

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — ICYMI: What's not in TJ's Products

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: At Trader Joe's we get a lot of questions, and we really do love answering them.

Matt: So please, keep them coming.

Tara: Okay, like everybody sees the ingredient panel on a package. So, that's what's in a Trader Joe's product. But what ingredients are not in a Trader Joe's product?

Matt: Another great question for another ICYMI, In Case You Missed It, mini episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

[Theme music begins with no two bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.]

Tara: ICYMI, what's not in a Trader Joe's product? This is one of those topics where we could do a whole full-length episode on this...

Matt: Sure.

Tara: ...because there's a lot, but I think for the sake of ICYMI simplification, we have a list of ingredients that we simply do not allow to be used in our private label products.

[Theme music ends. Light music begins.]

Tara: And those are ingredients that are used in food products by manufacturers all over the country in the world.

Matt: Yes. And so that's a really good point of clarification because we don't have things like spray paint or model glue.

Tara: (laughs) Right.

Matt: Like you don't use those in food, ever.

Tara: Right.

Matt: You shouldn't. So, we're not being silly about that. These are commonly used ingredients in commercial food and beverage production that we have chosen, often related to customer feedback, to not use. So, for us, being deliberate about what we do is really important and deliberately avoiding certain things, that's also important.

Tara: The list is really long and it's actually kind of shocking to see how long the list is and it's not even an exhaustive list. It's really just guidance for us internally. Like, "Hey, red flag." So, we don't use synthetic colors in our private label products. We used to say we don't use artificial colors, but because there isn't really a defined understanding of what artificial might mean to various people, like somebody might say, "Well, you put cherry juice in that yogurt, and it made it red, and yogurt doesn't naturally have red. So, that's an artificial color because you've artificially enhanced the color of yogurt, which is creamy colored."

Matt: Exactly. So, from a regulatory perspective, that is artificially colored or it has sort of an introduced color that wasn't, for lack of a better term, naturally present to begin with.

Tara: Most people like, who are not in the grocery business, will still say artificial color. We use the term synthetic color, and we don't use synthetic color. So, if we are using a coloring agent to add a hue to food or beverage, it is a naturally derived color. So, it might be from beet juice, or it might be from carrots or spinach. Something like that.

Matt: Yeah, so everyone's like, "But my sour jellybeans, do you mean to say that there are vegetables, you're sneaking carrots into my jellybeans?" Yes, kids, we are, but with the best of intentions. Plant based vegetable sourced colors are so great, and the food technology, the science behind this, just keeps getting better. Previously difficult to achieve colors like true blue is now achievable through a combo of a type of an algae, of a spirulina, and some other floral material. You can get these great, bright, vibrant colors that come from plants.

Tara: What I love about this conversation is we're talking about what's not in our products via what is in our products.

Matt: It's this group of stuff, this list qualified with artificial, artificial flavors. You mentioned artificial colors, even artificial preservatives, we use flavors, we use colors, we even use things that have a preserving function like salt, for example.

Tara: Wait, wait, talk about that. Some people will say, "Oh, Trader Joe's, you have too much salt." First of all, salt makes things taste good, but salt is one of the first preservatives.

Matt: So, salt absolutely has a desiccation factor drying. It minimizes water activity from a bacterial perspective.

Tara: Oh, you make it sound so delicious.

Matt: Suffice to say that salt can preserve and get, you know, salt, I really appreciate you saying that some people say like, "Ah, there's, there's too much sodium. I wish there was less sodium, lower salt in your stuff, please!" That's often a result of our tasting panel of actually tasting things. So, like, a soup is probably going to be greatly enhanced with a little bit of salt. And so that is something that we're always thinking about. It is true that sometimes we have things with more sodium or less sodium, but you can certainly trust that there's sodium reading on that nutrient fact label on the package, that's information that you can use to make a choice for you.

Tara: I want us to really focus on the things that we're not using: the synthetic colors and no artificial flavors, and we don't use MSG as a preservative in our products.

Matt: That's true. It's like it has a bunch of functions, probably mostly as a flavor potentiator that was based on customer feedback. All of these things are not set in stone. Aspects of our business, they evolve and change over time. Science, food technology changes. Our understanding evolves over time. So, who's to say what we might add to the list? We might have a new clarification and an understanding for example, on a sweetener basis, high fructose corn syrup was something that got a lot of negative attention. We heard from customers that they didn't want to see it and we don't use that. And now there are some other sweeteners that probably have the same nutrient impact, I think that another big topic is, on the list of things that we don't use, the things we avoid, under current nomenclature, current naming bioengineered ingredients, also known as GMO, genetically

modified organisms, however you spell it, whatever you call them, we don't use them, based on customer feedback, and that's been an interesting thing as it relates to even something like a tortilla chip. Corn, corn, now, so much of the corn grown in this country is from genetically modified or bioengineered seed sources. Most of that corn actually doesn't even go into food production. It goes into things like ethanol or livestock feed, and yet, finding non-GMO corn for a great tortilla chip, well, that's what our product development group and the merchandising team, they do a lot of work on that and spend a lot of time on that subject. So, no GMOs, no bioengineered ingredients. Things like partially hydrogenated oils, there were some governmental regulations around that. So, those once upon a time we had to be actively involved in avoiding them, less so now. And what's interesting too, is what we don't have in our products by way of ingredient, a lot of hidden marketing costs. And that sounds a little snappy that in and of itself almost sounds like a little marketing line. And maybe it is, but it's true because our products bear the cost of goods, the cost it takes to get them from the place making them, to the place selling them, your neighborhood Trader Joe's, and we don't add anything else on top of that. There's no movie star spokesperson, try as we might. Those are some of the things that we don't do. And yet what that causes us to really think about and focus on are the things that we do have. How can we have a shelf life that still protects the safety and the quality without using synthetic artificial preservatives? How can we have something taste amazingly intensely of blueberries and not use an artificial blueberry flavor? This all comes back like, so many things, to the tasting panel. And the incredible work leading up to behind the tasting panel to find the best producer able to create the best expression of that idea of that product to be able to bring it to you at your store.

[Music ends. Transition to closing. Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: I'm Tara Miller. Thanks for listening.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan. And Thanks for listening. ICYMI, In Case You Missed It.

Tara: That's some of the stuff that's *not* in a Trader Joe's product.

[Music ends.]