

# Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 67: Holiday Tasting Panel

*[Light easy music begins.]*

Tara: Well, well, well, would you look at that calendar.

Matt: November! Already.

Tara: The holidays are here at Trader Joe's. Well, of course, they're always here, really.

Matt: Now, we love the holidays, and it's a good thing because developing holiday products happens year-round. You know, it's too bad we didn't record some of that process for the podcast.

*[Music ends.]*

Tara: But we did!

Matt: Oh, that's what those lavalier microphones were for. This will be a good episode. Let's go Inside Trader Joe's.

*[Theme music begins and 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: You know, way back in January of this year, even before the tree and decorations were down at our house, the Trader Joe's crew here at the mothership in Monrovia, California had a few long days of tasting holiday products.

Matt: Now tasting holiday food is hard work. And somebody's got to do it.

Tara: We'll replay some of that in a moment. But first, a special guest.

Matt: Santa?

*[Theme music ends.]*

Tara: No, no, no, no. It's Bill from our Jingle Jangle supplier in Baltimore.

*[Light upbeat music begins.]*

Matt: It just wouldn't feel like the holidays without Trader Joe's Jingle Jangle.

Tara: Are you there, Bill?

Bill: Yes, I'm here.

Tara: How long have you been making Jingle Jangle for Trader Joe's?

Bill: This is actually our 10th anniversary of making it. So, the first year we sold it was 2013.

Matt: A decade in.

Tara: Wow.

Matt: We're 10 years in and I think we're getting close to figuring out how much to order. So, another 10 or so years and we'll have this thing licked.

Bill: I remember it really well because actually we started it in 2012 trying to get the price point and the mixture right. And a little bit more of this item and a little bit less of that item. And it took a long time to get that perfect mix, and we couldn't get it together in time for that year, so it got moved to 2013.

Matt: Which is a great point of entry here. Time. What is the timeline like for a year's production of Jingle Jangle?

Bill: Yeah, so it ends up taking us maybe around six weeks. We don't make all of the inclusion.

Tara: So, you take the cookies, the Joe-Joe's, from the supplier of the cookies,...

Bill: Yeah.

Tara: ...and you smash them up, that must be fun, and

Bill: It is fun.

Tara: (laughs) and then those get coated in chocolate.

Bill: They get covered in dark chocolate, yep.

Matt: Okay.

Tara: Do you make the pretzels, or do you buy the pretzels?

Bill: So, we buy pretzels.

Tara: Okay.

Bill: So, we buy the pretzels and then we take them and enrobe them in dark or milk chocolate and then put the white drizzle on top.

Tara: Okay. And the same with the caramel corn.

Bill: Correct. So, we buy caramel corn and then we use the panning process to pan the dark chocolate onto the caramel corn.

Tara: So, we do on Inside Trader Joe's what we call a jargon alert.

*[Retail jargon alert sounder.]*

Tara: Can you explain panning process?

Bill: Think of like, uh, rock polishing. We put a, the caramel corn inside of a machine. And it tumbles it. So, it's an endless belt and it just keeps on going around and the caramel corn tumbles and tumbles as we drizzle chocolate on it, make a layer, do it over and over and over again. And we put about, I think it's about 60 layers of dark chocolate on the caramel corn. Some of those layers don't fully cover it so, it takes some time to build it up and fill in all the cracks and crevices. And then once it's done, we put a shine on it so it's nice and shiny and seals the chocolate in.

Tara: Can I confirm you said 60 as in 6-0?

Bill: Correct.

Tara: Wow.

Matt: Now when I was a kid, um, in a cub scout frame of mind, I had a rock polishing set and I made one of my grandmothers the most God-awful necklace. It weighed like seven pounds, this giant shiny rock. And I lost patience with that project. I can't imagine 60 layers.

Bill: It's difficult to enrobe caramel corn because it's hard to get it to travel across belts because it has kind of edges and likes to get hung up on stuff, but that's the same technique that's used to make your dark chocolate almonds and various other chocolate covered items that you guys sell.

Matt: You don't think about it being built up with these thin layers. You think of it like, I don't know, you just magically, (ploop) it's got chocolate around it so, that's really neat.

Bill: (laughs)

Tara: It is magic though, no matter how it happens because it's all the best tasting things covered in chocolate, which makes them all taste even better.

Matt: There's the unifying function of chocolate, which is so great. Then you've got the textural differences that are happening.

Bill: So, that's really what we do. Our expertise is covering stuff in chocolate and whether it's pretzels or cookies or caramel corn, to make them even more delicious than they are by themselves.

Tara: Matt made mention of us maybe finally figuring out how much Jingle Jangle to buy. To be really honest, every year we thought we'd bought the right amount, right?

Bill: (chuckles)

Tara: That's a big part of the planning for our holiday season is buying the right amounts of all these products that we want to sell. What is that like every year when our category team comes back to you and says, "Yeah, we need to up this by a multiple of X."

Bill: I think it's exciting. It's so cool and exciting for us to see an item that resonates so well.

Tara: I've never met a person who doesn't love Jingle Jangle.

Matt: I can hear the letters coming in now, "Hey Tara, I don't." But some, you know, I'm sure there are some. Okay, fine.

Tara: I'm just saying I haven't met one.

Matt: Okay.

Tara: So, and I'm excluding from that people who claim they don't like chocolate. Cause I don't understand those people anyway.

Matt: There are popsicles.

Tara: There are popsicles for those people. That's right. And maybe they like the caramel corn just without chocolate on it. And that's okay too.

Matt: Which is good.

Tara: Are there specific ratios of each component?

Bill: There is a definite percentage of each ingredient. This year, actually, we've purchased a new piece of equipment that no longer pre-mixes them. It takes the seven ingredients and deposits it into the tin, you know, all at once. We can go at about twice the speed that we used to.

Matt: I'm imagining the sound of twice that speed. This syncopated movement. It's like, it might sound sort of like a Max Roach drum solo or something. I don't know, I'd love to hear this.

Tara: We shot some video of the process of making Jingle Jangle at Bill's facility and it is fascinating. Starting in December that'll be posted on our website and on Trader Joe's YouTube channel. Yes, Virginia, Trader Joe's has a YouTube channel.

Matt: What a nice surprise to hear that.

Tara: (chuckles) There are people who don't know.

Matt: Some of them could even be in this room.

Tara & Bill: (laughs)

Tara: Bill, I really appreciate giving us this time, and bringing us Jingle Jangle.

Bill: We appreciate Trader Joe's too.

*[Transition to sprinkles.]*

Tara: Baking is going to be just a little bit more fun this holiday season because finally Trader Joe's has sprinkles.

Matt: Yes, sprinkles to sprinkle on your home baked cakes and cookies and cupcakes. Maybe even on a little smoked trout.

Tara: Really?

Matt: Absolutely not. Sprinkles have been available for a long time in lots of different stores. Not at Trader Joe's because well, we're picky.

Tara: Of course, we are. So, let's go all the way back to that holiday tasting panel from January.

Matt: Do you think we need a jargon alert for the tasting panel?

Tara: Well, somebody might be listening to their first episode of the podcast.

*[Retail jargon alert sounder.]*

Matt: I'm happy to explain. The tasting panel. The thing every single product at your Trader Joe's has in common. Everything must pass our tasting panel to be in our stores. Period.

Tara: So, you're about to hear from our product developer, Lori. She's presenting an idea for sprinkles that are coming from Spain...

*[Music transition to Spanish music.]*

Tara: ...to the tasting panel.

*[Sprinkles tasting panel conversation.]*

Lori: So, you have in front of you a little cupcake with sprinkles on it. This is one of those items that is not in its absolutely final stage but let me start by showing you what the inspiration for this product was made by this supplier. The one that you have in front of you is all natural. It will not include the little gold balls if you happen to see them here because we can't import little gold balls. Um,...

Room: (laughter)

Lori: ...we, sorry.

Room: (laughter)

Lori: I did a lot of work because we have looked at sprinkles on many occasions and they have always been turned down by the panel. But I think this is the right product at the right time. We can mix anything, and my intention is if you like the idea of these sprinkles to go over there and work with them from their hundreds of different shapes and sizes to come up with a blend which holds everything in suspension, if you will, and things don't fall to the bottom, and we have all the right colors and shapes. But I think that sprinkles are absolutely everywhere, and nobody will be able to have a product that even comes close to this. Alex baked these cookies, under baked these, but cooked, baked them nonetheless.

Room: (laughter)

Lori: And the, and, but Alex went to a lot of work, so I'm not, nothing bad here. The colors do not run. He baked these two weeks ago, froze them, and the colors held. He did some just on very, very wet icing. It held. This is unusual for sprinkles in general and for a naturally colored sprinkle to hold all of its color like this, I think this is a great product. There.

Female: I agree.

Lori: I will bring back all different options of ways to mix this up. And we can decide what we think it should look like. If the concept is something that you think we should be doing, then vote for this product and we will rework it.

*[End of sprinkles tasting panel conversation. Upbeat music begins.]*

Tara: And then we voted.

Matt: Now, the tasting panel voting is a very specific tally. It's a super majority. There must be 70%, a minimum of 70% of the panelists approving a product. If you have 10 panelists, at least 7 of them must vote yes. No exceptions. We're looking for products with the greatest chance of success with customers, always.

Tara: This was a very preliminary round for the sprinkles, and they passed this round of voting. And the next thing you know, Lori and I were on a plane headed to the sprinkles factory in Spain.

*[Jet taking off in the background.]*

Tara: One thing we wanted to discuss with the supplier was how to get the colors we wanted using only naturally derived sources. We always want to use colors that come from naturally derived ingredients as opposed to chemicals or artificial dyes.

*[Sprinkles factory.]*

Lori: Do you have them divided by what are the natural colors and what are the artificial colors since we're only using...

Male: This is the artificial color, and this is the natural color.

Lori: Oh, okay, okay, and where do the natural colors come from?

Male: Like sugar, like potato starch. This is one ingredient.

Lori: Yes.

Male: Not one additive. It's not considered one additive. Understand me?

Lori: Yeah.

Male: If you put carrot, the product come orange.

Lori: So, when we talk, when we talk about red, you can use beet rather than cochineal and keep the cochineal out, correct?

Male: The red is not really red. If you put a little yellow, make the red more intense.

Lori: It's just like printing on paper.

Male: Yes, yes!

Lori: It's the same thing with ink, right?

Male: The same thing.

Lori: So, you're doing with...

Male: Yes, the same thing.

Lori: ...powder food color. So, essentially what I want to do when we're, after we've gone through everything, is take different things and mix them to come up with the mix that we actually want.

Matt: Alright, so when do you get to the fun part?

Tara: Oh, you mean picking out the cute little shapes that will be in Trader Joe's holiday sprinkles?

Matt: Exactly.

Tara: Okay, let's fast forward.

*[Fast forwarding tape.]*

Lori: So, let's mix. Let's do some mixing. I want to create the holiday mix.

Tara: Those are the...

Tour Guide: Let's see what else you have. Red, white, green.

Male: Christmas tree, of course.

Tara: Stars.

Lori: What are the, yeah, stars, different sized stars. I want, I want to create...

Male: A normal Christmas mix is stars, Christmas tree, and this, uh, uh, uh, Santa, candy cane. We have also Santa boot, but this is too bigger, too bigger for one mix.

Lori: But, um, I want to add in the confetti and things. Really, really fun. Yes, I love these stars.

Tara: Oh, look at those.

Lori: Love these.

Male: Natural also. This is natural.

Lori: Fantastic. Yeah, we need more red. I want the stars.

Male: Smaller stars in red is better.

Lori: Yeah.

Male: Maybe.

Lori: It needs a little more green, I think.

Matt: Now we want more green? I can't imagine, can you people from any other retailer fussing over exactly which shapes and colors go into their sprinkles?

Tara: I can, and I thought about that while we were there. Like, is this overkill? Are we putting too much effort into this? But the reality is, no, we weren't. This is what we do. To make sure we're getting the best product for our customers.

Matt: So, let's jump to the end of this sprinkles product development story. Lori and Tara, when you return from Spain with some really great specific ideas for holiday sprinkles, and jumping over several more steps, tasting panels, stops along the way. Those sprinkles, they're in stores now for baking.

*[Transition – changing the subject.]*

Tara: We can't tell you how many holiday products never make it past the tasting panel.

Matt: Oh, hold on. I actually, I think I have that. Uh, yep. It's a lot.

Tara: (laughs) But our product developers don't get frustrated, much. They listen closely to the concerns that are raised, they learn from those, and if it's a type of product we all think has potential if we get it right, they keep coming back with new variations.

Matt: Case in point, large chocolate coins, which we will have in stores for the holidays this year.

Tara: Yeah, these are super fun. I'm going to make sure I have some of these tucked away in the back of a cabinet where my kids won't find them.

Matt: I hope they don't listen to this podcast.

Tara: Oh, not a chance. More of my voice in their life? I don't think they need that, Matt.

Matt: These are great for stocking stuffers, or if you need to up the ante at the Thursday night poker, potluck, party.

Tara: (chuckles) So back in January when these were “paneled,”

Matt: Yes, “panel” can also be a verb. It's defined as the act of presenting a product to the Trader Joe's tasting panel.

Tara: One of our product developers, Trang, hoped that this version of the large chocolate coin would be the one that finally got approved.

Trang: So, we have paneled these in the past. We still think it's a great, compelling item. We've improved the chocolate. It's \$1.99 for 3.17 ounces. That is more than in line with our other chocolate bars. We can print our own label. We're thinking about doing a sticker on the back that's an easy peel so that you can give it to whoever you want.

Male: What would we do with this? What would we do with the art?

Matt: There's so many things that we can do, and I think the trick is to sort of have it be fun and just enough of us, but not be too crazy out there.

Male: I think it's fun. Are we worried about breakage though?

Trang: So, they package these all the time. If you, in the UK, they have them at almost every huge retailer and it will come in its own little master carton that you can probably put out, so we're not worried about that.

Matt: Product Developer Trang, she was working with the supplier in the Netherlands with Marc and his company to improve the quality of the chocolate in this large coin. Improve it from iterations we previously saw from different sources, versions which we did not approve. And we had to make sure that improving the quality didn't upset the cost that maintained this balance between quality and price that set us up for the value we were hoping to present.



Tara: Marc and his company helped us get it done. And so, this year we have, in addition to the Coins of the World, we have large chocolate coins in our stores for the holidays.

*[Radio transmission.]*

Matt: Come in Netherlands. Netherlands, do you copy? Over.

Tara: Hey Marc, are you there?

Marc: Yes, I am.

Tara: We're really, really happy to have you with us tell us what it is that your company does.

Marc: Well, we were founded in 1899 so, next year we will exist 125 years. We actually started as a bakery. These days we only focus on chocolate in our chocolate factory in the Netherlands.

Matt: I'm amazed at the level of detail on these coins that you make. I mean, they're so close to actual coins. How can you even do that?

Marc: Many of our workers here have been with the company for many, many years. One of them, for instance, is our own mold maker. And he's been working with the company for almost 30 years now. It's a craftsmanship.

Matt: Absolutely, I'm thinking it's, it's as much a sculptural piece of work as it is something that winds up being a chocolate.

Marc: Exactly. We can make molds very, very detailed. We received from Trader Joe's the artwork, and then our mold maker took that artwork and we made a proposal how the coin could look like with the design that we received from you.

Matt: Your team took what was a two-dimensional image and added the third dimension to make that image in relief. So, it becomes like architectural, sculptural, you're working in depth. When you open them, when you remove the foil, you carefully lift that piece of foil off, the chocolate coin is beautiful.

Marc: Thank you.

Matt: It's true.

Tara: The Coins of the World that we have sold for years and years are also made by your company. We knew we were going to get something great. It has depth and dimension and then you bite into it and it's delicious.

Matt: And I mean, the puns just write themselves. These chocolate coins have currency. They carry monetary weight in so many ways and they just feel great in the hand, on the palette.

Tara: So, Marc, how long is the production process?

Marc: I think we talked about this whole project that started end of October 2022. The project was approved in mid of January. And then we received the artwork and we finalized the artwork for the mold somewhere beginning of March. And the first shipping out was end of June.

Tara: Those are sent on a ship...

Marc: Yes.

Tara: ...across the ocean.

Marc: Exactly. So, some of the containers ended up at the east coast, but also some of the containers had to end up on the west coast.

Matt: It is like a freighter loaded with gold treasure.

Tara: This is a very valuable ship.

Marc: We need also need to make sure that the coins are shipped temperature controlled. The ideal temperature for chocolate is between 15 and 21 degrees Celsius. If it's too hot, of course, it will melt, but also too cold is not good for the chocolate.

Matt: So, 15 to 21 degrees Celsius, that would be between about 59 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit, not really a big range.

Tara: We recently had the opportunity to shoot some video inside your facility, Marc. And while we weren't allowed to shoot some of the process because it's secret, and we completely understand that, um, starting in December, you can see the video that we made about making the large chocolate coins and the Coins of the World, the smaller ones in the little gold mesh bag, at [traderjoes.com](http://traderjoes.com) and on our YouTube channel.

Matt: Marc, you work in a magical place that produces chocolate coins. What's your favorite part of the work that you do?

Marc: When I come into the office in the morning, I first want to go into the factory to feel the smell of chocolate and then to see all our production workers who are so dedicated to make the best products that they, that they can. And it's really what I said before, craftsmanship.

Matt: That's a great, great way to start the day. The smell of chocolate.

Marc: The people here are proud when we ship out these quality products and that we see them in store. That makes us very, very proud.

Tara: Marc, thank you so very much.

Matt: And please share with your team our appreciation for all their work, because their pride is well earned.

*[Transition to new topic.]*

Matt: Hey, do we have time to eavesdrop once more on the holiday tasting panel?

*[Music ends.]*

Tara: Um, yeah.

Matt: Okay, good. I am so excited about these new stollen crisps, and if I remember correctly, the tasting panel was, too.

Tara: Cue the flashback please.

*[Flashing back. Light upbeat music begins.]*

Jessie: You have a little crisp in front of you. So, this is stollen crisp. So, the inspiration we sell a ton of stollen during the holiday season. It's...stollen is a lot of citrusy flavors plus usually studded with fruit. So, this one is a crisp that is has lemon and orange peel and then studded with raisins and then we dusted it with a light coating of sugar to give it, to make it look like stollen bread. Um, it's really great on its own. Almost tastes like a crispy cookie. But with, like, with some cheeses, it also is great on a cheese plate. We do sell three other crisps during the season. So, we have the Fig and Olive, Raisin and Rosemary, and then we have the Pistachio Pomegranate.

Jon: I think it's a great idea. I saw that box and I was ready to buy it. I haven't even tasted it.

Tara: Really good.

Female: Yea, it's really good.

Tara: Love it with bleu cheese.

*[Transition to close.]*

Tara: Listening to that, I am shocked and amazed.

Matt: At how quick the conversation was?

Tara: Well, that, yes. Everybody loved the stollen crisps. But I'm amazed that you didn't give us a bad joke about the crisps being stolen.

Matt: I probably did. I hope I did, but just maybe not loud enough for the microphone to pick it up. But to be clear, this is stollen with two L's.

Tara: Right, like the stollen bread that's a classic holiday product at Trader Joe's, and it's also back this year.

*[Closing music begins.]*

Matt: Alright, this was a fun episode. I mean, you went to Spain, we heard from the Netherlands.

Tara: And Baltimore. Don't forget Baltimore. Our next episode of Inside Trader Joe's will be the Annual Holiday Shopping List so, hit that free subscribe or follow button to make sure you get it.

Matt: It *is* free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until the shopping list, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.

Tara: Happy holidays, too.

Matt: Yeah, and happy holidays, too.