

# Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 57: Wine Wonderings

Tara: Are you nervous?

Matt: No, this is our 57th episode, so not really.

Tara: Because we're talking about wine.

*[Light music begins.]*

Matt: Oh, right, right. And wine does make people nervous. Now our goal in this episode is to help people, to help customers overcome insecurities about wine.

Tara: Exactly. So if you worry that you'll sound silly when you ask for a bottle that you'll mispronounce something, or you might think, "Ah, what if I order a Chablis when I really want a Chardonnay?"

Matt: And to that I say, a Chablis is always a Chardonnay, but not every Chardonnay is a Chablis.

Tara: Okay, see, this is exactly what I'm talking about. This is the kind of info that we're gonna share on this episode, and along the way we'll recommend some wines you might like.

Matt: Ready? Let's go Inside Trader Joe's.

*[Light music ends. 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 marketing product guy.

Tara: When it comes to feeling embarrassed if you get something wrong about wine, you just really shouldn't.

Matt: You know if you're hanging out with people who will judge you by your commentary on wine, that's not good.

Tara: But that's a whole other podcast.

Matt: Or a therapy session. Remember, the crew at your Trader Joe's will not judge. In fact, they love getting questions about wine or anything really.

Tara: And later on in this episode, we're gonna head out to a store and talk with a couple of wine section leaders who are really good at answering questions about wine.

*[Theme music ends.]*

Tara: Let's start with some basics. Professor Matt, help us out.

*[Matt clears throat. Taps lectern. Upbeat string music begins.]*

Matt: Well, you'd think that a wine label would be a great place to start, and it is. In general, wines made in the U.S., they tend to be labeled by, classified by, varietal or the type of grape. You've seen Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Grigio and all the other wines named for the type of grape that's used to make them. The weird thing about that is they don't necessarily have to be 100%. So you can have a Cabernet Sauvignon that is 75% Cabernet, and the other 25% might be some Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, a bunch of other grapes almost used like spices in a seasoning rack, because blending grapes is an age-old winemaking practice. Most of the winemaking world they make blends and they've always made blends, so a Bordeaux, a Burgundy, those are blends and they don't necessarily on those labels, they don't necessarily tell you what those blends are. There are some classic grapes that are really specifically cultivated in different growing regions, that's where there's that continental or intercontinental divide. Wines from the U.S. labeled by type of grape, wines from other parts of the world are often named for their region.

Tara: I mean some of the more famous ones throughout Italy and France. You have Bordeaux, you have Burgundy, Valpolicella, Chianti, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, I really just wanted to say Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. How'd I do?

Matt: Really, really well, let's not leave out Rioja from Spain, and then apologies, every other great growing region.

Tara: I feel like I'm at the Oscars and I'm like, I'm sorry if I left anybody out. So let's go back to Chablis and Chardonnay.

*[Music transition.]*

Tara: So if I'm getting this correctly, Chardonnay is the grape, Chablis is the region, and that region is known for its Chardonnay grapes, but they are labeled, if they're coming from France specifically, they are labeled Chablis as opposed to Chardonnay, which is what you could expect if you're buying a wine, say, from California.

Matt: Basically, yes. That is it and it can be tricky. It can also be fun. It can be a little bit of a mystery. Some wine labels are more forthcoming than others. Some wine labels will be very clear on what the blend is, even if it's labeled as a single thing, but they might not.

Tara: So maybe adding a little more confusion before we get to the clarity, there are some exceptions even here in the U.S., right? To that method of naming wines that, you know, obviously if you see it says it's a red blend, then you know it's a blend. But if you see the word Rosé, that doesn't refer to a particular kind of grape or a growing region, or if you see the word Meritage, that's an entirely different beast.

Matt: Rosé is more about the process by which that wine was made than it is anything else. The pigmented red skins of the grape were left in the juice to macerate or to sort of soak a little bit longer than they would for a white wine so you get a little bit of coloration, you get that nice Rosé, that little blush, and you can get different levels of color, different intensities of color, depending upon time, and the amount of skin contact there. That's Rosé. Meritage is kind of a fanciful name. It's kind of a fanciful name to make something maybe sound bigger or more important than just a blend of grapes. It sounds a little higher end than red blend, but that's what it is. It's maybe attributed to some form of chip on the shoulder syndrome, whereby California grape growers were wanting to compete with the Old World, with Bordeaux, and so these noble varietals, these noble types of grapes, they wanted to show that they could grow them really well here in California and make wines that could be just as good as the Old World counterparts.

Tara: And I think they did that. So those noble Bordeaux grapes are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Carmenere. Did I pronounce that correctly?

Matt: Yeah, and there's so much that goes into a wine that is beyond the grape type, the grape varietal itself. You know, a French term comes to mind the terroir, but it's where it was grown, and not just the soil, but the climate and what's going on with the weather for that particular growing season. That all affects a grape, and so it's why vintages, vintage dates, that year of harvest that you so often see on a bottle of wine, that has been so important for so long, it used to really help you understand, well, this was a good year, this was a not very good year, this was a bad year. Should I buy an '82 or an '83? The science behind wine making has gotten to the point where consistency is a stable state, and it's not so variable. Wine making used to be a lot of hope that things would turn out, and now we're able to work to specific ends and vintage dates probably don't show so much variation from year to year as they once did.

Tara: The reality is the wine that we offer for sale at Trader Joe's is, generally speaking, wine that we hope that you enjoy soon, right? It's not wine that we're offering with the expectation that you're going to cellar it for 20 years, although there are some that you could do that with. Having that ability to be consistent allows people to know that when they pick up that bottle, if it's a similar bottle to one they bought six months ago but has a different date on it, they're still gonna enjoy it. They don't have to feel like they're taking a risk to buy a bottle of wine.

*[Music transition.]*

Tara: Okay, Matt, sometimes I see the name of a winery and sometimes I see the name of a vineyard. What's up with winery versus vineyard? I kind of always thought they were the same thing.

Matt: I think of it this way. I think of grapes as coming from vineyards and wine coming from wineries. Now, some wineries maintain their own vineyards and they grow the grapes that they use. Many wineries make more wine than they have acreage growing grapes to cover, so they buy additional grapes. There are even some wineries that have no vineyards whatsoever. They basically only buy crushed grapes and then they have a place where they just make wine. It's like you're either a farmer or a winemaker and not too many enterprises try to cover both. There are certainly those, and if you see the phrase estate, estate grown, means that the grapes used in the wine by the winery were grown on that same property within that estate, and if you see estate bottled, it's that plus the wine bottled there on site. That's not something you see too much of these days.

Tara: We're probably getting wine from all of those kinds of suppliers, from the large suppliers, occasionally from the really small ones, those real niche players. You kind of have to cover all your bases if you're dealing in that many bottles of wine.

Matt: And we're not trying to have everything under the sun. Far, far from it. We're trying to have a very tightly edited selection of wines and within that, we still want to have pretty much something for everybody who comes in to shop.

*[Music ends. Transition to car on the road.]*

Matt: Okay, so I guess this is what we would call an actual road show. We're on the road doing this show.

Tara: We're Crosby and Hope. Hope and Crosby.

Matt: Exactly. We're heading up Highway 101. If you're from California, you would just call it 'the' 101.

Tara: If you're a fan of 60's music, it's Ventura Highway, right?

Matt: Oh, yeah, yes. Did that song come out in the 60's?

Tara: Early 70's.

Matt: Early 70's. But you could even be a fan of early 70's music.

Tara: You could.

Matt: We're just at the point where we can actually see the Pacific Ocean. I'm thinking this is a picture perfect day to head up to Santa Barbara, specifically to the Goleta Trader Joe's.

Tara: They are just really stellar at talking about the wine that we sell at Trader Joe's. I don't really understand it as much as the folks who are doing the work in the stores all the time.

Matt: I feel like we're on the Mr. Microphone commercial. "Hey, good looking. Be back to pick you up later."

Tara: (laughs)

*[Transition to store interior. Upbeat music begins.]*

Matt: Okay, so we managed to make it to the back room of Trader Joe's in Goleta, and we're bothering as many crew members as possible.

Tara: We're gonna talk about wine guys. If you could introduce yourselves.

Dale: I'm Dale.

Tara: What do you do at the store, Dale?

Dale: Scrub toilets, sell wine, and have lots of fun.

Tara: (laughs) All right. How about you, sir?

Cooney: My name is Michael Cooney. Everyone calls me Cooney cuz there's so many Michaels. I work at Store 59 on Milpas in Santa Barbara. I've set up a lot of stores, their wine sections. I love wine. I go wine tasting quite a bit myself.

Matt: Tell us about your store.

Dale: Our store is probably the most fun store I've ever been in. We're near the UCSB campus. We have a lot of young and vibrant people that come here, shop and work.

Cooney: I feel like our store's an old established store in Santa Barbara. We do sell a lot of wine, beer, and liquor.

Tara: It seems like being in the Santa Barbara area, there's like this great laid back beachy vibe.

Dale: The only reason Cooney and I are here is cuz there's no surf today.

Cooney: (laughs)

Matt: Talk us through walking through the wine section.

Cooney: Well I guess what we did is, we made an area that was just this really nice nook for the wine that just fits it better. Instead of having one shelf full of Gewurztraminer, you know?

[Music transition.]

Cooney: The customers will, a lot of 'em will go for our suggestions. They trust us, and that's trust built through time, right? Like Dale knows this. You walk down the beach and you, people hail you, you know, they're like, "I know you!" You know, and like, so they...

Matt: You're thinking, "What did I tell 'em to buy last time they..."

Room: (laughter)

Cooney: I mean, I've had people, you know, just love what suggestions you might give.

Matt: What goes into deciding which wines are stacked? And a stack is literally just that, it's a stack of cases.

Cooney: Knowing what sells and knowing what people are looking for like that French wine, the blend, the Maison Barbotot. In our area at Milpas we stack even higher end Chardonnays, higher end Sauvignon Blancs, New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs are very trendy, Rosés obviously. So, and then we might do a little more Rosé or Sauvignon Blanc in the summer season. Maybe cut back on the Cabs and Merlots and Shiraz. We're lucky in our area, we get to get Santa Barbara Winery. Our brand wine sells like crazy once the people see it like the Diamond Reserve Cab, the Pinot from Santa Rita Hills. The most recent one we had, which was like, we couldn't keep on the shelf. We try to hit every price point just like you would in the meat section you have, it's the same with wine. You gotta have the choices for people.

Matt: Dale, tell us about the part of the store here in Goleta that has wine.

Dale: It is very simple. People are always grabbing something for a late afternoon sunset picnic or something. Straight down all the way through the imported wines, and then right into the red wines of California and Washington and Oregon. Around the corner we come down the white wines, and then in the very middle of that is stacks. Gives you an opportunity to see things that you don't normally see. I'll probably do something, giving a little brief explanation of how it's produced and why it's a little bit more money. I'll just take the cardboard separators and write stuff on it. You can walk in not knowing anything about wine, but you'll know if it's something that you want to keep in your mouth or get it out real quick. So...

Matt: It sounds like a dental visit here. I mean, I don't...

Room: (laughter)

Dale: And I'll ask 'em things. You'll know how much they know about wine, how much they know about the person they're gonna share it with, what their palette might be like if they're just looking for themselves. Do you or the person you're buying for smoke cigarettes? Do you like dark chocolate? Light chocolate?

Matt: It's like the *Cosmopolitan* questionnaire.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Yeah, this is fascinating, Dale. Do you like pina coladas? Walks on the beach?

Tara: Don't even. (laughs)

Dale: If it's younger people, you kind of know where to start. I mean, the palette still wants sweet stuff. And sometimes you'll get a hold of somebody whose parents drank wine and they always drank Cabernet Sauvignon and they're willing to start moving into some of that stuff. And I will give them three choices and explain all three what these are like, what, you know, what sounds more like you. And if they just aren't sure, I'll say, "Well, here's what I think. I think you oughta start right here and take a picture of it if you like it." They text it to themselves so they can find it real quick and they always know what they are gonna get.

Matt: You have a thing that has a camera and you can't find the photo you took, so you send the phone's image to the phone to be able to find it?

Dale: Right.

Tara: So it's in your text messages. I totally get it. I do it all the time. I do it all the time, text myself.

Cooney: I always love when you're talking to a customer and they can't find the photo and you end up going through their whole scroll and you're just like looking at their whole lives.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: You're like, "Nice sunset!"

Cooney: Yeah. I love your dog. Yeah, it's pretty funny.

Matt: I'm sure there's a way to organize that stuff, not that I know how, but...

Tara: There is totally a way to organize it, but it involves being organized.

Dale: (laughs)

Tara: Right?

Cooney: I would say the majority of people will go with our recommendations. Once they get to know you, they'll be like, "Okay, I'm gonna go with Dale's favorite, you know, I only have 10 minutes to get outta here or whatever." And when I started at Trader Joe's, I was a surfer bro that just had like a microbrew and like, our old captain, he's all, "Hey, try this chocolate with this wine." And I remember I was on a date with a girl and I was like, "Oh my God, like, you know, genius." Boom. Just opened my mind up. When it comes to newer crew members, I just tell them, tell people what you like. If you like a wine, you don't have to say all the nuances. You don't have to describe it to a "T." You just need to say, I like this wine. And maybe have

two reasons why you like it. Maybe it just, you know, balances out well and it goes down well, whatever, great with whatever food you might like, and then go to the stacks. Those are the good selling wines.

Tara: I think that's a really great little inside tip right there. In whatever store, whatever Trader Joe's you shop in, the stacks are the wines that sell at the highest rate, at the fastest rate. So you can probably be sure those are gonna be really good.

Matt: Yeah. I mean this is, you know, this is that difference between the Trader Joe's approach to being a grocer and so many other retailers where we don't sell the space in the store. So the crew has made the determination, the decision to put something in a stack because they need that much product on hand to support the day's business. Or they are driven to share it cuz they think it's worthwhile, it's worthy of customers' attention. Lots of other places, you know, if you're in a certain part of the store or a certain zone or displayed in a certain way, it's because the company behind that brand, that product, paid for that presentation.

Tara: Even in wine.

Matt: Even in wine, absolutely.

Tara: It's, you know, there's this romance that people associate with wine. And that's great but it's unnecessary. Wine isn't produced by magic and romance. It's produced with agriculture and chemistry.

Matt: Or we could have the same romantic considerations for things like smoked trout.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Like I don't understand why it exists in one place and not others. Where lots of people work really hard to make that can of smoked trout an amazingly consistent, wonderful thing.

Tara: I think one of the things that's really important to understand about how we buy wine on our end is that it's kind of the same way we buy food. We, in that we taste every single wine that is brought to our attention before we decide whether or not to put it on our shelves in the stores.

Matt: The tasting panel rules. We tried it. We liked it. We think it's worth your consideration. Don't take our word for it. We hope that you like it too but we think everything here is good. We acknowledge that there are differences, stylistic differences, flavor differences, and yet we feel that we've done the work to identify what's a great version of that through the tasting panel.

Tara: Should we taste some wine?

Cooney: It's 12:54p, we're good.

Dale: (laughs)

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: We brought some wines with us that will be in the stores very soon.

*[Cork pop.]*

Dale: My favorite sound.

Tara: All right, which is this one?

Cooney: Pinot Noir. Trader Joe's Grand Reserve Pinot Noir Carneros 2021 Lot 23.

Matt: Those lot numbers are symbolic or signifying the producing winery, that particular wine, that combo. Now, even if there's a new vintage, a re-up of a particular Cabernet from this area and that producing winery, we use the same lot number. So the lot number on those reserve wines is just an indication who made it. Now there's a little bit of secrecy there because we don't put the producing wineries name on that label on purpose, but this will help you and us keep track of them.

Tara: Lot 23. So this one comes from the Carneros region, which is, that's that region that straddles Napa and Sonoma, right? Good for Pinot cuz it's a little cooler.

Cooney: Bottled by Carneros cellars in Napa, 14 ½% percent alcohol. So it's a little bit up there.

Matt: This is interesting because it smells like Pinot Noir grapes, which a lot of Pinot Noirs don't. You could have up to 25% other grapes in the blend.

Tara: A lot of the California Pinots especially like they've been blended with so many other things that they have, like that super red thing going on and Pinot is really light usually.

Dale: That's why I kind of like this one cuz it is a little bit more so. A little bit.

Tara: Yeah. Be a really good Thanksgiving dinner wine.

Dale: Yes.

Tara: Cuz it's not so heavy and all the foods are so heavy on Thanksgiving.

Matt: Yeah, although there's enough, um, with that higher alcohol content and a little bit of the, there's sort of like a little bit of a structure tannic thing going on. It's pretty big. Like this could work as a cocktail type of wine too.

*[Small transition.]*

Cooney: Next on the list here is the Traders Grand Reserve. It's a Malbec, a single vineyard from Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina, 2019. This is a Lot 111 and hey, it looks like it's imported into San Luis Obispo, which is just an hour and a half north of here.

Tara: Is this our first Grand Reserve from Argentina?

Matt: I believe so.

Tara: I think it is, yeah?

Matt: That's my understanding.

*[Wine pouring into glass.]*

Tara: The Malbec is kind of like the most famous grape from Argentina, yeah?

Cooney: I always think about Malbec when I think about having barbecue.

Matt: Yeah.

Cooney: It has a nice level of acidity so like something with a little heavier, fattier, mouth feel. This would work nicely to kind of clean up your palette.

Dale: Good full body.

Matt: You can see right away as compared to that Pinot Noir, this Malbec looks really different in the glass. It's a little more opaque, a little darker color, heavier pigmentation here. Not as see-through as the Pinot Noir was.

Tara: It's even a little more viscous on the side of the glass, like it, you know, it sort of clings a little bit differently.

*[Small transition.]*

Cooney: Now we're onto the Trader Joe's Diamond Reserve. So it's the upper echelon of the Trader Joe's Reserves.

Dale: These Diamond Reserves have been wonderful.

Cooney: Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley, 2020, Lot number three.

Tara: Diamond Reserve number three.

Dale: Here we go.

*[Wine pouring into glass.]*

Tara: You know, the Diamond Reserve, this, the real has to be really special wine.

Matt: It's from a particular sort of sub Appalachian within an area.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: That's small. So supply is necessarily limited.

Cooney: Whoa, okay. It doesn't matter what it is, I'm taking it.

Matt: Yeah. I mean, Oakville's not a giant area.

Tara: The whole idea of the Trader Joe's Reserve wines, they're like, at every level the expectation is just greater, right? So there's the Petit Reserve, which is like this, a good basic version of this varietal from this area.

Cooney: A lot of those have been the best value.

Matt: I think so too.

Cooney: Six or \$7.99, somewhere in that range.

Matt: And oftentimes we find ourselves at the tasting panel saying, "God, this is worth a heck of a lot more than \$6.99.

Cooney: Yeah.

Matt: Okay, let's make it \$6.99. Like, you know, because that's just such a mind blowing deal.

Tara: And then you go to Reserve and it's like, okay, that's a little bit better. And then you go to Grand Reserve and that's a little bit better. And then for a while, like we thought the Platinum Reserve, that's the best we're gonna get for the, with these kinds of wines. Like we just can't, we can't do any better than that. So we did the Platinum Reserve and then suddenly we were, we found ourselves being presented with some wines from these very specific growing areas that were so good that we could offer at these tremendous values. So the Diamond Reserve for us, that's \$19.99, but those wines might be \$60, \$70, \$80 in someone else's label or more.

Cooney: \$19.99, that's stellar.

Tara: Right?

Cooney: Wow.

Tara: And I think people who shop with us who, who know what we do with wine...

Cooney: They know it now.

Tara: They know it.

Cooney: People seek it out.

Tara: People have had good experiences. So now when they see it, it's like, "Okay, I'll try that cuz it, I know it's a good deal. It's gonna be a really good wine for that money."

Matt: Yeah and then therein lies our work that you can't goof up that trust.

Tara: Right.

Matt: It has to deliver on those expectations.

Cooney: This is the one that I look forward to the most every year. Like I had this Diamond, I had this for Christmas this last year. I bought a bunch of bottles, and yeah. But I opened one up the day before just cuz I was like, okay let's mm-hmm, and I opened up the day of, and that breathing time really does that Cab well.

Matt: It changes, yeah.

Tara: For people who are really wine people, this is basic knowledge. I understand that. But for someone who's newer to wine or who doesn't really know why, why do you open it up early? Why do you want it to sit open?

Dale: You want that air coming in and bringing, exposing all the flavors that are kind of buried deep in there. They're tight when they're, when they've been compressed into that bottle, and then when the air hits it, it just starts opening up. The flavors start coming out. Just like when you have a warm steak versus a cold steak, more flavor.

Cooney: Cuz then your surface area increases. You might not have a decanter. I always do that before I have dinner. If I know I'm gonna have wine, I'll open it up. That's kind of the rule of thumb there. And then usually with chilled wines I tell 'em, you know, with a red you could put it in the fridge half an hour before you're gonna drink it with a white, take it out half an hour before you're gonna drink.

Matt: If you can spend a little bit of time with it and do some things by way of a process, the anticipation is like such an important ingredient to enjoying things.

Dale: It always tastes better at the beach though.

Matt: It does taste better at the beach.

Matt: What do you hear from customers by way of how they frame up their questions? Are they looking for wine to go with a really specific type of food? Or are they just looking for red or white wine or a certain price point?

Dale: I would say in this store, they're saying a wine for dinner, I'm having friends over, or we're going to someone's house and I'll always ask what they're having.

Cooney: How big is the food? How big is the wine? I just keep it really simple cuz just okay, you're having a big steak, have a big wine.

Matt: Yeah.

Cooney: Having a light fish, have a light wine. The fish can be tricky, you know, with salmon, people always ask for salmon and with a red it's Pinot or something like red.

Matt: Yeah. But I mean, I'm always amazed by how many people think that, you know, sort of, you know, other fish, light fish that they're disallowed from having red wine with that, you absolutely can, but there's a stylistic consideration.

Cooney: There is, yeah. Everyone has a different thought on it, but that's the beauty about it. As long as you know that, and that comes with the experience is understanding what you were talking about.

*[Small transition.]*

Tara: If you could tell Trader Joe's customers one thing about the wine section in your store, what would it be?

Dale: Value. Really good value.

Cooney: You can have a good time and you can not break the bank.

Matt: Mm-hmm.

Cooney: You don't have to get that \$50 Pinot, you can get one for \$12.99.

Matt: So really our hope is that shopping for wine at your Trader Joe's is like shopping for dinner on the frozen aisle or anywhere else in the store, that it's easy to find something you really like. Please ask us. We would love to help you figure out what is the perfect pairing with that pizza, that salad, or anything else on your plate.

Cooney: Yeah.

Tara: Good stuff guys. This has been fun. I had a good time.

Matt: Yeah, yeah. And so you should, between the two of you divvy up these unopened guys and take 'em back to your crew.

*[Matt handing over bottles of wine.]*

Cooney: Okay.

Matt: To share 'em, try 'em.

Tara: Share 'em with your...

*[Music ends. Closing music begins.]*

Tara: Did you know that we sell about 40 million bottles of wine every year at Trader Joe's?

Matt: I didn't.

Tara: If you wanna learn more about wine and everything else you'll find at Trader Joe's, be ready to receive every episode. Hit that free subscriber or follow button.

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

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.