

## Transcript — Episode 12: Frozen. The Foods.

Matt: All right. Let's see.

*[Sound of microwave buttons beeping.]*

Matt: 20 minutes ought to do it. And... Defrost.

*[Sound of microwave oven beginning to hum.]*

Tara: Here's what we're thawing for this episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

Tara: Hey, we're recording for the Inside Trader Joe's podcast. Do you have a minute to talk to us about frozen food?

Matt: Now that your mouth is full of frozen food?

Customer: Delicious. Delicious.

Matt: What is it about cauliflower?

Catherine: The Cauliflower Gnocchi honestly caught me by surprise.

Tara: I got you a skillet, because I know, you know, you can't do anything without a skillet.

*[CLUNK of skillet hitting the stovetop.]*

Ross: Alright, let's see what we can do.

Tara: Here we go.

Sound: Pouring frozen pieces from package into skillet.

Tara: From the Trader Joe's mother ship in Monrovia, California...

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

*[Theme music and store bells ring two times.]*

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, the director of words and phrases and clauses.

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

Tara: This episode is entitled "Frozen: The Foods." Brrrr.

Matt: But there will be no singing snowman or princesses of Arendelle.

Tara: Do we have a location there yet?

Matt: No. We haven't found a place with enough parking. No. This Frozen is about another place, a very popular section at your neighborhood Trader Joe's.

Tara: We'll do a little testing in our test kitchen. That's what it's for, right? To find out the best way to prepare one of your favorite Trader Joe's frozen foods.

Matt: Our annual Customer Choice Awards have been announced. So we'll also have our customers taste test some of the winners.

Tara: We'll preview some new products coming soon to a store near you.

Matt: And I'd love to know about some frozen food ideas that are still just that in the idea stage.

Tara: In our business, the word fresh is an important one. We all want food that's fresh, right?

Matt: But sometimes you know food can be fresher when it's frozen.

*[Sound of stopwatch starting and ticking...]*

Matt: Freezing...

Matt: ...is stopping time. So you can take a really perfectly ripe mango, cut it and freeze it and it doesn't ripen anymore and it doesn't become overripe and it doesn't begin to break down and become yucky. It's stopped in time.

*[Sound of stopwatch being stopped.]*

Tara: I've never heard it said exactly that way.

Matt: I don't know if I've ever said those words before, so...

Tara: I think that whole concept of stopping time that you find that piece of fruit when it is at its best. And then (you... you...) you keep it at its best until you're ready to eat.

Matt: It's ready when it's perfect. It's ready when it's ready to be frozen, and the clock is stopped, and you can start the clock when you want it to.

Tara: I think this is a conversation we can have with Catherine.

Matt: Yeah.

Catherine: Hi, I'm Catherine. I have been working at Trader Joe's for eight years. I'm currently a Product Developer for Frozen, Grocery, Deli, Cereal and Beer & Spirits.

Tara: Wow. Okay. You're busy.

Catherine: Yes.

Matt: You have all the food groups covered, so...

[*Sound of room laughter.*]

Tara: As much as I'd love to talk about beer and spirits, actually, let's talk about Frozen.

Catherine: I feel we have so many amazing products in our stores, but the frozen aisle, when you walk down, all the customers are engaged. There's really a lot of exciting items there.

Tara: Yeah, there are. It really is, it's my favorite place to shop in the store just because I see things on the call. I want to have that today. Well, I want to have that today and I ended up with this, these bags full of frozen things that I get home and I, I, it's, it's a, it's, it's like making a puzzle, putting a three d puzzle together.

Matt: There's no room in the freezer.

Catherine: You need a bigger freezer.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: How many products do we... do we normally have in that category, in that part of the store?

Catherine: Believe it or not, we have about 350 items that we're able to fit in our freezer section.

Tara: Wow. It's not the same 300-and-something products all the time though.

Catherine: No, we definitely, we have seasonal items that come in for the holidays. We probably add about another 40 SKUs.

Matt: And for those of you keeping score at home... SKUs, S-K-U, stock keeping units. Good, classic grocery jargon. I love it.

Catherine: (giggle)

Tara: What it equals is a product.

Tara: Mandarin Orange Chicken is a SKU. Chocolate Lava Cakes are a SKU. That's... They're not out of place.

Matt: I am askew at this moment.

[*Sound of room laughter.*]

Catherine: With Frozen, there's definitely a lot of room for innovation.

Tara: Do you have any examples of that, like things that are really sort of on trend or ahead of the curve?

Catherine: All things cauliflower. We're really the first store to have riced cauliflower. You can now find it other retailers, but we're now pushing that further and now we're doing a riced cauliflower risotto will be out for the holiday season.

Matt: What gives, I mean, I like cauliflower as much as the next guy. What is it about cauliflower? Is it that, is it what it isn't? It's not carbohydrates or is it because of the flavor or is it both? Why is this so compelling?

Catherine: It's really proven to be the perfect substitute for high carb foods, so if you are watching your calories, you're watching your carbohydrates, you can use riced cauliflower as a base instead of rice. It works perfect for pizza crust and even mashed potatoes. The Cauliflower Gnocchi honestly caught me by surprise. Our riced cauliflower was a huge success for us, but the Cauliflower Gnocchi was that times 10. It's blown out of the stores.

Tara: So a little later on we're going to go into the kitchen with Ross.

Catherine: Okay.

Tara: He's going to go over some cooking instructions for us...

Catherine: Perfect.

Tara: ...for the Cauliflower Gnocchi. Yeah, that'll be fun and tasty.

Matt: I just imagine like somewhere there's like in the heartland, like a cauliflower farmer is looking at his children and he's like, "I told you, we could make it!" Like all of a sudden like cauliflower is this really incredible thing, and we don't have enough. I'm talking to you, cauliflower growers. Grow more cauliflower! We need it.

*[Sound of room laughter.]*

Catherine: And it's true, and a lot of our cauliflower's coming from Italy where obviously, they're very proud of their pasta and their rice and we're trying to place more orders for cauliflower and they're wondering what are we doing with it? Like what is happening in the United States right now?

Tara: So why do we go to Italy for that stuff?

Matt: They're the one country that's been able to produce the volume that we've needed at the right cost.

Tara: And we're able to get a lot of organic cauliflower.

Catherine: Yes.

Tara: That's the big difference, right?

Catherine: Right.

Matt: A thank you note to Italy is on my to do list.

Catherine: Our sister office in Boston... There's a very famous restaurant there that has a battered cauliflower. So I get an email from our VP of Merchandising, which is my boss. She sends a photo and says I have to try this dish. Two weeks later...

Matt: Should we translate that? "Catherine, get to work on this."

Catherine: When Marcy asks, you listen.

Matt: Sure.

Catherine: Two weeks later I get another email about the tempura cauliflower. This is coming from our VP of Innovation. Another two weeks also get it from the VP of Merchandising in Boston. I'm convinced they all went to lunch together that day, but for dramatic effect they just space things out a little bit.

Matt: Or we have too many VPs, I don't know.

Catherine: But I reached out to a supplier in Southern California. They actually flew out to the east coast to go to this restaurant, enjoy the dish there. They brought back probably 10 samples or so to share with their staff.

Matt: Who wants to sit next to that guy on the plane?

Catherine: But it was a labor of love for about six months, just really trying to perfect the sauce, have the right amount of savory notes and sweetness, and it's been in our stores now for about four years. And it's really great item.

Tara: Just so everyone's clear, that's the product that became known as Kung Pao Cauliflower. Okay. So you've developed a lot of products that have wound up in our freezers. Do you have a favorite?

*[Generic holiday music and sounds of people mingling and conversing.]*

Catherine: So every year at Trader Joe's we have a holiday party. There's unique Trader Joe's songs and of course because we're a food company, we have plenty of food to enjoy afterwards. So one of my colleagues they took to strip waffles, put vanilla ice cream inside and made an ice cream sandwich. I watched him do this, I thought was absolutely an awesome idea. So I reached out the next day to one of our frozen novelty suppliers.

Matt: Okay. That triggered a grocery industry jargon alert for me. Frozen novelty suppliers... Frozen novelty is just another way to talk about handheld ice cream. Strangely enough, it wasn't until about the 1920s that people started making pre packaged ice cream bars, ice cream sandwiches, ice cream cones, and that is a frozen novelty and that is what a frozen novelty supplier does.

Catherine: They created a custom Mini Stroopwafel, so it's bite size and we offered that last holiday season and we'll have it this holiday season as well. It's our Mini Stroopwafel Ice Cream Sandwiches.

Tara: Those were a big hit this year. So how long do things last in the freezer?

Catherine: Most of our items, they do have about a two year shelf life. You can still consume it after two years, but the quality of the ingredients, There'll be some frozen buildup on the vegetables inside, that sort of thing.

Tara: One of the other things in frozen food that has changed dramatically certainly in my lifetime because I remember when you would buy maybe you know frozen peas or frozen corn or something like that and you would really just be getting like a big block of frozen peas or frozen corn and now it's not like that. Everything is separate and you can sort of shake things out of a bag or a package and save the rest for another time.

Matt: Well that's interesting. It probably was in the early to mid 60s when grocery jargon alert when IQF comes into play... individually quick frozen, each word matters. Rather than a block of frozen peas, You have peas spread either on a plate or a conveyor belt. And each pea is frozen very quickly within a matter of minutes. And that fast freezing time period actually keeps ice crystals smaller. So the faster or something is frozen, the smaller the ice crystals. Remember, water expands when it freezes. Water inside cells expands and it can damage those cells. So if you freeze it quickly, the cell structure remains intact and you actually get a better texture. And that kind of process has just really changed not only the quality but the usefulness of stuff. So you can shake out that bag of peas if you just want a little bit, you don't throw out a whole block and waste half of it. And there are different IQF processes for different things. A strawberry is handled differently from a pea is different from a frozen croissant or a macaron or a pizza, and each producer has: to figure out their timing and their process to best serve that specific food stuff that they're working on. It's, it's a real scientific undertaking.

Tara: Catherine, I know that you have been very busy working on products that are due to hit the store sometime in 2019. Do you have some that you're especially looking forward to and can you tell us a little about them?

Catherine: First off is an egg frittata. It's 25 grams of protein and under 300 calories. It takes two minutes in the microwave, so if you're in a rush in the morning, it's the perfect breakfast. The next items, it's actually two, so high protein, low calorie ice creams. They been trending. We haven't brought them in our stores yet. All the ones on the market, they have sugar alcohols, which is something we avoid in our private label brands, so we worked with a supplier. It took some time to get it right, but it's a pint of ice cream. It's a little over 300 calories. If you eat the whole pint. Yet, you're getting 20 grams of protein with the cookies and cream. The chocolate peanut butter ice cream, there's 23 grams of protein.

Matt: Okay. I mean that's an interesting for me, somewhat strange trend, but the idea of like protein loading through ice cream.

Catherine: (giggle)

Tara: We sell a lot of fish.

Catherine: We sell a lot of fish.

Tara: In the freezer?

Catherine: Right.

Tara: When we sort of really got into the frozen salmon business, I was told and was able to verify that at that time, we were the only grocery retailer in the US that was selling what's called once frozen wild Alaskan Salmon. Is that still the case?

Catherine: I can't speak for other retailers, but for Trader Joe's... They catch the fish, they freeze the fish, that's it. There's no freezing it and mass slacking it off into portions and refreezing it, which you can find elsewhere.

Tara: And I'm fascinated by that, that it's. I mean, when you freeze and then defrost and then freeze and then defrost again, I imagine that that's probably not great for the integrity of the fish.

Matt: It doesn't necessarily change the flavor. It absolutely changes the texture. And you know, ice is water obviously frozen and it expands in that process and that stretches all the cells out. And when you do that repeatedly, what you can wind up with is a really mushy piece of fish. I just had some tilapia last night out of the freezer case and um, great!

Tara: What'd you do with it?

Matt: Basically making like, you know, fish and chip style stuff. So you do a flour, you season the flour however you like to season it, I like smoked Paprika or onion salt, maybe some garlic powder. (Season) Then you coat the fish in the flour. Then maybe do a little egg dredge. I like a 50/50 mix of Panko bread crumbs and traditional Italian style bread crumbs, mix those up, a little bit of herbs and stuff in the bread crumbs. And then you fry it in oil, a neutral oil. I like grape seed oil because you can get it super, super hot and it doesn't set the house on fire usually. So...

Catherine: Good tip.

Tara: I like the "usually" on there.

Matt: Usually, yeah. Good work, everybody. Outstanding.

*[Sound of Trader Joe's store noises: people talking, carts rolling, bells ringing, cash registers dinging.]*



Tara: Every year we invite Trader Joe's customers to vote for their favorite product in our Customer Choice Awards. This year's winners were announced and several frozen products were named favorites. So Matt and I are in the neighborhood Trader Joe's in Glendale, California, letting our customers have a taste of a couple of them... Trader Joe's Spanakopita filled with spinach, ricotta, and feta cheeses in the appetizer category, and the Trader Joe's A Dozen Macaron Varies is a favorite dessert. Crew Member Miggi is working the demo station.

Matt: Now we want to see if these Customer Choice Awards actually mean anything here in Glendale.

Tara: So Miggi, tell us what you're, what you're serving customers here today.

Miggi: I am serving our Spinach Spanakopita with the ricotta cheese and feta, and this community loves spanakopita.

Tara: I don't blame them.

Miggi: The serving size is perfect, so you can just pop in, you can just pop the tray into the, into the oven or the toaster oven. It comes in its own tray. Try it please.

Customer: Great. Perfect.

Tara: Alright cookie time. This is the pistachio flavor one.

Customer: Mmm. My daughter would love this.

Tara: And all the colors that are used in those macarons are all from, from naturally derived sources, so there's no like red dye number four.

Customer: Right.

Tara: None of that stuff in it.

Customer: Exactly. That's why I like it here.

Matt: This customer, she's going to, she's going to taste that frozen Spanakopita. Let's see what her reaction is.

Customer: It's very crunchy. I think it's really good. It's a lot of cheese.

Matt: Don't let the giant microphones scare you away. It's actually not alive.

Tara: Hey, we're recording for the inside Trader Joe's podcast. Do you have a minute to talk to us about frozen food?

Matt: Now that your mouth is full of frozen food?

Miggi: We're going to record you chewing.

Tara: Do you, do you have favorite frozen products?

Customer #1: I like the mini Tacos.

Customer #2: I'm going to try the ice cream for the first time that he's been telling me about. Well, I haven't had it yet, but I'm going to try it. Which one are you telling me? Um, cookie butter one I think...

Tara: You can't go wrong.

Customer: Sounds great. I'll just sit on the couch with the spoon. Just go at it, yeah.

*[Sounds of kitchen pans and stove.]*

Tara: We are in the kitchen with Ross, and you might remember Ross from an earlier episode. He manages the quality assurance piece of the operation when it comes to making sure that the products are consistent and the quality that we approve is the quality that is what you buy.

Tara: I got you a skillet, because I know, you know, you can't do anything without a skillet.

*[CLUNK of iron skillet hitting the stovetop.]*

Tara: So the skillet is on the range top. Today we are going to work with the Cauliflower Gnocchi, which everybody's talking about. It's in the, it's in the customer choice awards. We talked about it in our conversation with Catherine. Um, it's, it's a really popular product. And yet, even though there are three different ways to cook it, uh, outlined on the back of the package, we still have customers who are like, "I don't know what to do with this." So when you make it, what do you do with it?

Ross: So I use the stove top preparation, um, but I add a little oil or butter first. Um, I prefer all of oil myself, but um, uh, just just to get the cauliflower started, get 'em a little bit a coated with the oil and then I pretty much follow the package directions from there.

Tara: Here we go.

*[Sounds of gnocchi pouring from package and plunking into a skillet.]*

Tara: The sound of gnocchi hitting the skillet. So from start to finish, Ross, what is this? How long does this take to cook?

Ross: Just under 10 minutes.

*[Sound of sizzling in the skillet.]*

Tara: Two and a half servings per container, per package. But even if you ate the whole bag, it's 330 calories for the whole bag. For 12 ounces of what is ostensibly pasta. That's pretty great.

Ross: And we add about a quarter cup of water just enough to kind of steam it, try to cook it through so they'll get soft.

Tara: So when you added the water, you definitely put a cover on it.

Ross: I put a cover on. Yeah. So and that'll just be for a couple minutes, pretty short term. And then take the top off, continue to saute for another minute, let the water kind of dissolve or evaporate and then add a little bit of oil and getting a nice crusty exterior.

Tara: We've been talking a lot about what's the best way to make to cook our frozen products and it really, it really is product to product. There's no one way that's right for every single product.

Ross: Yeah, correct. I mean there is some rules of thumb. I mean like, I mean some fairly obvious ones to be like pizza says very much better going to be in the oven than in a microwave. But so anything that kind of has a similar to where you want to get a specific texture on the outside. Usually an oven is going to do a better. Um, and there'll be like a bread item or like a cheesy crust on top of something.

Tara: Yeah, I'll be, I'll be honest, I've cooked our Lasagna, frozen Lasagna in the microwave and it's been delicious. It just doesn't have that sort of Brown cheesy crust on it. I'm reaching in here. Oh my goodness.

Tara: Oh, that's really good. It really does taste like cauliflower, but in the best way. I mean it's, it's got, uh, it's got all of that like perfect cauliflower flavor, but yet it still tastes like a gnocchi, which is really interesting to me. That's really good. Thank you, Ross. That's delicious.

Tara: We get a lot of customer feedback about how much fun we have with our product names. Look at our Frozen section. We have "Gone Bananas," frozen banana slices drenched in chocolate. Those are delicious.

Matt: And I don't know what took us so long, but we finally got around to doing strawberries like that. So then we came up with Gone Berry Crazy.

Tara: Do you know what Avogadro's Number is, Matt?

Matt: I don't know it by heart to be honest with you, but it is like six point zero, two, two, one, four, nine times 10 to the 23rd power.

Tara: Equal in our minds to a little bit more than five avocados in every package of guacamole. And when I think of Avogadro's number, I think Avocado's Number Guacamole.

Matt: Like someone was probably waiting in the wings, a huge fan of Amedeo Avogadro, this Italian molecular scientist, like... "When can we get his name on a product?" And it finally happened, and that one actually stuck and worked amazingly enough.

Tara: One of the sort of all time favorites among customers I think is our line of cereal bars that are called this blank walks into a bar.

Matt: So This Strawberry Walks Into a Bar..., so never would I have guessed that like the punchline to a bad grownup joke becomes like a cereal bar that's pretty much for kids, but it's apparently worked out okay.

Tara: You know, it was the success of This Strawberry Walked Into a Bar... that led to These Peanuts Go On a Date.

Matt: We used to have a line of bagels, the Bagels Spinoza... It Bagels The Mind. So it's some arcane reference to Baruch Spinoza who was a Jewish Dutch philosopher. And why this made sense for a bagel name, but who knows at this point, so then we just eventually abandoned it.

Tara: One of my favorites is the crunchy pea snacks that we call Trader Joe's Contemplates Inner Peas.

Matt: And if you go way back, we have some just questionable judgment calls where we had some apple products. Yes, I'm going to go there. Eve's Apple Buttered by Adam, which then led to Eve's Apple Sparkled by Adam and we just stopped doing that.

Tara: That was a good idea.

Matt: To stop, yes. The stopping was a good idea.

Tara: Yeah, I think so.

Tara: We hope you've enjoyed learning more about frozen foods at Trader Joe's. We'll keep looking around the US and around the world for more yummy stuff that you can heat up in your kitchen.

Matt: And this really warms my heart. Almost 2000 people have rated this podcast on apple podcasts.

Tara: Thank you. And be sure to hit that subscribe button too wherever you get your podcasts.

Matt: It is free and it's worth every penny. And that way you'll get new episodes automatically as soon as they're released.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.