

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 60: Customer Choice Awards 2023

[Up tempo schmaltzy show biz music.]

Matt: (announcer voice) The star products are arriving at the 14th Annual Trader Joe's Customer Choice Awards. Let's go down to the red carpet with Ryan Seacrest.

[Crowd roaring.]

Tara: We don't have a budget to hire Ryan Seacrest.

[Crowd moaning in disappointment.]

Tara: I think we should just start with the ceremony.

Matt: (announcer voice) Okay then. (normal voice) Let's go Inside Trader Joe's.

[Theme music begins and two bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.]

Tara: From the Trader Joe's mothership in Monrovia, California. I'm Tara Miller, director of words and phrases and clauses.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the marketing product guy.

Jon: And from Trader Joe's East Coast office in the old United Shoe Machinery Building in Boston, Massachusetts, this is crew member Jon Basalone.

Tara: Obviously we're all crew members, but you're also Trader Joe's president of stores.

Jon: Yes. And we all know that titles at Trader Joe's are really for our parents to use at cocktail parties and when they're playing cards with friends. But yes, that's true.

Tara: As you know, every year we ask our customers to share their 'must have' products across a bunch of categories.

[Theme music ends and light up beat music begins.]

Tara: And our team has been tabulating the votes nonstop so we're ready to announce the winners of the 14th Annual Customer Choice Awards.

Matt: I just am always so excited and glad to hear from customers what they think are our greatest products.

Jon: You know, it's funny, Matt, when I vote, I try to influence with my favorite products that I really want to stick around. For instance, the Green Tea with Pomegranate and Blueberry, I vote for that in beverages and it may be the only vote that it gets, but, you know, hoping to influence somebody somewhere.

Tara: Your beverage choice is not, you were not the only one who voted for that.

Jon: Can I ask about one more product? Sorry to interrupt.

Tara: Go ahead.

Jon: How did the Canned Smoked Trout Fillets do?

Matt: I don't think it even registered a blip.

Tara: But maybe if next year we instituted a favorite tin fish, it might rank.

Matt: It actually sells a lot, and not just to me or to Jon.

Tara: Since we've had these awards, there are a handful of products that always win their category. And while we love those products, we're looking at you Mandarin Orange Chicken, if the same products win in their category every single year, the awards are not really guiding people to try something new, right? Which is kind of what we hope.

[Music ends.]

Matt: And that's why we are so proud and excited that five products have graduated.

[Pomp and Circumstance Marches begins.]

Matt: And by that we mean that we have determined that these five products, they're no longer eligible, they're not eligible for your votes. That's because those five products are now the freshman class of the Trader Joe's Customer Choice Products Hall of Fame. There is such a thing now.

Tara: Jon, this is the main reason we wanted you here, to help pay tribute to these five fantastic inductees.

Jon: Oh, great.

Tara: We're gonna start with the Dark Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups.

Jon: People stop me on the street to talk about this product. The quality of the chocolate, the creaminess of the peanut butter, the time it takes to remove the little paper cup, is just enough time to really build your anticipation. Then deciding, am I going to eat this in two bites or just throw the whole peanut butter cup into my mouth?

Tara: We've changed categories a few times, right? But whenever there was a category where this product was eligible, it won.

[Music transition.]

Matt: Also unsurprising, the Unexpected Cheddar. It takes the cake as far as cheeses go...a cheesecake, that would be an interesting cheesecake. Maybe, maybe not.

Jon: No cheese I think has captured the hearts and minds of our customers like Unexpected Cheddar. We sort of cheated by adding hints of parmesan to cheddar cheese. What makes cheese taste better? More cheese, right? But that's what gives it that sort of, kinda has an umami flavor to it where it's really craveable.

Tara: It's a favorite for everyone I speak to about Trader Joe's cheese. Like what's your favorite cheese at Trader Joe's? And it's almost always that one's first and then something else. So this year we're giving room for something else, and the Unexpected Cheddar will be honored forever in the Hall of Fame.

Matt: Welcome aboard Unexpected Cheddar. Who's next?

[Music transition.]

Tara: Next is Soy Chorizo. And I have to say that even though we were very clear that this product was no longer eligible, it got a lot of votes. (laughs) People couldn't help themselves.

Jon: I'm a little surprised in a way that it, that it's in the Hall of Fame. I have to tell you this because, you know, a product with such a frustrating package to deal with, and I think that's a testament to how great it tastes, you know? You put up with a weird un-resealable tube in order to get a product packed with all the flavors and spice of chorizo. It's the best use of soy since crayons.

[Music ends.]

Matt: Okay, number four of the freshman class.

[Drum roll.]

Matt: Peanut Butter Filled Pretzel Nuggets.

[Audience applause. Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Not a surprise.

Tara: And these are the easiest things in the world to eat.

Matt: I beg to differ in that the plastic film used on these bags must be specially constructed that once you begin to tear it, it immediately shreds apart and you have to eat the entire bag.

Tara: So the key here is scissors.

Matt: I use my teeth.

Jon: The trick to these is, you know they're gonna be really good is when you take one out of the bag and you shake it, and you can hear the peanut butter in the pretzel. That means it's good, it's ripe, it's ready to go.

Matt: I think that's a hack.

[Music ends.]

Tara: The Peanut Butter Pretzel Nuggets hack.

[Small transition... a little music buildup.]

Tara: Our final inductee for the freshman class in the Trader Joe's Products Hall of Fame...

[Fanfare music.]

Tara: Mandarin Orange Chicken.

[Audience applause.]

Jon: I mean, let's hear it for candied protein.

Tara: (laughs)

Jon: Sweet and savory with a slight touch of citrus. I mean, glazed fried chicken, you know, what's not to like?

Tara: Every year since we've had these awards Mandarin Orange Chicken has won.

Matt: Absolutely. And in no way am I begrudging Mandarin Orange Chicken its crown, its position. I love it and I am so glad that something else has a shot.

Jon: (laughs)

Tara: (laughs) Okay, guys, we have gone through the five products that represent the freshman class of the Trader Joe's Product Hall of Fame. What I can tell you is there will be more, but this year, 2023, this is where we're starting.

Matt: Very nice.

Tara: Awesome. Thank you, Jon.

Jon: Thanks for having me as always. Congratulations to the five products that have been inducted into the Hall of Fame. And I can't wait for the day when Smoked Trout is also in the Hall of Fame.

Matt: It's on the horizon. I can see it.

Tara: (chuckles)

[Music ends.]

Tara: All right then...

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: to our nine voting categories here at the 14th Annual Trader Joe's Customer Choice Awards. Category number one: Beverages. This is a pretty wide open category. This could be bottled water, this could be juice, this could be wine or beer, or...

Matt: Okay, hurry up. My arms are getting tired.

Tara: It could be anything that you drink. Okay, ready?

Matt: Beverages, ready.

[Tympani roll begins.]

Tara: Favorite Beverage as voted by Trader Joe's Customers across the country...

[Tympani roll ends.]

Tara: Sparkling Honey Crisp Apple Juice Beverage.

[Crowd applause. Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: This year was a little different than how we've presented this product in the past.

Matt: Our existing offering, we couldn't get that same format, the same size can in a four pack, but we wanted to have this product. We knew that customers loved it. We offered it in a slightly larger 12 ounce can. Still a customer favorite, and this is a great drinking beverage.

[Popping open a can and pouring.]

Tara: Cheers.

Matt: My second career as a Foley artist.

Tara: Oh, I understand why people like that so much. This really does taste like honey crisp apples, which have a super distinctive apple flavor.

Matt: And it's a, I mean, this sounds crazy to say it so I'll say it. It's made with honey crisp apple juice.

Tara: Right.

Matt: Actual honey crisp apple juice, and there's that fantastic balance of acidity and sweet, that tartness that gets on the outer edge of your palate. So refreshing.

Tara: Yeah, this is what we, what is referred to at Trader Joe's as a limited or seasonal product, so it's not always available in the store. When this podcast airs, it will probably still be available in some quantities in most stores, but if you can't find it right now, it will be back next fall. That's our plan. I wanted to talk very briefly about the number two vote getting product in this category because it was actually really close. And this is one of my all-time favorite Trader Joe's beverages, Triple Ginger Brew, which comes in that big green bottle with the swing top top. (bottle pops open) Whoo! That's a good sound. So the intense aroma of ginger that comes out of this bottle, just is mind boggling to me because you expect ginger ale and this is so much different.

Matt: This is not your grandparents' ginger ale.

Tara: No.

Matt: Not even close. This is a ginger beer and this is a gingery, gingery drink. This is great on its own. I know lots of people who make the various types of drink known as mules with this.

Tara: I also love that you can put the lid back on.

Matt: Maybe, you know, you don't want to have that all at one sitting and you know, a bottle or two of that's been kicking around our fridge at home for several days after we've opened it. And it's still nicely charged, as they say in the industry with bubbles afterwards.

Tara: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Absolutely. Okay.

Matt: Alright, what's next? We are moving right along. The category known as milks leap toward immortality - Cheese.

Tara: Okay, so wait, wait, wait.

[Music ends.]

Matt: I am.

Tara: No Unexpected Cheddar this year.

Matt: Whew.

Tara: Which has won this category...

Matt: I was just gonna go off of rote memorization.

Tara: Right?

Matt: And I guess I have to read.

Tara: Yeah, we have a new winner this year. This is super exciting.

[Tympani roll begins.]

Matt: The Customer Choice for Most Favored Cheese.

[Tympani roll ends.]

Tara: English Cheddar with Caramelized Onions.

[Crowd applause. Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: One of my favorite products from the Jurassic Coast, that sort of south, south westerly area in England. Man this cheese is good. It's not like a raw onion kind of flavor. It is a sweeter french onion soup flavor.

Tara: We actually have a video on the Trader Joe's YouTube channel, which is [youtube.com/traderjoes](https://www.youtube.com/traderjoes), that kind of follows the making of this cheese.

Matt: That exact cheese?

Tara: Yeah. There's cows in the video. I'll give you that much.

Matt: That's a spoiler alert.

Tara: Yeah, I'm glad to see this one getting the love that it got this year.

Matt: It's that good.

Tara: Okay, so what is a better transition out of cheese than health and beauty aids and household products.

Matt: I think that transition pretty much just wrote itself.

Tara: Yeah. What we call HABA, Health and Beauty Aids, and household section.

Matt: What did customers vote for as their favorite thing out of this collection of stuff?

Tara: By a margin of more than two to one, our scented candles.

Matt: These candles are just such excellent examples of how Trader Joe's brings things to market. They're well made, the quality is high, the price is incredible. They're consistent, and they're a favorite.

Tara: Interesting to note the number two vote getter is a brand new product. The Daily Facial Sunscreen that made quite an impression when it first launched last summer, and we, let's be honest, we struggled to get more.

Matt: An apology, we knew it would be popular, we didn't think to this degree, we are working with our producing vendor as quickly as possible to get more in on a consistent basis because we clearly struck a chord with this.

[Music transition.]

Matt: Alright, the next category on our list, let's see. It's produce, fruits, vegetables, the bounty that this category provides is amazing.

[Tympani roll begins.]

Matt: What is it that people voted for?

Tara: The answer, Matt, is entirely bananas.

Matt: Both conventional and organic.

[Tympani roll ends.]

Tara: Yeah, it's bananas.

[Crowd applause. Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: There is a tremendous amount of work that goes into bringing nicely ripened bananas up into this part of the world, out to stores, and into your house. I love a banana. The next product, and it was not too far away, is an interesting twist on avocados.

Tara: Yeah. The teeny tiny avocados, which we've offered in our produce sections for a number of years now. It's an innovation, it's an avocado, but it's kind of a single serve avocado in a healthful way. You know, sure, you can eat a whole regular size avocado but a teeny tiny avocado, it's the right amount for a burger or a sandwich or to top a salad.

Matt: This is like table for one avocado style. They're just so cute. There is a series of ripening stages that all avocados go through and these go through this same process. They're just smaller and it's nice to have something that is so manageable.

Tara: Our next category in the Customer Choice Awards is Sweets and Desserts. Matt, what's the winner of the sweets and desserts category?

[Tympani roll begins.]

Matt: Well, hold your horses because it is, of course, Hold The Cone!

Tara: Woo-hoo.

[Tympani roll ends. Crowd applause. Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Hold The Cone! People love 'em. We love having 'em.

Tara: We sell so many of them. And every time we bring in a new flavor, it just disappears. It's kind of an amazing thing. I've yet to encounter a flavor of Hold The Cones! that I don't like.

Matt: I'm, that's almost a challenge. Like I would like to develop one, like a blue cheese...

Tara: But then no one would eat it. Well, somebody would.

Matt: Someone would.

Tara: Okay, that's sweets and desserts. So next up, vegan and vegetarian products. There are a lot of people, it seems, who talk about Trader Joe's as though we're a health food store, we don't talk about ourselves that way. But I think one of the reasons that, among certain groups, we have a reputation like that is because we do offer a lot of products that fall into the vegan and vegetarian category. Like, well, if you carry vegan things then you must be a health food store. And really it's just we wanna offer an array of products that work for a large number of our customers, and it's given us an opportunity to introduce things that fall under vegan as far as their ingredients,

[Tympani roll begins.]

Tara: ...but just tastes like good food. Our Vegan Kale Cashew and Basil Pesto is the winner of this category.

[Tympani rolls ends. Crowd applause. Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: And so it's resonating with a lot of people. The top five in the vegan and vegetarian category, some are vegan, some are vegan and vegetarian, some are just vegetarian. They all came in pretty close, but this pesto, if you haven't seen it, if you haven't bought it, it's really beautiful green in the tub. It's in our refrigerated case with other dips and sauces and things.

Matt: It sounds, at least from my perspective at first, like, wow, kale, pesto, what did I do wrong? And yet it's delicious because it has this wonderful springtime green, energetic flavor. It's interesting that it's made without dairy, deliberately so, it's not missing anything. It's got great flavor, it's got great textural mouth feel.

Tara: The cashews take the place of both the pine nuts and the parmesan cheese really. So there's a cashew butter in the ingredients here, and that it really adds both of those flavors that you would use when you make a traditional pesto. It's a really delicious product. It smells so good.

Matt: Sure.

Tara: We do have a lot of products in the store that are vegan and/or vegetarian. So if you are, you know, if you're looking to not have as many animal products in your diet, we got you covered.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Okay, where are we going next? Oh, we're going to entrees so we're going to the kitchen. I asked our friend Alex to help us to announce the winners of the entree category.

[Upbeat music begins. Transition to kitchen.]

Tara: Okay, ready? Are we good? Okay, we're in the kitchen and as everyone can hear, it's really loud in here. This is a well used kitchen. There's a lot of cooking that goes on in here, and Alex is joining us to cook our favorite entree winner.

Matt: We're so fortunate to have you here. Your kitchen skills, your culinary help. What do you have for us?

Alex: We have Butter Chicken and...

Matt: Wait a minute, wait a minute. Butter chicken?

Alex: With Basmati Rice.

Tara: The one you just put in the microwave to cook?

Alex: That's right.

Tara: Okay, Matt, we could have done this ourselves.

Matt: But we didn't. And here's Alex. So Alex, take it away.

Alex: Okay guys, we are gonna open up this package. It's a lot of work, okay?

Matt: Expertly done.

Matt: Expertly opened.

Tara: Do you have to do anything with the film on the outside?

Alex: Yeah, you know what? We're gonna puncture it with a fork.

[Poking film with a fork.]

Alex: And we're gonna go into the microwave on high for seven minutes.

[Microwave door opens and closes, beeping of buttons.]

Tara: What is Butter Chicken? It's chicken in a...

Matt: Chicken in a curry sauce. So it is an Indian inspired recipe. It's very similar to our runner up in this category, Chicken Tikka Masala. There are distinct differences in preparation. There's a really key ingredient difference, but I think the resulting dish is quite similar.

Tara: They are very similar in flavor, and they both are served in these boxes with basmati rice on the side. The basmati rice that's in the Chicken Tikka Masala package is cumin flavored, which really does add a distinctive flavor that makes it different from the Butter Chicken. I'm gonna open this box too.

[Opening box.]

Matt: Just to take a look there.

Tara: Here we go. Just a little package, a nice compostable tray on the Chicken Tikka Masala.

Matt: That's a cool thing to note. So that was a nice piece of work done to change out what was for a very long time., a plastic tray, right?

Tara: Yeah, it was a black plastic tray the last time I bought it, so there you go. That's pretty cool.

Alex: I can say from experience, it does not affect the cook at all. It cooks just like we all know and remember.

Tara: While we're waiting, we have a lot of Indian inspired entrees in our frozen section. There's these two. There's Palak Paneer, which by the way was one of the top five finishers in the vegan and vegetarian category so, go Palak Paneer. There's a Vindaloo, there's a Saag Paneer.

Matt: Yeah, and Tara, can we walk just for a little bit?

Tara: Yep. We're walking, we're going over to this mic.

Matt: So, while all this is happening, while we're figuring out the winners of the 14th Annual Customer Choice Awards, Crew Member Rolo is expertly testing a new recipe. Rolo, how's it going?

Rolo: You know I'm making this falafel mix. It's my first time so hopefully...

Matt: You have a lot of boiling oil. This is serious, I don't want to distract you. Focus is the name of this game. It smells wonderful. An updated Falafel. Mix recipe, alright. You know being in the Trader Joe's test kitchen here is among my favorite places.

Tara: There's food inspired by cuisines from around the world.

Matt: And what I love are the aromatics going on. We have Falafel frying, we have Butter Chicken heating, we have Palak Paneer steaming. It's so much fun.

Tara: We're getting close, right?

Matt: We're in countdown mode. 5,...

Matt/Alex: 4, 3, 2, 1.

[Long beep.]

Matt: Happy New Year! Oh, sorry.

Alex: Tara, I'm gonna let you go first.

Tara: Okay.

Matt: Like if this were a scary movie, you'd make Tara open the door?

Alex: But I'll be there for backup.

Matt: You like that?

Tara: Man, I get it. That, and that's a substantial entree there. Four hundred calories. That's like, it's got 24 grams of protein in it. That's pretty great.

Alex: I'll go in for my bite. That's good.

Tara: You know what? It's got a little heat.

Matt: Sure.

Tara: It's got a little kick to it.

Matt: I like how the two main components cook up. The basmati rice has that nice, almost like popcorn aroma.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Matt: The grains are separate, distinct from each other, tender, fluffy, nicely cooked rice. It's interesting and yet the Butter Chicken floating in its sea of delicious gravy is bubbling hot, heated through.

Tara: I totally get why this is the favorite for entrees.

Matt: Great flavor.

Tara: Congratulations again to the winner of the Entree Category: Trader Joe's Butter Chicken with Basmati Rice. Whoo!

Matt: Well done.

[Transition. Music ends.]

Tara: Now that we've had a little lunchtime treat in the kitchen, we're getting towards the end here, Matt, and, there's some surprises here.

Matt: I'm always up for a good surprise.

Tara: Okay.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Let's start with the snack category. The snack category has a new winner this year. It's a product that caused a lot of stir on social media this year. Someone somewhere intentionally or unintentionally started a rumor that we had discontinued this product. Someone

thought an out of stock item meant that the item was not coming back. And a customer posted on social media, "How could Trader Joe's possibly discontinue this product? It is my favorite product. I can't live without this." And it went like wildfire. We got more calls from media outlets asking for comment on us discontinuing this product than I could count.

Matt: I'm just fascinated by the state of what passes for media these days. I'll let that stand on its own. Of course, this product is not discontinued.

[Opening a bag.]

Matt: These are our Rolled Corn Tortilla Chips Chili and Lime Flavored. That wonderful bright pink and sort of a limey, greenish yellow color. (rustling bag) And I spy with my little eye there are a couple of double stuffed, like double rolled in here. Well that's kind of like a double rainbow. Wow, it's so limey. That is the overwhelming flavor, followed up by some chili heat. I can see why they're so popular. You know, folks buy so many bags of these every single week. Another supply challenge for sure. Difficult to sometimes keep in stock.

Tara: Number two on the list of favorite snacks. The Rolled Tortilla Chips, they won by a large margin, but this was number two: Organic Elote Corn Chip Dippers. I kind of just wanna taste these against the Rolled Corn Tortilla Chips, and see how different they are.

Matt: As different as seasoned fried corn things could be, these are that different. (smelling inside the bag) So aromatically, this particular bag is very corn forward.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Matt: Smells like roasted corn.

Tara: Tastes like roasted corn. And I have to say they taste nothing alike.

Matt: No. Zero.

Tara: These interestingly are significantly hotter. The Elote Corn Chip Dippers are, they're pretty spicy at the end.

Matt: And then of course the only reaction for that is to have more.

Tara: Right. (laughs)

[Music ends.]

Tara: We have reached the apex...

[Dramatic music begins.]

Tara: ...of this episode.

Matt: The most important category of all the Trader Joe's Customer Choice Awards Overall Favorite...we'll tell you what that is, right after these commercials.

Tara: We don't have commercials.

Matt: I was just trying to build some suspense, but okay.

Tara: This is a product that's already won another category.

[Fanfare music begins.]

Matt: So what is it?

Tara: The overall winner in the 14th Annual Trader Joe's Customer Choice Awards: Trader Joe's Rolled Tortilla Chips Chili Lime.

[Crowd applause.]

Matt: Wow, congratulations Snacks, congratulations Chips. I guess this is as much a comment on our dietary habits as it is anything else. Wow, okay, a corn chip took the gold as it were.

Tara: In years past, before we moved it to Hall of Fame status, Mandarin Orange Chicken regularly won overall and entree. It's nice to have new winners. The second place overall winner was our Hash Brown Patties. Who knew?

Matt: I wonder if it's because we've had such a difficult time keeping those in stock, they're just on people's minds, truly, because, I mean, they're hash browns. They're really good. They're the second most voted for product here in the overall category. That's a wow for me.

Tara: But again, the Chili Lime Flavored Rolled Tortilla Chips, those are the overall winner in the Customer Choice Awards this year. And so I say congratulations to them.

Matt: We'd actually like the Rolled Tortilla Chips to come up and say a few words.

[Rustling bag.]

Tara: Well, what I think the chips were trying to say was, thank you to everyone involved in making these chips: the product developer, the category manager, the crew in the stores who stock them on the shelves, the captains, the customers,...

[Orchestra begins playing softly in the background, then gets louder.]

Tara: ...the many dips that allow themselves to be used with these chips. Oh, oh, okay, okay. The orchestra's giving us the hook.

Matt: Of course, all those people who ask their friends to go to the store and buy them, those rolled tortilla chips, and then the people who see them eating them on the subway and ask for a taste, and they somewhat grudgingly share. I mean, the list goes on and on and on.

[Orchestra playing impatiently louder.]

Tara: We'll be back soon with another episode of Inside Trader Joe's, so hit that free subscribe or follow button.

Matt: It *is* free and worth every penny. We should also thank the people who subscribe to this podcast.

[Orchestra drowning them out.]

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.