before. So kudos on that one too. I'm going to try it.

Matt: And kind of gives us an interesting opportunity to try some different things out.

Tara: What'd you think of the pastor, Matt?

Matt: I like it a lot. I like it. It is, of the three to me, it's the most strongly seasoned, and I really like it. Some chili spiced fruit alongside this...

Tara: Oh yeah.

Matt: ...would be really wonderful. A burrito or a sandwich-y kind of thing with that would be really nice.

[Music transition.]

Alex: A torta.

Tara: A couple of weeks ago, you walked over to our part of the office with a plate of tacos that you had made using this, and you put onions and cilantro and pineapple in the tacos.

Alex: I did. Yeah. That was a very authentic preparation of an al pastor taco, onion, cilantro, a very thin slice of pineapple and then top it with whatever salsa you like. I like our

Guacasalsa. I think it's perfect for the flavor profile of this. The only other thing maybe is a squeeze of lime.

Matt: So where in the store can I find these?

Alex: You can find these in our meat and seafood taste.

Matt: So where's that?

Tara: So refrigerated part.

Alex: Refrigerated part of our stores.

Matt: Or just do as I do. Ask a crew member.

Alex: They're the best.

Tara: Thanks, Alex.

Matt: Thanks, Alex.

Alex: Thank you. Thanks for having me again.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: Matt, I love having Alex on the podcast. He's super smart, has great products to share and always has good cooking tips for us to share with our listeners, but also and maybe most importantly, he feeds us really well.

Matt: Ultimately, his work feeds customers too.

Tara: So to recap, now in stores, the three new meats we tried today are Carne Asada Ranchera, Pollo Asado Chicken Thighs, and Pork Al Pastor.

Matt: All perfect for tacos and really so many other things.

Tara: We'll keep you up to date on more new products here on *Inside Trader Joe's*, and that's just another reason 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.