

Transcript — Episode 21: The Chocolate Lovers' Guide to Trader Joe's

Matt: Why talk about chocolate?

Tara: Um, it's chocolate.

Matt: Really good point.

Tara: Here's a taste of this very chocolate-y episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

[Tease Montage – Fast upbeat music begins.]

Alison: Jingle Jangle was on my mind. I think we had just placed the orders or something and it hit me Springle Jangle!

Tara: Dark chocolate, white chocolate, milk chocolate.

Sabrina: So 73% cacao means that there is 73% of pure chocolate mass without any sugar, without any dairy or milk ingredients.

Matt: Sweet. Semi-sweet. Bittersweet.

David: When you get that level of kind of bittersweet, you especially want to pair that actually with something really nice and jammy for a wine.

Tara: Later in this episode we reveal this year's winners of the Trader Joe's Customer Choice Awards.

Matt: The suspense is killing me.

[Music ends.]

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

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

[Theme music begins and 2 bells ring at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.]

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, the Director of Words and Phrases and Clauses.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the Marketing – Product guy.

Tara: But you know, sometimes we also call you Professor Matt because we call upon you to start us off with a (clears throat) brief history lesson and the etymology.

Matt: Or eat-omology.

[Music ends. Baton tapping on music stand or similar. As if a professor is tapping on a lectern to get everyone's attention before beginning a lecture.]

Tara: Listen up, class. Professor?

Matt: When we think about chocolate, we really have to go back to the plant.

[Light music begins.]

Matt: This is about Theobroma cacao. So there's kind of a chocolate tree. It grows in this tight band around the planet, around that equatorial band, give or take 20 degrees north or south. Chocolate trees produce pods, and those pods are like a big fruit and they can be strikingly beautiful and those pods are harvested. They have to be harvested by hand and very carefully, probably with something like a machete.

[WHACK of a machete into dense plantation.]

Matt: They're opened up and what we're after are the seeds. The seeds inside the pod are removed and they're fermented. And that fermentation starts to affect some changes on those seeds. Then the seeds are basically hulled. There's like a hard outer shell and inside is a kernel and those kernels turn into nibs. And those nibs are then roasted. The roasting then sort of toasts them, cooks them, and really brings out a bunch of interesting flavors. That material, those roasted nibs, are then maybe further ground or broken up. And that mashing squeezes out cocoa solids and cocoa butter. And that combination, cocoa butter, cocoa solids, creates chocolate liquor. It's not alcoholic. It's not booze in any way. It's just the word because it's more liquid. Although I think of it really as a paste, cooked in a process known as conching. And then you can add to it sugar or dairy to make milk chocolate or other flavors. And the idea of using chocolate as a food or a beverage, it goes back thousands of years. People have found pottery from the Olmec civilization. Shards of pottery with traces of cacao that are thousands of years old. And this practice translates and moves into Mayan and Aztec cultures. Spanish conquerors, conquistadores, find this, bring this back to Europe, back to Spain. And when the Spaniards brought it back, the aphrodisiac powers attributed to this cacao drink. Well those monks had to lock up the recipe. Otherwise chaos would have ensued.

Tara: Thank you Matt. Right now I'd like to switch gears a little bit and find out a little bit more about the chocolate that our customers might be able to find, say, like now.

[Music ends.]

Matt: I have not breathed.

Tara: (laughs) OK, we should move on.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Matt: So one might think that everything that's possible to do with chocolate has already been done.

Alison: Wrong.

Tara: That's Alison. Alison is our Category Manager for candy, cookies and cereal.

Matt: Okay, Alison, what is the reaction you get when you say to someone, "My job is candy and cookies and cereal."

Alison: Well, I always think of it as like if you asked a kid what they want to be when they grow up. Like, "I want to be in charge of candy!" And that's kind of what I do. (giggles)

Matt: It sounds like a careful what you wish for situation.

Alison: Yeah (laughs)

Matt: It seems that chocolate's got to be top of mind for you.

Alison: Yes. The category is about 75% chocolate because chocolate.(laughs)
chocolate it's a tricky business.

Matt: This is stuff that is effectively starting off as a seed from a fruit. I think of it not too dissimilar from coffee.

Alison: I, a lot of times, equate it to wine where you have the grapes grow in different places. Cocoa beans are certainly a plant. They're taking in the terroir of the environment around them and those have distinct flavors. One big thing now is these single origin chocolates, which are chocolates made from cocoa beans harvested from a specific area and just that area.

Matt: But when you start tasting this region as compared to that region, it's astounding how different this stuff can be. And it's all chocolate.

Alison: Our customers are asking for vegan items. Or for instance, we launched almond butter cups this past year. Almond butter was very popular in the grocery category, but we have peanut butter cups so why not almond butter cups.

Tara: That makes me think of a product that's still sort of in development but has been approved by the tasting panel. It was milk chocolate but made with almond beverage. So it's an almond beverage based milk chocolate as opposed to a dairy milk chocolate. But I wouldn't have known the difference if I hadn't been told. It just tasted like really good creamy milk chocolate. And I feel like our vegan customers are going to absolutely flip for that particular bar.

[Music ends.]

Matt: New stuff, new products, things that you weren't expecting to find. That's the treasure hunt of going into a Trader Joe's. I want to see if I can name this product in two shakes. So can you give me a couple of shakes?

[Shake sound twice.]

Matt: That to me kind of sounds like Springle Jangle.

[Opening can.]

Tara: Oh my God, that smells so good.

[Music begins.]

Alison: It's kind of a springy take on the Jingle Jangle so it is pink and yellow drizzled yogurt pretzels. It is Joe-Joe Bark, which is my personal favorite item.

Tara: Tell us what Joe-Joe Bark is.

Alison: So it's crushed up Joe-Joe Cookies with the cream and the cocoa cookies, smashed in with a bunch of chocolate and rolled out into a bark and crumbled up.

Matt: I'm glad you clarified. I thought it was like one of Rin Tin Tin's sidekicks.

Alison: (laughs) Oh Yeah!

Matt: And now, Joe Joe Bark!

Alison: (laughs)

Matt: Okay. Insert dad joke.

Alison: It has butter toffee peanuts. It has dark and milk, not dark and milk, but both dark and milk mini peanut butter cups. It has spring pareils and it has pastel candy gems.

Tara: It's adorable.

Matt: It's a very chocolate-centric mix.

Tara: It is.

Alison: It's a great mix of sweet and salty. It has some texture in there and those lovely spring colors.

Matt: So how do you do this work though? So if there are these different components you start...I'm thinking you started with an idea like this is a mix. And then do you build bit by bit?

Alison: This I built bit by bit. I can't believe this is my life, right? The supplier sent me 25 different items that could be part of said mix and I put them out on a large table in the kitchen and I started plopping them into a bowl to see what would go together. And you know, I think that's where my culinary background helps. I'm with the textures and the balance of flavors and this is what I came up with.

Tara: Tell us about naming this product.

Alison: When I was on my run... (giggles)

Tara: Yes.

Alison: I think about candy when I run. My name is Alison and I think about candy when I run.

Tara: (laughs)

Alison: So Jingle Jangle was on my mind. I think we had just placed the orders or something and it hit me Springle Jangle! (laughs)

Tara: When you look at the Springle Jangle, it is mostly chocolate, right? There's milk chocolate, there's dark chocolate.

Alison: If you add milk, it's milk chocolate. You have to have at least 12% dairy for it to be milk chocolate.

[Music ends.]

Alison: White chocolate is actually none of those cocoa solids or that cocoa powder. It's only the cocoa butter.

[Upbeat string instrumental music begins.]

Matt: It's funny because you know, I guess technically speaking then, white chocolate isn't really chocolate. It's just called that because it doesn't have those chocolate solids or cocoa solids. And then Ruby chocolate sort of becomes this thing and the FDA is taking a little bit of time and really even understanding how to name it, or if it could be called Ruby chocolate. I believe they've granted a temporary driver's license. So it's got like a chocolate learner's permit. It's not dyed pink or colored pink. It just is because that's the color of those cocoa pods or the cocoa nibs that come out of them.

Tara: We have a new chocolate bar that is sort of a similar color as the Ruby chocolate, but it is actually white chocolate with raspberry in it.

Alison: Correct.

Tara: Right? And it looks like a flower.

Alison: It should come out a few weeks before Valentine's Day and it's intended to last through Mother's Day.

Tara: Yeah. Alison, thank you for coming in and talking to us about chocolate. Get ready...

Alison: Yes.

Tara: Because Springle Jangle is a comin'!

Alison: Start salivating.

Tara: We're thinking early April that this one comes out?

Alison: Yeah.

Tara: Is that the idea?

Alison: I think it's more, we're planning on mid to late April.

Tara: Mid to late April, okay.

Matt: I'm excited about this stuff.

Matt: Tara, I have a hypothesis.

Tara: What's that, Matt?

Matt: That if something can be dipped in chocolate, Trader Joe's has dipped it.

Tara: Should we test this theory?

Matt: Yes.

[Music ends. Car ignition starts.]

Tara: Okay Matt, I smell a road trip and I know exactly the place to go to find out if your hypothesis is true.

[Hokey car & traffic noises. Upbeat music begins. Chocolate factory ambience in the background, light manufacturing noise but definitely noticeable.]

Tara: We've traveled not too far from the mothership to one of Trader Joe's longtime candy vendors. I'm sitting here today speaking with Tim who is sort of the man in charge of dipping things in chocolate.

Tim: I think I've probably made maybe 45 different products for you over the years.

Tara: I think when a lot of people think about chocolate covered stuff, they think, okay, you pour the chocolate over the stuff and it dries and you put it in a tub. There you go. Chocolate covered stuff, right? I don't think it's quite that simple.

Tim: So we have a process called the panning process. So we have a large stainless steel revolving pan and it turns. Let's say we add 50 pounds of almonds and we start the pan and it starts to turn. And while it's turning we add chocolate to it.

Tara: Wow.

Tim: We spray chocolate on it while it's turning and we blow cold air and it's slowly builds up the layers of chocolate on top of the almond. At the end we smooth it out so it's nice and smooth. Then we have to let it sit for 24 hours and then we take it to one of our polishing rooms.

Tara: So the polishing room really does sound like something out of Willy Wonka. But hopefully we're not finding Veruca Salt in the polishing room here.

[Music ends.]

Tara: So it really is an art and science like together, right?

Tim: Oh yes.

Tara: What have you covered in chocolate?

[Music begins.]

Tim: Well we've covered almonds, cashews, pistachios, pecans, macadamias, hazelnuts.

Tara: Hazelnuts.

Tim: Walnuts. So I think that's all the nuts. Raisins, cherries, blueberries, cranberries, pomegranate seeds. We have an espresso bean that we bring in from Brazil. Dark chocolate espresso beans.

Tara: And where is that chocolate made for you? Is that made here in the U.S.?

Tim: Made here in the United States, but we have a special blend of beans from around the world to get to a certain flavor profile.

Tara: Okay.

Tim: So, it's kind of a secret.

Tara: There's always room for innovation when it comes to new products at Trader Joe's. So I'm sure we'll be covering some other things in chocolate as time goes on.

Tim: Let's come up with a lot of wonderful ideas of different things to coat.

Tara: Tim, thank you so much for showing us around.

Tim: Thank you for coming today.

Tara: We really appreciate it. Having tested Matt's hypothesis, the results are, we haven't covered everything, but there is still time.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Okay, so Alison told us that when she says, "I manage candy and cookies at Trader Joe's," people want her job.

[Music begins.]

Matt: So Sabrina, when you let people know that you oversee the regulatory details of product labeling and work with vendors to get that all squared away, what do they say?

Sabrina: They pretty much ask me what it is I really do because they don't understand what that means. (laughs) So my go to response is everything on the product label, that's what myself and team review. Whether it's the nutrients, the ingredients, the allergens, they know if a product is vegan, gluten free. We want to make sure our customers are getting exactly what they want.

Tara: So if it says 73% cacao on the label, what does that actually mean?

Sabrina: There is 73% of pure chocolate mass without any sugar, without any dairy or milk ingredients. That is the percent of chocolate per se or cocoa in the product

Tara: So tell us a little bit about white chocolate.

Sabrina: So the only ingredient in white chocolate that makes it chocolate is the cacao fat, also known as cocoa butter. So to be called white chocolate it has to have a certain percent of cocoa butter. 20% is the minimum but in every standard of identity that FDA has for chocolate, they also have other requirements. So for white chocolate, not only do you have to have 20% cocoa butter, you also have to have 3.5% milk fat as a minimum and 14% total milk solids, which is what makes it more milky and creamy.

Matt: So then according to the FDA, white chocolate must have dairy ingredients.

Sabrina: Yes.

Matt: Oh, interesting.

Sabrina: They can also use different sweeteners too. The standard one is cane sugar, but according to the regulation, you can use any type of nutritive sweetener and it has to be at least 55% which is why white chocolate is so sweet.

Matt: It has to?!

Sabrina: Has to be, yes.

[Music ends.]

Matt: Wow! So who, who is thinking that up? Like I'm going to make 55% sugar and no less.

Tara: Often times you hear from people, "Wow, white chocolate is just so sweet." But it is required to be.

Matt: By definition.

Tara: So it is required by regulation to be really, really sweet.

Matt: We should all be required to be sweet.

Tara: We should and unfortunately that's not the case. (laughs)

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Are you a chocolate lover?

Sabrina: My go to typically is dark chocolate. So I like the Dark Chocolate Lover's Bar or Dark Chocolate Covered Almonds.

Matt: Have you always liked darker chocolate? Has it changed? And if it has changed what brought about that change?

Sabrina: I've liked dark chocolate ever since I was introduced to it. As a kid I wasn't allowed to have candy, only on Halloween. And the only chocolate there really is on Halloween is milk chocolate so I didn't know it existed until I was probably in high school.

Matt: I might've had it sort of a similar upbringing. Like when I brought my lunch to school and people wanted to trade, no one wanted to trade with any of the things from my lunch.

Sabrina: My dessert was homemade pear applesauce, so yes.

Matt: Did you ever like hide it? And like I used to hide like carrot and celery sticks in my underwear drawer.

Tara: Matt!

Matt: And then my dad found them all at once. Sorry.

Tara: Okay. Sabrina, thank you so much for coming in and talking to us yet again. This was fun. As always. I love nutrition facts.

Matt: Absolutely. And all of our guests today get a bit of a door prize. The opportunity to taste that soon to be coming out Springle Jangle.

[Shaking noise.]

Matt: Give it a shake, give it a shot.

Tara: Here we go. Oh, she's picking the Joe-Joe Bark.

Sabrina: Mmm. Very good.

Matt: Nutritional values for this product based on taste? What are you going to guess?

Sabrina: I'd say probably 13 grams of sugar?

Tara: Per serving?

Matt: We're going to do a little bit of a research and uh...you're good!

Sabrina: Awesome! There we go!

Matt: I guess that's why you do what you do. Thank you. Wow. Okay.

Tara: (chuckles)

[Transition.]

Tara: You listeners may remember David as one of our Trader Joe's holiday carolers.

Matt: And those recordings are now available on LP, eight track and cassette.

David: (singing) "Truffle all the way."

Tara: Yes! Episode 19, if anyone wants to give that one a listen.

Matt: Now, some of our Trader Joe's crew members have been with us for decades and decades. Now David hasn't been with us, as in with us on this planet, that long. He's what you'd call one of our resident Millennials.

[Music ends.]

Tara: And as someone who, not yet saddled with the responsibilities of children, often entertains and loves chocolate, we thought you, David, could be our expert on how to pair Trader Joe's chocolates with Trader Joe's wine and beer.

David: Oh, I'd be honored. I've been known to do that.

[Music begins.]

Matt: Now David, I have been told that you're a fan of what I'll call abrasive flavors.

David: If I can feel like I've been punched in the mouth by something I just ate, like that's a, that's a success for me.

Matt: Well, let's put that good taste to work.

Tara: I have a bag next to me that has a bunch of different Trader Joe's chocolate products in it.

David: Awesome!

Tara: We'll start with, this is Trader Joe's Organic Dark Chocolate 73% Cacao Super Dark. This is the one in the purple shiny label.

David: Oh, I love these! When you're already getting up into the like, into the 70-80% dark chocolate, the sort of comically dark chocolate, you especially want to pair that actually with something really nice and jammy...

Tara: Okay.

David: ...for a wine. Something like a Zinfandel. We've got like an Old Moon Old Vine Zinfandel. It's just dependably great.

Tara: I'm going back into the bag. Crispy Rice Milk Chocolate. The little 3 pack of Belgian chocolate bars.

Matt: Screaming for a wine recommendation.

David: Absolutely. So with a kind of a softer milk chocolate like that, you get a lot of the fun texture with the crispy rice. A lighter wine is going to do really well with that. Something like a pinot noir. Cotillion Pinot Noir, in particular, is really nice. Just nice and delicate and you'll get to explore a lot of those interesting flavor combinations that way.

Tara: This one is going to test you a little bit. Montezuma's Absolute Black with Cocoa Nibs. This is 100% cocoa solids. So there's nothing else in here. The ingredients are 93% chocolate liquor and 7% cocoa nibs. So there's nothing else in it. There's no milk, there's no sugar, there's no vanilla, there's no additives, there's no nothing. What kind of wine do you drink with that?

David: Well first off, let me just say this is like 100% my jam. We have a Pasqua Amarone Della Valpolicella. That works really well with it. We have a Tribunal Red Wine, which is a big expansive wine, but its tannins are actually a little more curbed and nuanced. It kind of interplays rather than conflicts with the chocolate there.

Tara: Matt, you want to reach into my bag here and see what you come up with for David?

[Tara passes bag to Matt. Matt digging around in a bag.]

Matt: I want to make this really tough.

David: (laughs) Challenge me.

Matt: Dark Chocolate Covered Mini Pretzels.

David: You want something refreshing. But not like so light that it's just going to you know melt into the chocolate pretzel. So like an oatmeal stout is really good. Our Stockyard Oatmeal Stout is pretty much tailor made for that. It itself is pretty chocolatey.

MATT: Beer pairing, I like that cause like beer and pretzels.

[Music ends.]

Tara: That makes perfect sense actually.

Matt: Perfect.

David: Right?

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: Okay, this just pulled from the chocolate mystery bag. This is Trader Joe's Fair Trade Organic 72% Cacao Belgian Dark Chocolate Bar.

David: With something as big and dark like this, sometimes I like to switch it up and do a port. Sort of more of a dessert wine. Cause there the sweetness actually kind of lifts up some of the bitter in the dark chocolate.

Matt: Chocolate and port, yes. And you need to be wearing an ascot for this.

David: Yes! Ascot, smoking jacket.

Matt: So are you going Tawny? Ruby? Late bottle vintage? What kind of port are you feeling for this?

David: Well, we've actually got an interesting one called Evenus.

Tara: The darker the chocolate, the fruitier the wine? Like the bigger fruit flavors but not necessarily super tannic wines?

David: That's exactly how I would go, yeah.

Tara: Okay. Have you had a chance to try the Springle Jangle?

Matt: Everyone on this episode gets a crack at it. A chance to do a taste preview. It should be in stores, we think, around April.

Tara: Drum roll please.

[Music ends. Snare drum roll.]

David: Oh, that's fantastic! That's everything I wanted it to be. (laughs)

Tara: (laughs) Thank you.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: This is one of my favorite days of the whole year.

Matt: Your birthday.

Tara: No.

Matt: My birthday.

Tara: No.

Matt: David's birthday.

Tara: No, no, no, no, no. It's the day we get to announce the Trader Joe's Customer Choice Awards.

Matt: Oh, if I may.

[Music ends.]

Matt: (clears throat)

[Awards show theme music begins.]

Matt: (echo announcer voice) Recorded live at the Trader Joe's mothership in Monrovia, California. It's the 11th Annual Customer Choice Awards.

[Polite applause from large theater audience.]

Tara: We send out a request to our customers via email and on our Instagram page to submit to us their favorite Trader Joe's products in a bunch of categories and then one overall winner that your favorite product in the whole store that transcends every category.

Matt: These products touch customers' hearts. This isn't about how many times they've purchased it, necessarily, this is about their vote.

[Awards show theme music ends.]

Tara: Matt, the moment we've all been waiting for...

Matt: Let's step into the winner's circle.

[Awards show theme music begins.]

Tara: Every year since we have been doing the Customer Choice Awards, the overall favorite at Trader Joe's has been Mandarin Orange Chicken. Do we think that it can retain its leadership position?

[Awards show theme music ends.]

Tara: Let's find out. Shall we?

Matt: Let's!

Tara: Let's!

[Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: Okay, number five....Unexpected Cheddar.

Matt: Totally expected.

Tara: Number four...Dark Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups. Again, a perennial favorite every year.

Matt: It's true.

Tara: Number three...Mandarin Orange Chicken.

Matt: Wait a minute..

Tara: Yeah. While people still love Mandarin Orange Chicken, it is not number one anymore.

Matt: Wow.

Tara: Number two...Cauliflower Gnocchi.

Matt: Okay. I could've seen that one coming.

Tara: Yep. Last year in 2019, it was number two.

[Music ends.]

Tara: Matt, the moment we've all been waiting for. The envelope please...

[Envelope rips open. Tympani roll.]

Tara: Number one, the overall favorite product at Trader Joe's as determined by the 11th Annual Customer Choice Awards...Everything But the Bagel Seasoning.

[Loud applause. Awards music.]

Matt: Wow!

Tara: Whoo!

Matt: That's amazing.

Tara: Everything. But the Bagel Seasoning could not be here today to accept this award because it's currently busy on the shelves at your neighborhood Trader Joe's. So here to accept this award on EBTB's behalf is our friend David.

[Music ends. Light echo on David's mic as if in auditorium.]

David: Hello! I'm wow! This is unbelievable! I mean, obviously we want to thank the customers. We couldn't have done this without them. Gosh, I had a whole thing prepared. God, this thing is heavier than they tell you.

[Music begins playing him off stage.]

David: I guess all the little bagels out there. I know you could see us accepting the award. Time to go to bed.

Tara: (laughs) I don't know what else to say to this. This is so ridiculous that I love it. But it's...

Matt: Congratulations to all our products. It really is an honor just to be on the shelves.

[Awards show music ends. Closing theme music begins.]

Tara: And congratulations as well to all of our crew members for keeping Trader Joe's customers happy with lots of delicious chocolate. It's a tough job but they do it well.

Matt: Since we started this podcast, the listenership has really grown. Thank you, and thanks for rating and reviewing this podcast wherever you get your podcasts. That helps more people find it.

Tara: And be sure to hit that free subscribe button so you can get the next episode.

Matt: It is free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.