

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 99: The Cheesiest Episode of Inside Trader Joe's. Ever.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: I've really been looking forward to this cheesy episode.

Tara: Matt, it's a Cheese Episode, not a cheesy episode. At Trader Joe's, we're serious about cheese and we're excited about 2026.

Matt: Right. It's going to be a Gouda year.

Tara: Matt.

Matt: You're right. Cheesy does it on the silly puns. This is nacho average episode.

Tara: (sighs) And we have Kim, the category manager for cheese, joining us from our Boston mothership.

Matt: Ah, yes, the big cheese.

Tara: (heavy sigh) Ricotta be kidding me.

Matt: Let's goat *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.

Tara: Culture? Is that another cheese reference?

Matt: Cheddar believe it.

Tara: Oh, Kim in Boston, save us.

Kim: Hi, Tara. Hi, Matt.

Matt: Kim, Havarti?

Kim: Fine, thank you. And I'm grateful to be invited to participate in this podcast today.

Tara: Oh, we've lost Kim.

Matt: Or she's found the way.

Tara: Oy, let's talk about cheese.

[Theme music ends. Light music begins.]

Kim: It's one of my favorite topics.

Tara: And that's why we wanted you to join us here, because you know all the things that are happening in the world of cheese.

Kim: You better Brie-lieve it.

Tara: Oh my gosh.

Matt: Wow, that's great. It just keeps getting better.

Tara: (sighs) What's happening in cheese, Kim? We're going into a new year. Let's talk about cheese.

Matt: Are there things that you think will be defining really important aspects of cheese and our business related to it?

Kim: First of all, trying to be a bit impartial because I find all cheeses to be delicious, but with everything else, whether it's grocery or anything else in life, there's certainly trends. And we definitely see a lot of trends happening in the packaged world, particularly where I would classify it as dips and spreads. They're really diverse in flavors and cheese types. But I think the common denominator, they're not only delicious and at a great value, but they're also very convenient and they're versatile in their uses.

Matt: So in your thinking, when is a cheese spread in the cheese category because it's a cheese spread, not a dip in deli?

Kim: There's definitely a few different factors. Nearly all of my cheese spreads are majority cheese, almost all of them are at least 90% cheese. Shelf life is another common factor, we tend to have more shelf life in our cheese spreads and dips than, say, fresh would. The common denominator with all of them is they are all clean ingredients. So there's no difference in cheese, we're not getting a longer shelf life because of additives, per se, but it could be how it's packed and the different ingredients in it.

[Music transition.]

Tara: So spreads.

Kim: Spreads.

Tara: I'm thinking back into my Trader Joe's tenure. Over the last several years, cheese spreads have become more of a thing.

Kim: You're right. I've been with Trader Joe's for six years working on cheese, and when I started, the cheese spreads that we had were really pub cheeses, for the most part, and then cream cheeses. We still offer the same pub cheese, the classic sharp cheddar and the jalapeño and horseradish that we've always had, and they continue to do very well. But back in 2022 is really, I think, when we started to press on the gas with diversifying our assortment and adding new items, and we did that with the Unexpected Cheddar Spread. Unexpected Cheddar

continues to be a leader in the cheese world. This year alone, in 2025, we're going to sell about 2.1 million pounds just on the block of Unexpected Cheddar Cheese, and that's growing, and it was kind of found by accident, actually. I was looking for a holiday item, and growing up, I used to eat cheeseballs at holiday time. So we went to the supplier who does our Unexpected Cheddar Cheese and said, "Is there a way we could do a deconstructed cheeseball that's not loaded full of all the quote-unquote 'bad ingredients' that you typically find in a cheeseball?" And so, we started working on that, and it just wasn't hitting the way that I wanted to, but the base cheese was absolutely delicious. I said, "Well, we can't get the right cheeseball effect that we're looking for, but the Unexpected Cheddar Spread is just delicious." We brought it in in September of 2022, and it's been a hit ever since. So we added a Hatch Chile variety of it, which we bring in pretty much every summer, it's done very well. We have a Holiday Cheer that we brought in, again, this holiday did very well. And we finally nailed it with the Totally Cheeseball that we brought in this holiday, and it did exceptionally well. And that is a variety of Unexpected Cheddar, and it's blended with our Coastal Syrah Toscano, so two of our customer-favorites cheese and one Totally Cheeseball Spread.

[Music transition.]

Matt: This feels like a lot of other categories that are parts of our store, where the new development is not the thing itself, but some new version of it. So what's exciting in cheese is cheese spread, not just a block of cheese. And we see that throughout the business. But you just said that customers will buy more than two million pounds of just a piece, the block of Unexpected Cheddar, so regular, if you will, cheese is still a giant thing for customers.

Kim: Yes, it is. So another example of that would be our Double Cream Brie Spread that we brought in as an everyday item that just launched this holiday season. We sell a lot of Brie. We have a lot of different varieties of Brie, whether it's a domestic or a French. We have the traditional French, the Triple Crème, as well as the Mushroom Brie and some other soft ripens, like the Saint André. But there's still a desire, I think, the convenience factor of a spread. Again, it gives you a little bit more shelf life. And so, the Brie Spread has been very popular, it's doing very well. It has some additional uses to it as well. You can cut it and put it on sandwiches. There's a lot of our customers that love Brie, but they don't necessarily like the rind, and that's where we came up with the idea of Brie spread, and everything but the rind is really what you're getting in that Brie Spread. So it's very easy to spread into a turkey or roast beef sandwich or spread it onto apples and have a nice low-carb indulgent snack.

Matt: And you could just sell a bag of the rinds, just Brie rinds.

Tara: Who wants that?

Kim: I'll have to look into that.

Matt: I'd probably eat those.

Tara: Yeah. I'm curious, in the cheese section, we have cut pieces of cheese, we have spreads, we have slices, we have shreds. What do we sell the most of? What do customers seem to buy most often?

Kim: Well, I think a lot of our classic every day, I like to refer to them as grocery list items, like our shredded cheese. We sell a lot of our sliced cheese. We're able to offer the

convenience of people going in to buy the sliced cheese and not have to wait at a service counter but have a great value and great items.

[Small music transition.]

Kim: Going back to cream cheese, I consider that a bridge item, like the core cream cheese to spread on a bagel in a traditional use or often in baking, particularly with the brick items, whether it's a cheesecake or mixed into frostings. But there's so many other usages there, so the amount of it we sell is pretty great. No pun intended on the grate. (laughs)

Tara: (laughs) You just can't help yourself.

Kim: Whipped cream cheese is our top-selling cream cheese item, and we offered our first flavor of that this fall and winter. Very popular, so much so that we actually were able to chase the product and work with our supplier to bring more in. But that's Everything But the Pizza. So it is a cream cheese and it's great on a bagel, but we're hearing through our crew and customers that there's so many other usages that they like to use it for, whether it's spreading it on a piece of pepperoni, again, for a low-carb, pretty nutritious snack, or dipping bell peppers into it, you're getting the pizza without the crust. And then, we have some great new flavors coming. We'll have a delicious cream cheese, Dill-icious, I should say, cream cheese, that is excellent accompaniment with salmon or lox. For Easter time, we'll be bringing in in spring a Carrot Cake Whipped Cream Cheese, which, not that I play favorites with my cheeses, but it's definitely up there.

Tara: What do you do with that, other than eat it with a spoon?

Kim: What don't you do with it (laughs) is what I like to say. My favorite way to eat it is on a spoon. It's like taking the idea of a carrot cake and the cream cheese frosting and removing a lot of the sugar. You get all the same flavors, including little pieces of carrot. Selfishly, I left raisins out of it, because I'm not a carrot cake with raisin person. But it's great on our Cinnamon Raisin Bagel and you can have that flavor profile if you are a raisin person. Graham crackers is another great way to eat it. You could even make a fantastic frosting out of it to spread it on a spice cake or on a carrot cake.

Tara: It would be really good on a ginger snap.

Kim: That would be a great way to offer it.

[Music transition.]

Tara: So talking about things that are coming, things that you're working specifically with our suppliers to develop, what's happening in your cheese-making brain?

Kim: I'm very excited about all of the projects we already have that have been approved, and there's a lot, peeking under the tent, that are to come. One of the ones that I think is the most interesting is a marinated Parmesan. I've never seen it in a grocery. But it's shredded Parmesan, and it's marinated in an oil blend that has garlic and olives and a little bit of cilantro. Fantastic, almost addictive. The first time I tried it, I was like, "Wow, this is a punch of flavor, not sure it's my thing." And then, the second bite, I started to like it more and more, and then I just plowed through all of the samples. So initially, I was thinking of it, "God, it would be really good topped on a crostini as an appetizer served with pasta." And then, talking to some of

my colleagues and other crew members who had tried it, they use it in lieu of salad dressing, so they'll mix it into vegetables and lettuces and eat it that way. I think putting it on a pasta, whether it's a cold or a hot pasta, would be another delicious way. It's truly just an innovative item.

[Music transition.]

Kim: Another item that I'm really excited about, and there's really not much to it, but is a Whipped Ricotta. The first time I had whipped ricotta, I had it in a restaurant, and it was served with just roasted carrots on top of it, some pine nuts and a drizzle of olive oil. I'm not a ricotta lover. I know there's a lot of uses to it, but I don't like the curds in it. And this is just a truly creamy and dreamy way to eat it. So that's something that will be coming to our stores in 2026. Where does it end? We are bringing Whipped Feta back. That was something we brought in as a limited item this past spring in 2025. The crew and our customers spoke and we listened, so it's going to be coming back as an everyday item this January. And we're working on some variations of that, that I don't want to tell too much, because it still hasn't made it through our tasting panel. But if all works out, there'll be additional flavors coming in on that as well.

Matt: These spreads and whipped things seem to be so interesting, and when we bring something in, you actually talked about chasing, we're often chasing the volume, because customers lock in on things and they love them and then we've got to go get more, go get more. What is it about whipping the cheese that makes it that much more interesting?

Kim: It really changes the whole dynamic of what you're eating. Feta is another one. Feta is very, very popular, but you whip it, the whipped feta is not just the three ingredients of the whipped ricotta, it has some other ingredients in it, including some cream cheese, but it truly changes the texture and the flavor of the item. All of us are on time crunches these days, we're trying to do too much in too little time, so to whip up the food processor and try to make it...and very frankly, when you do it that way, it just also doesn't taste quite the same, because I've tried doing that as well, I think that's a piece of it. The other is cheese is delicious. Again, I'm lucky that I have the access to trying as many cheeses that we do and being able to have the pleasure to bring it to our stores. But when you're doing some of these spreads and dips, it gives you the opportunity to take something that is already delicious and elevate and change the profile of the flavor and the texture. Natural cheeses, without changing the whole dynamic and blending the cheese, really, all you can do is soak it and rub it, and we do a lot of that as well. Actually, I can give another peek under the tent with that in a second.

Matt: Sure. I know for one, I just won't try to make something like whipped feta, and so that's just so much nicer to go to the Trader Joe's that I shop at down the street and just pick it up.

Tara: All right. You've piqued my interest, Kim.

[Music transition.]

Matt: With the soaking and rubbing spa treatment, what's happening with this? It's like cheese on a holiday.

Kim: (laughs)

Tara: (laughs) That's exactly what it is.

Kim: A cheese spa. But we've moved beyond the soaking and rubbing, and we have worked with two different suppliers in Spain to bring some new innovation and new technology into the natural cheese world going into 2026. You've seen a bit of it this holiday with our quince Spanish cheese, which did very well, but we have similar items that we'll be bringing in as spotlight programs next summer. The first one is a labor of love. It's called the Sheepish Tomato. The name is inspired because it's a Spanish sheep's milk cheese. Say that three times fast. But it's injected.

Tara: I can't even say it once.

Kim: So they're injecting it with a tomato jam that all the ingredients are coming from the Toledo region of Spain, whether it's the tomatoes, a little bit of sugar, the vinegar, it's an absolutely delicious cheese and it's really pretty to look at. But what they're doing is they're creating the cheese, they're aging it approximately three months, and then they're injecting it using special equipment. So it's a good way of bringing new flavors into the cheese and be able to get that flavor in every bite, that you can't necessarily get out of a rubbed or soaked cheese, because it's actually in the center, and then they continue to age it another two to three months. So the result is a veined cheese, just truly delicious.

Matt: And just a quick shout-out, Trader Joe's crew member designer, Michelle, did an amazing label for that. I love that label.

Kim: That was her and I going through a computer and looking at my vision board for probably close to 45 minutes, and then seeing her bring my ideas to life, it just warms my cheese-ish heart.

[Music transition.]

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Damn.

Tara: I love that you have a cheese vision board.

Kim: (laughs)

Tara: I think I need vision boards.

Kim: The other one, which I may go on a limb and say it's probably my favorite of 2026, is the Mediterranean Mezcla, which is really a mélange of cheese. So it's a Spanish aged cheese, again, made in a very similar way to the tomato, and then it's injected with a PDO pesto from Italy. So it's bringing two of my favorite European classics together, with the traditional Spanish sheep's milk cheese with the PDO pesto from Italy. It's just beautiful to look at, because you can really see the bright green of the pesto throughout, but you get the classic flavor of both items.

Tara: I think if you're a regular visitor to the Trader Joe's cheese section, you've seen our spotlight cheeses. Can you give us just a quick rundown of what the spotlight cheese program is and what customers might come to expect from that?

[Music transition.]

Kim: Sure. So we're putting a spotlight on the spotlight program now, thank you, Tara. The intention behind it is to find items that are an exceptional value that you may not be able to find in other places because they're exclusive to Trader Joe's. If they're not exclusive, it's really a beyond wow. We do have some branded items. For example, once a year, we tend to bring in a Point Reyes Toma cheese, different varieties of it, but at a price that you just can't even come close to anywhere else. But beyond that, I really look for items that are new and different, items that can bring up feelings of nostalgia from a different time in your life. The idea of the program is to bring something in once a month, that we sell through within that month, so that it's an additional offering from our customers and our regular cheese connoisseurs, that they can try something else and know that they only have a limited time to buy it. It may not be back again. If it is, it won't be for a while. And the next month, they get to come in and have the same treasure hunt all over again.

Matt: It makes me think that so many of the cheeses in your category, in my mind, function in that way, they are special and they are great. But I'm wondering, is there a sleeper in your category that you think deserves more attention that customers should know about?

Kim: A sleeper? Hmm. Again, it's like trying to pick your favorite child.

Tara: (laughs) I have one, Kim, and I wonder if you can tell me if it's a sleeper or if I just don't know that as many people love it as I do, the 1000-day Gouda.

Kim: That's a good one.

Tara: Is that a big-hit cheese?

Kim: It is a big-hit cheese. Goudas (goo duhs) or Goudas (gow duhs), if we want to say it in a cheese-perfect way.

Tara: The right way, is that what you're saying to me, I should say it the right way?

Kim: That's a good one for a sleeper, actually, because Goudas (gow duhs), I think, as a whole could use a little bit of love right now. We brought in a lot of flavored ones and blended ones. For example, we brought the Green Goddess Gouda back this spring, and it blew out probably four weeks quicker than we thought, so we'll be bringing it back next spring. They're one of the best blending cheeses, so we do a lot of flavors there. But to your point, the basic Goudas are probably the sleepers there. I was going to say the mélange, the Cheddar-Gruyere Mélange. That is a cheese we've carried for a moment, and it definitely has had its highs and lows, but it's a fantastic price point, and it really is the best of both worlds. You get the creamy, buttery, nutty cheddar, and then the Gruyere on the back-end, and that's something truly special that once in a while just gets lost in that assortment but could be my sleeper.

Tara: That's a fantastic grilled cheese sandwich cheese.

Kim: It is. We have a lot of wonderful cheddars, we have two import Gruyeres and one domestic Gruyere, so that sits in the middle.

Tara: Anything else you want to share with us?

Kim: I think one other call-out that would be remiss of me not to mention is mascarpone. Mascarpone as a whole is having a moment right now. People are cooking more

at home and they're spending more time at home, and mascarpone is that ingredient item you sometimes forget about. It's used often in baking and different dessert items, but there's a lot of really indulgent ways to use it, whether you're making homemade pasta as a filling or adding it to your sauces and soups. And we'll be also adding a seasonal vanilla bean for springtime. That's something to keep an eye out on.

Matt: I'm fascinated by adding the traditional mascarpone to a soup. So you could even take a classic tomato soup and add it to something like that to make just a creamier version?

Kim: Actually, I make tomato soup that way. I just blend, whether it's the San Marzano tomatoes, I use the hand mixer to it, we'll put a little bit of mascarpone and some garlic powder, salt and pepper, and it makes a really great bisque. It's actually lighter than a bisque, because you don't need a lot of it. It's also great added to a sweet potato or a butternut squash soup.

Matt: That sounds great.

Tara: Yeah.

Kim: You could even, instead of blending it in, you could top your butternut squash soup with it with pumpkin seeds and it looks really pretty.

Tara: I think I want to come have dinner at your house.

Kim: There's lots of cheese, I can promise you that, lots of cheese.

Tara: I'm all in.

Matt: Great.

Tara: Okay.

Matt: Soup's on.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: So much cheese, so little time.

Matt: I know. We could easily do another episode all about cheese. We really shredded this one.

Tara: Kim, fantastic.

Kim: Thank you.

Tara: We hope to see you again soon.

Kim: You too.

Tara: In the meantime, there's lots more cheese in the refrigerator case at Trader Joe's that will start conversations at your home, and more conversations are ahead in 2026 on *Inside Trader Joe's*. 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.