

## Transcript — Episode 16: Produce

Tara: Here's a preview of what we are producing ... for ...

Matt: I see what you did. That was a good one. Nice.

Tara: For this episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

Jack: From field to fork...I'm all things produce.

Tara: I'm thinking about berries and stone fruits. What else is big in the summertime?

Jack: Fresh figs.

Matt: Dear Everybody, Eat shishito peppers. They're great.

Jack: What I've learned is, don't look at the weather app before you go to bed, you'll sleep better. (chuckle)

Tara: From the Trader Joe's mothership 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 Matt Sloan, the Marketing – Product guy.

Tara: This is our first ever episode about produce at Trader Joe's.

Matt: We didn't even have a produce department when Trader Joe's was born. Then from humble beginnings, we've grown.

Tara: Oh, I see what you did there.

Matt: And we're very proud of our citrus and pears and apples and squash and other fruits. And our vegetables are even more popular.

Tara: They all taste great, which is important. We know that, but there's a lot you may not know about the produce you find at Trader Joe's.

Jack: Hi, I'm Jack and I'm the Category Manager for produce for Trader Joe's. Basically, I'm all things produce. The decisions we make... How do we keep it fresh? How do we get better quality?

Tara: We were thinking about going to our Boston office to speak with Jack. That's where he's based, but we were able to get him to come back and visit us here at the mothership instead. Welcome back, Jack.

Jack: Always great to come here. For the first time I didn't have to use GPS to get to the office from the hotel.

Tara: (chuckle)

Matt: Nice!

Tara: How long have you worked in the produce business?

Jack: I got a job at a local supermarket, 16 years old and one of my first jobs when they gave me was stocking the baby food. And you know baby food way back when, they come in all those little Gerber baby jars and I wasn't very good at it. Cause you'd reach in and you'd pull them out and you'd drop it on the floor and it would break. Well, luckily for me, the baby food section was right next to the produce section. The produce manager either took pity on me or took a liking to me, one of the other. And he said, "Come on over. You can work with the produce crew."

Tara: You're all things produce. You're the category manager. How long really have you been at the front of the produce piece of the business?

Jack: About the last 28 years or so, give or take.

Matt: We need to go then and now. So something from then as compared to something now, a big difference. What was it like 28 years ago? What is it like now?

Jack: No bag salads. Didn't exist!

Matt: We had to wash lettuce. Imagine the struggle.

Jack: (chuckle) That's right!

Tara: It was real.

Jack: And these little tender greens.

Matt: Do you think more people eat more of those leafy greens now because of that?

Jack: Oh yes. Way more. I mean, let's face it, years ago if you didn't like iceberg lettuce, you were pretty much out of luck. People want produce that tastes good. When we first started it was mostly what shipped well, what didn't go bad quickly, We all sold those cucumbers covered in grease, you know, because that way we could hold them in the back room a long time and now people want produce that's fresh.

Matt: That's a product idea we're not going to pursue... Cucumbers covered in grease... just not gonna do that.

Jack: (laughs) Yeah.

*[Truck engine revs and turns on.]*

Jack: A lot of what eats up our day is finding that truck, getting that delivery there on time, picking it fresh, you know, weather impacts produce, unfortunately, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Lots of times you'll get a call from the strawberry vendor saying, "Oh my God, we can't get in the fields. It's raining." You can't pick strawberries when it's raining. If you pack them when they're wet, they tend to bruise in the container and go bad. So like lots of times we have to wait until the field dries out.

Tara: So that could be the difference between going into a Trader Joe's on a Thursday and finding strawberries or not finding strawberries, because it rained on Monday in the strawberry field.

Jack: What I've learned is, don't look at the weather app before you go to bed, you'll sleep better. (chuckle)

Matt: So I'm thinking about the map. I'm picturing this in my head. All the stuff winds up in our stores, which happen to be in the U.S. but you're looking outside of that.

Jack: We source product from around the world, wherever we think we can get the very best quality at the time of the year.

Matt: If it's summer down south, it's winter, maybe up here.

Jack: To get grapes to our stores every day, 52 weeks a year, they come from Chile, they come from Peru, they come from Argentina in the winter time, Mexico, California in the summertime. Customers have come accustomed to having items in the stores year round.

Tara: You can't get a local banana, right? Bananas don't grow in the United States. Right? So if you want a banana, you have to, you have to find it somewhere else and bring it here. How do we know where those products are coming from?

Jack: Every product that gets delivered to our warehouses every day has paperwork defining where it came from. We don't buy from terminal markets where we don't know where that product's come from.

Matt: What's the terminal market? It sounds like the end of the line.

Jack: You're right. It's when, when suppliers don't have a home for their, for their goods, it goes to the terminal market.

Jack: There's a big one in New York. There's a big one in Boston. There's a big one in LA. You know, we don't buy from there because again, we lose control over where it's been, where it's been harvested. We're loyal to a supplier. We pay a fair price for the product. We become a very desired account and we can leverage that into getting things that we want, like social responsibility. It's a big problem in the produce industry. No easy solutions, but you want to make sure that you're dealing with companies that treat their workers fairly.

*[Upbeat music begins.]*

Tara: I love discovering new things in the produce case even new varieties of apples.

Jack: I think Honeycrisp was the one that really set everybody excited. Very difficult apple to grow. Very expensive to grow, gives you poor yields. And then you heard in the industry, "You want me to plant these? Am I going to make any money on these?" But boy, that's a wonderful apple. It's now our #1 selling apple. It gave growers confidence to go out and find new varieties.

Matt: We've entered into this new era where patenting, holding a patent for a type of produce, is becoming really important. These varieties are now controlled like intellectual property.

Jack: Like our supplier for Opals, we sell a lot of Opal apples. It's a delicious apple. It's yellow, looks nice. But again, very difficult to grow. And they have an exclusive on that. So what suppliers are looking to do is saying, "Hey, I've got something really special and you can get it from me." I think it encourages companies to try new items.

Tara: All right, Jack, let's see how well you know your apples, okay? This little game we like to call..

*[Game show music starts.]*

Tara: How do you like them apples, Jack? Just made that up so we don't need to call it anything. (chuckle) All right. So I'm going to say a characteristic and you're going to tell me which apple...

Jack: Okay.

Tara: ...fits that characteristic. Let's start with crunchy.

Jack: Oh, that's easy, Honeycrisp

*[Bell dings.]*

Tara: Honeycrisp. Yes, I agree with you. That's my favorite apple. Okay, sweet.

Jack: Well, there's two. There's a traditional one, Fujis...

*[Bell dings.]*

Jack: ...very sweet, been around a long time. But there's a new variety, Kiku.

Tara: Ooh!

*[Bell dings.]*

Jack: Very, very sweet, really popular.

Tara: How do you spell that?

Jack: K. I. K. U.

Matt: If I say kids love 'em, you're going to say ...

Jack: Galas

*[Bell dings.]*

Jack: Middle of the road. Smaller sized, not too sweet, not too tart. Pretty good crunch.

Tara: Tart.

Jack: Granny Smiths.

*[Bell dings.]*

Tara: Yellow.

Jack: That's an Opal apple.

*[Bell dings.]*

Jack: Right.

Matt: And something really red but, but not Red Delicious.

Jack: That would be our Envy apple.

*[Bell dings.]*

Tara: Green?

Jack: The Grannies, your real classic green.

*[Bell dings.]*

Jack: Sometimes they get a little blush on them certain times of year but...

Matt: Blushing grannies...whole different episode.

Tara: (chuckle) Whole different episode.

*[Game show music ends.]*

Tara: Jack, you were kind of mentioning off mic that you get a lot of feedback from stores who are hearing from customers wondering why we don't sell things by the pound, and wondering if they're getting a good deal paying on an individual basis.

Jack: I think a lot of customers question why the industry standard is by the pound. It's mostly really to get them to buy more. Well, we really feel it's best to be up front with our customers and let them know what they're paying for product right off the bat. I use the example of a customer who thought we were charging too much for Honeycrisp apples. Ours were much more reasonable than our competitors but a competitor sold by the pound. And it sounded cheap. But boy when you got four apples. You bought a bag of four Honeycrisp apples. That apple was going to cost them almost \$8 for a bag of four apples, where ours would cost much less than that. That's something we're very proud of.

Tara: Obviously we sell a huge amount of produce in our stores. People keep coming back. So we hear things like, "Wow, what great values, what a great selection." But occasionally we hear, "Guy, your produce sucks." What do we do as a company to manage quality control?

Jack: It starts honestly with picking a good supplier base. That's step one. Step two is you have a good quality assurance team in the warehouse where they look at product. Is it good? Would I buy this?

Tara: That's a great question. "Would I buy this?"

Jack: And honestly, we have some great, great store people. They really want to do the right thing. One of the other things we try to do: Everybody gets a delivery every day. That's almost unheard of in the industry.

Matt: Is that maybe in some ways a result of just the physical difference? I think of a normal grocery store almost functioning like a little warehouse in the back.

Jack: Distribution efficiency. I used to cringe in my past life when I hear that.

Matt: I still cringe now.

Tara: (chuckle)

Jack: That's not a good thing. And you're right, Trader Joe's either by accident or in their wisdom makes their back rooms really small. Makes their coolers really small.

Matt: Yeah. We just don't have room to hold it.

Jack: It's fresh product, picked fresh, shipped fresh, and there's a whole host of things that can go bad. Some go wrong on you sometimes.

Tara: It's the weather, it's the time of year, it's how that soil is functioning, it's the transportation and how hot it is the day that some someone is driving down that highway.

Jack: But that's produce and that's what we live with everyday.

Tara: When you think about all of those pieces that Jack and his team go through every single day to make sure the quality of the produce in our stores stays consistently high, it's pretty amazing to me.

Tara: Can we talk about packaging a little bit? We made an announcement at the beginning of the year about changes we were making to packaging throughout the store and I know that a big piece of that work is happening in the produce department.

Jack: Let's be honest, we have lots of packaging in produce. And in the packaging we have, how can it be more environmentally friendly? First steps was we looked at can we sell more product loose and why do we sell something packaged? You'll see it in, especially in our potato and onion section, in our apples. We have more loose apples that we did before. We have more loose potatoes and onions. A good example is, and it's funny the things you find. We had garlic. For years we sold them in this little pouch. And I thought, "Geez, why do we do that?" Probably because that's the way we've always done it. So what we did was I looked and said, "Why can't we just sell a clove of garlic loose?" And what we really found was, wow, we added a lot of costs. The costs of getting those little sleeves, the costs of a little header card, the cost of putting two little cloves of garlic in those sleeves added a lot to our costs. So now you can go into a Trader Joe's and you can get a big clove of garlic for 49 cents. Some things we need packaging on. It's hard to sell loose blueberries. So right now we're testing in some of our stores two things. One is the fiber till with a plastic over wrap. Again, it's some plastic, but it's a lot less plastic.

Matt: When you say fiber till, just describe that. What is it?

Jack: It looks like cardboard. It's biodegradable, compostable. And another one is we have a thinner plastic, more recyclable container with a plastic over wrap.

Tara: It seems, Jack, that your work in sustainability is really paying off. We had a goal to eliminate a million pounds of plastic from our stores over this year and we've surpassed that. We are on track to eliminate 4 million pounds of plastic from our stores in 2019 and 2½ million pounds of that plastic has come directly out of the produce section.

Jack: How cool is that?!

*[Island music, waves crashing.]*

Matt: Okay. You get to choose one, one fruit, one vegetable. The only things that you'll get to have on the desert island. What are they going to be?

Jack: The vegetable one is easy. This is a new item for us. By the time this episode comes out, I hope it's going to be in the stores and that's baby cauliflower. Doesn't really look like cauliflower. It's little stock with this feathery top and it has a wonderful flavor. I'm pretty boring when it comes to my fruit, but I like my blueberries. We do a great job with organic blueberries, two pounds every summer.

Matt: It's like a single serve pack for the drive home.

Jack: (laughs) Yeah. We have a grower that comes to us and we do it as an opportunity buy.

Tara: I think we have a jargon alert opportunity here, Matt, for "opportunity buy."

*[Electronic newsflash]*

Matt: Grocery retail jargon alert...Opportunity buys. It needs to be an opportunity for our customers.

Tara: It's an opportunity for everybody. I mean it's an opportunity for that grower and it's an opportunity for customers to find something new and interesting or of ridiculous value.

Matt: I think anybody growing anything interesting, fruits and vegetables, just call Jack 'cause this is cool.

Group: (laughs)

Jack: We take all calls.

Tara: I love that.

Jack: A company came to us last year to try this new variety of raspberries that they were very proud of. Terrific opportunity buy. Sold very well.

Matt: While raspberries are really tough to handle. Maybe among the toughest things to handle. I think that sounds like an easier opportunity than I'm going to pick on Jerusalem artichokes also known as sunchoke. Emphasis on the choke. Neat idea, but you know, who wants to eat those? Apparently nobody.

Jack: We did try them. I have to admit. We did try them.

Matt: Think of artichokes with an “f” and that's, that's sort of what they're known as.

Jack: They do cause some distress to certain people, for sure.

Matt: The growers of Sunchokes of America will... Dear Matt, we don't like you.

Tara: Speaking of opportunities, this episode we'll launch in the height of summer. I'm thinking about berries and stone fruits. What else is big in the summertime?

Jack: Fresh figs. We carry them only at the height of the season. It starts in mid to late July and they're available for about six weeks.

Tara: Slice those figs in half, top them with just a little bit of crumbled blue cheese, and drizzle that with honey, and just watch them disappear.

Jack: I'm already getting emails from customers anxiously awaiting, "Hey, when are the figs coming this year?"

Matt: Figs are super tricky to get them just right.

Jack: Regular supermarkets have these enormous produce departments and they've got to carry everything everyday whether it's really good or not.

Matt: They even carry sunchokes every day.

Jack: They do! (laughs) One of our values here at Trader Joe's, we're a national chain of neighborhood stores. Well if you want to be a neighborhood store, you need items from either locally grown or from your region. And it's a challenge. But we've got some pretty good successes. Colorado has a nice little niche, they grow a number of really nice items. We've got some items grown in Texas. Okra being one of them. Our Portland, Maine store, they want Maine potatoes. Same thing with Massachusetts and Rhode Island grown products.

Matt: Rhode Island grows great potatoes.

Jack: They do!

Matt: Thanks, Rhode Island!

Jack: Things that are very popular in California may not be popular yet in the midwest, but they will be. By the same token, this item's on the east coast that we can move to the west coast. Shishito peppers is the classic example of big on the west coast. People in most other parts of the country haven't heard of it.

Matt: Why not? Dear Everybody, Eat shishito peppers. They're great.

Tara: But be cautious.

Matt: Not that cautious. They're not that spicy.

Tara: But 1 out every 10 might just get you.

Matt: That's true. I always get the bags that are all not or all hot.

Jack: One of the things that I find really nice about Trader Joe's customers: They like to try new things.

Tara: Thank goodness.

Jack: They come into Trader Joe's to see what's new and different. And in produce it's very hard to be different. You know, everybody carries strawberries. Everybody carries blueberries. So when you find an item like a shishito pepper, it's really a positive thing for our customers, and our customers really respond well to that.

Tara: But pretty soon summer will be over. What's great in the fall?

Jack: The first one's pumpkins. One of the other items that really dominates our thoughts in the fall is Brussels sprout stocks.

Tara: And you can roast that whole stock in your oven. You don't even have to remove them. And let's talk about winter produce.

Jack: Oranges. We have an heirloom variety that we buy direct from a produce supplier. He has some very old trees with the heirloom varieties of navel oranges.

*[Electronic newflash]*

Matt: Grocery retail jargon alert...Heirloom. Does heirloom mean a non hybridized older variety?

Jack: It's from the original variety.

Matt: Like the original variety from somewhere in Asia or just in like Barstow?

Jack: Navel oranges all came from one naturally occurring mutation where they took it and then from these trees, original trees.

Matt: I love pears and I'm worried about pears. I don't think anybody else likes pears very much.

Jack: (chuckles)

Matt: What's up with pears?

Jack: It does have a stigma to have. It's considered old people's fruit.

Matt: Thanks.

Room: (laughter)

Matt: If the shoe fits...

Jack: You know, I happen to like pears myself. Some pears can be treated with a chemical. Basically keeps them from ripening in storage. What we also found is they don't ripen that well when they came out of storage. We don't use that chemical at Trader Joe's. There's nothing better than a really, truly perfectly ripened pear. It's delicious. The problem is it's hard to get that. Cauliflower... been around forever. So it was almost the same idea as your pears. It was old people vegetables. But it's not anymore.

Matt: See, the old people know some things. I guess that's the real message here. Listen, kids.

Jack: Both fruits and vegetables are increasing in popularity. Vegetables are increasing at a faster rate. And we see that at Trader Joe's. People want to cook fresh vegetables. When I grew up, you steamed them to death, right? Or boiled them forever and they were okay if you added a lot of butter, but ... Carrots had been around forever and for years they were declining in consumption, in popularity. Now they've actually turned the corner.

Tara: So you know we have that product, the organic carrots of many colors. Carrots used to come in all kinds of colors. And it was the Dutch that really settled on the orange and orange became the acceptable color for carrots everywhere. But these old carrots that are purple and red and sort of fuchsia colored and, and orange and white, that's how carrots were up until a few hundred years ago.

Matt: Blame the Dutch!

Tara: Blame the Dutch! Tell us about organics in our store.

Jack: This is one area where we don't mirror national trends. We sell way more organics than an average supermarket. 32% of our offering is organics.

Tara: What you're saying is, our customers they want organics.

Jack: In a lot of instances we've seen where we carry both conventionally grown products and organic products. Over time the conventional product just doesn't sell. People buy the organics more.

Tara: What about the idea of less than perfect produce? What happens when something is still good but doesn't really look great?

Jack: We share that out. That's a Trader Joe's jargon, but we basically donate it to food banks.

Tara: Produce is the number one category of food that we donate.

Matt: That's really proof of the amazing work that the crew is doing at every store, every day to take care of that section, to take care of the produce and to help figure out a place for it other than the trash. You know it's still usable. It's still valuable. We make sure that it gets to someplace where it can be used either a food pantry or a food bank type of place.

Tara: How do you tell when things are ripe? I mean everything has a little, everything's different, right?

Jack: Unfortunately it is different for every kind of fruit. Like berries, are not going to ripen. They are what they are. Might as well eat them day one. They're not going to change. Things like cantaloupes will get sweeter if you let them ripen, where watermelon will not. Pineapples tend not to get sweeter. Bananas, obviously everybody knows the riper they get, the sweeter they get. Some people like their peaches really soft. Other people like to peaches kind of firm. If you really like a firm peach, you might want to try the white varieties of peaches. They tend to sweeten up. They have less acid so they tend to taste sweeter when they're firmer. If you really want a soft peach, take yellow peach. A lot of it comes into personal preference too.

*[Up tempo countdown show music begins]*

Matt: We're counting down the top fruits at Trader Joe's and we don't stop until we get to number one, but first, here's a long distance dedication.

Tara: (CRACKS UP)

Jack: It's dominated by berries.

Matt: All right, #5.

Jack: #5 is probably off the top of my head... One pound, two pound organic strawberries.

Matt: #4

Jack: 18 ounce blueberries.

Matt: #3

Jack: You know something though. I went back and just had a, had a brain cramp when I was calling back.

Matt: It's probably like on the top three, probably another size of berries.

Jack: Yes

*Radio jingle: "Number one!"*

Jack: Avocados are the #1 and #2. We did 1.9 million in avocados this week.

Tara: Really winding down. Do you have a favorite produce item at Trader Joe's?

Jack: We have a Soba Noodle Vegetable Kit. I'm a big fan. It's basically a mix of fresh vegetables with some soba noodles and the sauce where you can actually stir fry it and it's delicious.

Tara: And Jack, how about one more new product that we can look forward to in produce?

Jack: We decided to branch out a little bit and I've got a Southwest Sweet Potato Bowl. It's Vegan. It's got some poblano peppers, roasted corn, black beans, pico de gallo. If you add a protein, you can make it really a main dish, not a side kit.

Matt: I'm glad you said that. I thought you were going to say sunchokes.

Jack: (laughs)

Tara: Thank you, Jack, we appreciate your time.

Jack: I thank you.

Matt: And I'm actually glad that you moved on from baby food.

Jack: (chuckle)

Matt: No offense babies.

Tara: And so ends another episode of Inside Trader Joe's. I don't know about you, Matt, but I learned some things.

Matt: Hey, I did too. I always do. And that's another reason to hit that free subscribe button. It's free and worth every penny.

Tara: And that way, the next episode of Inside Trader Joe's will conveniently show up in your podcast app just as soon as it's ready.

Matt: So until next time..

Tara: Thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.