

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 92: Store Recipe Contest

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Okay. I've actually been working on some ideas for Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest.

Tara: Matt, you're a little late. The judging's over. We're going to talk about the winning store and their recipe on this episode.

Matt: All right. I'll save them for next year but just don't tell anybody about them.

Tara: Your secrets are always safe here on the podcast.

Matt: I've been working on things like Mandarin Orange Chicken Macaron, Everything But the Bagel Sublime Ice Cream Sandwiches, Smoked Trout Ambrosia, Hot Honey Cacio e Pepe Overnight Oats. These are great.

Tara: Most of those recipe ideas sound absolutely horrendous with the possible exception of the Everything But the Bagel Sublime Ice Cream Sandwiches. I might actually try those.

Matt: Yeah. We should probably talk to the tasting panel folks about that.

Tara: Fortunately, the crew members at Trader Joe's stores across the country came up with some much better ideas, and we're sharing the winner on Trader Joe's Instagram at TraderJoe's.com, and we're about to announce the winner right here on the podcast.

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. So which store won the recipe contest for 2025?

[Theme music ends.]

Tara: Through the magic of podcasting, we're going to meet them right now.

[Static, dial tuning in on CB radio transmission. Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Okay. Houston, are you there?

Matt: Do you copy? Over.

Tara: Come in Houston.

Summer: We're here. Over.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Excellent use of the CB radio shorthand there. Thank you so much. If I understand our connections, we're talking with Store 426 in the Alabama Theatre in Houston on Shepherd Drive. Did we get the right number?

Summer: That is correct. Store 426. Woo-hoo.

Matt: Excellent. Excellent. And with whom are we speaking?

Dustin: My name's Dustin and I am the captain here at Store 426.

Summer: My name is Summer.

Tara: Hey, congratulations. You have won the Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest.

[Crowd applause.]

Tara: Woo-hoo.

Summer: Awesome.

Dustin: Honey Gochujang Corn Cookie Ice Cream Sandwich.

Summer: That's a mouthful.

Tara: I have two immediate reactions. The first is...that sounds so strange.

Summer: Yeah.

Tara: And the second is...I tasted it, and it is absolutely delicious.

Dustin: I'm not going to lie. I was really surprised when I heard the name of what we were submitting and I was like, "That's what we're doing?"

Matt: Bold.

Dustin: And then we all tried it and we're like, "Yeah, no, this is awesome." But I would've never thought gochujang and cookie ice cream.

Matt: I think that's what helped it rise to the top though, because you have this mass 400 some odd recipes, and you have to hook people's attention with the name.

Tara: For sure.

Summer: I'm actually from Louisiana, Go Tigers. So I have a little bit of Cajun influence in my cooking and my baking, a lot of French influence, especially from my dad. Growing up we would eat what we would call Couche Couche, which is essentially cornbread and milk. Sometimes you could put a little bit of cane syrup on there if you're feeling frisky. So I was thinking about that, wanting to do a sweet cornbread. Then I was thinking about miso...

Matt: How did miso get into your mind at that moment?

Summer: I love cooking. I love eating more than I love cooking, but...

Tara: Same.

Summer: ...so I'm always thinking about different flavor profiles, and I love the miso. I love miso paste, like the yeasty umami flavor. And so I really wanted to do the miso in there but just didn't end up working out because the miso is limited. And so I had to pivot a little bit to end up doing the gochujang and honey with the ice cream and I was like, "I really want to make this into a cookie."

Tara: We used to have a corn cookie mix, and so when I saw this I thought, "Oh, somebody used to make this with the corn cookie mix and then just adapted it using the cornbread mix." But I was completely wrong, because you just came up with this on the fly.

Summer: Yeah. I've only worked here for about three years. I used to go to the one in Baton Rouge, but I don't think I ever even saw the cookie mix. But I love making cookies. I worked at a bakery in Baton Rouge for a few years, but I remember a lot of their recipes in the back of my mind, because I would make them so often. I know the basics of a good cookie recipe. Baking is a science, so you just have to experiment with what works. I know how it should look, how it should taste, how it should feel while I'm rolling it. Putting different things like the honey instead of the egg and adding a little bit of the ice cream in there to help bind things together, it just kinda all worked out.

[Music transition.]

Matt: So the use of ice cream, specifically molten ice cream, is that a thing that you do often?

Summer: I don't really...

Matt: Did this happen accidentally?

Summer: Yeah. I don't really... Honestly, I've never used... In my baking I like to do weird stuff. I love recipe development. That's what I want to be when I grow up as a recipe developer. Just experimenting is my forte. I noticed that the dough was a little too dry, so I know that ice cream is mostly the cream, vanilla, sugar, so the extra fat just helps bind it a little bit more together. It helped wet the ingredients a little more. So that was just, like I said, just an experiment.

Matt: Was this the first time...

Summer: Yes.

Matt: ... you used melted ice cream?

Summer: Yeah.

Matt: And you... whoa. And you saved the day, won the contest and brought glory to the Alabama Theatre Trader Joe's.

Summer: Well, you know Matt, that's what I do. I just bring glory wherever I go.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Apparently. Wow.

Tara: Summer, you are matching Matt Sloan here wit for wit. I am here for it.

Matt: Now in hindsight, it's Honey Gochujang Corn Cookie. In and of itself, that would be a winning thing, having tasted it. So we were out of stock on miso. What a newsflash for Trader Joe's. We were out of something.

Tara: No, we had it, but it's not an everyday product. And that is a rule of the contest is you have to use everyday products.

Matt: And this is where we interject the whole other show on, "Which season is miso season?"

Tara: Yeah. It's not seasonal. It's limited.

Matt: Like my patience. So you move to gochujang.

Summer: I use gochujang in a lot of different things, mostly savory. I thought the gochujang was a really great way to coat the outside of the cookie. I'm a really big fan of coating the outside of a cookie in something before you bake it.

Tara: So let's talk about it becoming an ice cream sandwich.

Summer: My partner Nikki, she was the taste tester for me. I would give her something and she would say, "Oh, I think it needs a little bit more of this. I think it needs a little bit more of that." So that's when we added the ice cream, it just helps bring everything together. It helps cool everything off. And I personally am a big fan of ice cream sandwiches, ...

[Music transition.]

Summer: ...and I was thinking of our ice cream sandwiches that we have with the cookie and the chocolate chips around them. That was an homage.

Tara: I can tell you from being in the room during the tasting process, it was one of the last things that we all tasted, and the entire room went silent. That just doesn't happen. We are tasting and we're talking about everything.

Matt: We can't shut up.

Tara: We can't shut up, even with food in our mouths. The entire room went silent, and people just kept eating. The voting on these recipes is very, very specific and intentional and scientific. And by scientific, I mean there's math involved. Everything gets numerical scores on several different aspects of the recipe. Those scores are added up and that's how the winner is determined. And there was one point that separated the winning recipe from the second recipe. We had such great recipes in this contest, but nobody was surprised at the end that this was the

winner. Even though it was that tight, it made sense to everybody on the judging panel. Really impressed. It's just still blows my mind. There's five ingredients. It's great.

[Music transition.]

Tara: And I want to talk about how the recipe contest played out in Store 426. Who managed that process?

Summer: There was a few different people. Everyone would submit their recipe. We made all of them. We made sure to make it anonymous. We had about six or seven, maybe eight submissions, and they were all really good. And then we did a vote after, and I think somebody had counted it. And I don't want to say it was a landslide, but it was close kind of.

Matt: You didn't have to go back for a recount.

Summer: Yeah. I think I voted for one that was like a Philly Cheesesteak. That one was pretty good.

Tara: We had close to 400 recipe submissions, and our top 10 were from stores all over the country. We had stores in the northwest and the southeast and in Texas and in Massachusetts and in the Midwest. We had stores from everywhere represented in the top 10. We weren't looking for representation. It just happened because we have great, interesting, innovative crew members all over the country. You all know our products probably better than anybody. That shows itself in these recipes that come in, because they're just unlike anything we see anywhere else.

Matt: Historically, this would be understood as some form of fusion cooking, but it's just doing what people have always done. It's trying things with the ingredients they have at hand. It's not like it's blue cheese ice cream.

Summer: I can make that for you, Matt, if you want me to.

Matt: That one...that sends shivers like down my spine.

Tara: Have you had garlic ice cream?

Matt: No. And I'm leaving a completely fulfilled life without it.

Summer: (laughs)

Matt: But I would try it.

Tara: But I'm thinking black garlic and blue cheese ice cream.

Matt: Okay. Blue cheese with a black garlic sprinkle. Instead of Jimmies, you get black garlic sprinkles.

Girls: (laughs)

Matt: All right. Take that, Jimmies.

Tara: (laughs) And you have people all over the country, not from New England, who don't even know what Jimmies are.

Matt: What do you do for summer in Houston?

Summer: Stay inside.

Matt: And watch movies?

Summer: Yeah. I will say my favorite product right now is the Root Beer Float Pieces. I like to put them in ice cream and that's my summer product. Or I'll do the red, white and blue popsicles and I'll put those...

Matt: Rockets or...

Summer: Yes.

Matt: We should know what they're called.

Summer: Out of This World. And then I'll do either one of our sparkling waters and put it in there. I'll blend a few of them up in the blender, put some fruit in it. You just go crazy out here. It's so hot.

Tara: All right. We are so grateful for the time that you gave us, and you created a fantastic recipe. We're really excited to share it with our customers on our website.

Summer: I'm really excited for everyone to try and for everyone to tell me what they think about it.

[Music transition.]

Tara: I loved every minute of that conversation. I wish we had the chance to talk to everyone around the country about how they come up with recipes. We do have the chance to talk to a couple of folks from here in the office who helped organize the Store Recipe Contest, who helped put together the production of making of all of those recipes, because it was a production, making 10 recipes simultaneously in a relatively small workplace kitchen.

Matt: There were some territorial feelings, but dang it, we worked through them all.

Tara: Territorial feelings here. What are you talking about?!

Matt: See?

Tara: Let's have our two guests introduce themselves. Welcome.

Matt: Judges.

Rachel: Hello, I'm Rachel.

Kathleen: And I'm Kathleen. Ready to talk about recipes.

Tara: So we've talked to you a lot about recipes that you have had a hand in creating for TraderJoes.com.

Rachel: Yes. And I'm equally excited to talk about recipes other crew members have created.

Matt: There were a lot of recipes.

Kathleen: We're talking almost 400 recipes.

Tara: What are the rules?

Kathleen: You want to use five Trader Joe's ingredients. We requested that those ingredients be Trader Joe's products that are available all year long so that our customers can make these amazing dishes all year long. Then generously, we gave them some freebies, so we decided that cooking oils, butter, salt, sugar. What else am I missing? Black pepper.

Rachel: And that's it.

Kathleen: And that's it. Those are the freebies. So those could be used and not count towards that five ingredients.

Matt: You could almost make a meal out of the freebies.

Kathleen: (gags, laughs)

Tara: I don't know that anybody would actually want to eat that though.

Matt: Seasoned ghee.

Tara: I'm not coming to your house.

Rachel: I'm into it.

Matt: All right.

Tara: Okay. I knew you would be. So let's get to how we came to the final 10.

Kathleen: Well, we start by reading a whole heck of a lot of emails from our stores and salivating over what we see. We ask them to submit the list of ingredients, the instructions for the recipe, and then a photo of the finished dish. And we have an illustrious panel of judges, and we all came up with our picks as the semi-finalists. And this involves every single judge reading every single recipe, making sure all rules were followed, cross-checking everything and then deciding what sounds like something we want to eat, basically.

Tara: Okay. So you have all the panelists, all the judges coming up with a group of favorites.

Kathleen: And we sit in a little room, and it gets heated in there. No punches are thrown, but all the judges come in with very different palates, and every time I'm impressed with how many different recipes make it to that round.

Matt: I will cop to being one of the judges whose top picks were met with resounding just deafening silence.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: That would've been me.

Tara: And Kathleen, you and Matt have both acknowledged, "No, you want to try the stranger things that maybe won't appeal to some other people," but at the end it's a very democratic process. Ten recipes that really...they're voted on democratically, and they have to have a majority in that room, or they don't make it to the final round.

Rachel: Kathleen is basically our executive chef here so she can really appreciate the nuance and the detail and the creativity. And I am, (laughs) I'm a single lady that lives with my cat and needs some real specific direct instructions on how to make something. And so it takes all kinds. We have a vegan vegetarian. We have a pescatarian. So we really do get great representation there.

[Music transition.]

Tara: All right. We have the final 10 recipes. These are our finalists. Getting everything made on the same day and ready at the same time, how do we make that happen?

Kathleen: Excel spreadsheets.

Rachel: (laughs) That's Kathleen's answer.

Kathleen: I organize a schedule, so at 3:30 everything is... the temperature needs to be ready to be served in the way the store and crew members intended it to be tried.

Tara: So it's giving everything a fair shot.

Matt: Or "Yes, chef."

Rachel: But a lot of smiles too. Not a lot of grumbly "Yes, chefs."

Tara: No, no.

Rachel: They're enthusiastic, "Yes, chefs."

Tara: We spoke to our winners in Houston. They were very excited, but we also had nine runners up. Every single one of them was delicious. The difference in score between the winner and the 10th place finisher was actually not that great. Everyone was close. Do you have any favorites other than the winner? Were there any that really stood out to you, Kathleen?

Kathleen: When I am tasting a recipe, I'm looking to see how crew members are using our products innovatively, seeing a vision beyond what's on a box or on a package. And for me, the Vegan Chocolate Silk Pie Bites really delivered a unique way to use our new Silken Tofu.

Tara: Mm-hmm. It wouldn't ever have occurred to me to use tofu to make dessert.

Kathleen: They were delicious, and they were executed exceptionally well, and I think that's part of the reason why I was so impressed by that recipe.

Tara: I want to give a shout-out to the store that submitted that recipe. That was Store 516 in Peabody (Pea-b'dy), Massachusetts. And yes, I know how to say Peabody (Pea-b'dy), Massachusetts.

Kathleen: (laughs)

Matt: I was going, "Wow. Mr. Peabody (Pea-body)?"

Tara: No, it's Peabody (Pea-b'dy), and that in my brain...

Matt: Even Mr. Peabody (Pea-b'dy) is Pea-b'dy?

Tara: In my brain it was always Mr. Peabody (Pea-b'dy) even though they said Mr. Peabody (Pea-body) on television, they were just wrong. How about you, Rachel? Did you have one that really stood out to you?

Rachel: Well, I was personally quite excited about the Chicken Salsa Verde Mini Pies. I thought that was really cool. That's from Store 13 Valencia, California. I'm just always really excited about something where I see it, and I think I could make that. I'm clearly the less sophisticated chef here. We have a great, relatively new product, the Salsa Verde Pulled Chicken, which is so good. If you haven't had it yet. I actually had it last night.

Matt: Plug away. This thing is deserving of more people's attention.

Rachel: I had it last night in a quesadilla and I was like, "Man, this is something. We got to tell people about this." But they used a can of our biscuits, our Organic Biscuits, onion, cilantro, pack of Unexpected Cheddar Cheese, shredded cheddar, and they're just like these fun little bites.

[Music transition.]

Tara: Going back to your perspective, Kathleen, of using things in an innovative way, using those biscuits, not as a biscuit necessarily, but as a vehicle for a meal. I thought that was really-

Matt: Almost a pie crust.

Tara: Yes.

Matt: Almost like a mini pie crust thing.

Tara: Yeah. I've used those biscuits as a pot pie topping. Instead of doing a pie crust, I've used those to top a pot pie, just to dot the top of a casserole dish and make it into a-

Matt: Who says you can't have chicken cobbler?

Tara: Yeah. You totally can.

Rachel: Well, speaking of biscuits, we also had the Biscuit and Gravy Bread Pudding from Store 703.

Tara: 703 Chicago.

Rachel: Hey. And that was something. That is some rich stuff. The soy chorizo. We've got the biscuits, used our Almond Chipotle Dip. That's a really interesting product if you haven't tried it.

Tara: I noticed in the recipes that there were some definite trends like some Trader Joe's products that crew members really seem to love right now, lots of recipes using specific products.

Rachel: I noticed that as well, Tara. Crew members are pretty crazy about bulgogi right now. In particular, the one in our frozen section.

Tara: The meat one or the vegan one?

Rachel: All of them. Korean products are trending in our stores. Our crew love them. Those products popped up in lots of recipes.

Kathleen: And we also got a lot of Dubai style chocolate-inspired recipes. No surprise there. Really innovative, because there was the use of shredded wheat in a lot of them.

Tara: One of our finalists was a Dubai-style chocolate-inspired recipe.

Rachel: The age range of our crew was really evident throughout all of our recipes.

Tara: How so?

Matt: Did you ask for ID?

Kathleen: (laughs)

Rachel: You can tell some of these recipes are being eaten after 2:00 AM.

Tara: Older people aren't awake at that time?

Matt: Yes. We are not.

Tara: We sometimes are, but it's after we've already been asleep for four hours and we've woken up in the middle of the night.

Rachel: Crew members are making after-meal snacks for crew who work late shifts. But then there's a lot of recipes that were dinners, healthier dinners.

Tara: So you're assuming after-work snacks are the younger crew, and the dinners and healthier things are the older people who have to watch-

Matt: Like fiber bites.

Kathleen: (laughs)

Rachel: I am making the assumption. I might be wrong.

[Music ends. Transition to close.]

Tara: Thanks to both of you.

[Closing music begins.]

Tara: Our crew members at all of our stores know so much about Trader Joe's products, I guess it's not surprising they come up with such creative ways to use them.

Matt: So when you need some ideas, well, you know who to ask. And our crew, they're always ready to help.

Tara: And this would be a help to us, AND make sure you receive the next episode of Inside Trader Joe's. Just hit that free subscribe or follow button.

Matt: It is free and worth every penny.

Tara: You'll find all our back episodes and the recipe for Honey Gochujang Cornbread Cookie Ice Cream Sandwiches on our website, TraderJoe's.com. Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.