

Transcript — Episode 27: Trader Joe's Talks Beer and Beyond

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

Matt: Grab a frosty mug, maybe even fill it with hard seltzer, and join us for another episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

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

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, the Director of Words and Phrases and Clauses. I really enjoy red ale.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the Marketing - Product guy and for me, well, the type of beer that I enjoy, it just depends. I like stout, porter, but I also like hefeweizen.

Tara: Oh, you are a complicated guy.

[Theme music ends.]

Tara: Once upon a time long ago, and not very far away,...

Matt: 13.1 miles.

[Car driving by. Upbeat music begins.]

Tara: ...a very smart retail entrepreneur began a new type of convenience store.

Matt: Did the crew wear Hawaiian shirts? I think I've heard this story.

Tara: It was mostly known then as the place where you got your wine and cheese and party stuff.

Matt: And beer?

Tara: Oh yes.

Matt: As that store grew and grew and his other neighborhood stores named Trader Joe's were created and the product selection grew too, we developed a reputation for great values on other products.

Tara: And we kept our reputation for wine and cheese.

Matt: And beer.

Tara: And snacks. We still have that party store feel, but of course the delicious frothy beverage we call beer began long before that story. So let's go back in time a little further for a short lecture on beer from Professor Matt.

[Upbeat music ends.]

Matt: (clears throat) Just a shot of beer history.

Tara: Exactly.

[Stringed instrumental music begins.]

Matt: You know beer is probably among the oldest recipe in humanity's drink book. There was an ancient Sumerian goddess, Ninkasi, and she had devotional hymns dedicated to her, which actually included the recitation of beer recipes. This is for preliterate societies to remember how to make beer. So how was this recipe, this ancient recipe created?

[Music ends.]

Matt: It was likely a happy accident coming from eating cereal.

[Light music begins.]

Matt: You cereal, as in cereal grains. A handful of wheat is literally difficult to chew, so it's very likely that early civilizations that were eating cereal grains, things like wheat and barley or early strains of it, einkorn wheat for example, they probably soaked these grains to make them softer. And in that soaking many of those grains probably sprouted. They germinated. And if someone forgot the porridge outside for a day or two, natural airborne yeasts might've caused some fermentation. And the guy who got that lucky porridge on the third day, he might've felt a little magical afterwards because of the alcohol that formed from the sugars in that. And people from this accident started to do that on purpose.

Tara: Matt, if I didn't know you better, I might think you're making this up.

Matt: Well, but I'm not. And so when I'm usually stumped for some historical ideas, I go to the comic book section of the home library. I had this great book and it's the comic book story of beer. I actually happened to know one of the authors of this book, Jonathan Hennessey, all about the history of beer. So thinking about this happy accident that led us to what we now consider as the brewing process. You start with barley, you have to harvest it and clean it and then you soak it, you steep it in water and that actually starts the germination, these little tiny barley guys, these grains start to grow and then you have to stop that. You have to

heat them, almost toast them. And then you grind them up and then you make this wort, this liquid that starts to ferment. And for a long time, probably most of human's history of making beer, this was a highly perishable product. You almost had to consume it within the next day or so. And again, accident leads us to an incredible discovery. So supposedly once upon a time people ate hops or the fresh tendrils sprouts of the viney hop plant, they ate it like asparagus. It's very skunky and the hops themselves are incredibly bitter. So why someone would eat this, I don't know, or they at least understood that that strong bitter flavor could mask bad flavors, bad tastes, flaws in beer. So monks started using hops. And I think that they began to understand that their beer when it was hopped, lasted longer than when it wasn't. And it started to spread and you jump way ahead and you gloss over lots of important facts and you get to this idea of IPA, India pale ale. Jumping ahead in time, a lot, craft brewers are interested in resurrecting the style of beer and American, you know, tinkering with old ideas and making them new. And now you have IPA is almost totally associated with the U.S.

[Light music ends.]

Tara: And that brings us to the present and to our first guest.

[Upbeat music begins.]

Catherine: Hi, I'm Catherine. I'm a Product Developer at Trader Joe's. I work on a number of different categories including my personal favorite, beer and spirits.

Tara: I think that would be everybody's personal favorite...

Catherine: Oh definitely.

Tara: ...if they got to do that.

Catherine: So at Trader Joe's, how it works is the product developers work very closely with the category managers. They create something called the shopping list. So they listen to our customers. They're also going into our stores to identify gaps. They turn over the shopping list to me and it's my job to find the best supplier to create the products at the best value for our customers.

Matt: I mean beer is often on my shopping list, but you have a beer shopping list.

Tara: For most of us in my age group, beer was beer. Over the last 20-30 years, that has changed dramatically. Even people who are just like beer drinkers, you know, like old school, I just want a cold beer. Everyone knows the different styles of beer now. So when you're developing beer, are you going to a brewery for example that specializes in one thing or are you going to a brewery that can do lots of different things?

Catherine: It's actually both. So for our barrel aged beer that we have coming out later in the year, it was with a brewery that specializes in barrel aged beers. It made sense for them to do that because they have the barrels on hand. But then there's also craft breweries that are experimenting with things like brute IPA, hazy IPAs. We have a daily tasting panel. We have suppliers they send in the samples, we try them. Very rarely is the initial sample ready for our approval panel. There's a lot of back and forth, often as many as 10 iterations. So we finally get it right.

Matt: When I come home every day, "What'd you do at work today? I had to taste a bunch of iterations of beer."

Catherine: It's not a potato chip where you need to reduce the sodium. They can turn around samples in a week. This is taking often many weeks for them to brew a new batch of beer.

Tara: How long does that take?

Catherine: It's usually about three weeks.

Tara: So you have to start much further in advance. Like if you have a target date of the holiday season for example, you would have to start like...

Matt: Probably like the proceeding holiday season, like almost a year out.

Tara: What are some of the products you've been working on recently? Like things that we might see soon?

Catherine: So an item that launched earlier in the year that I absolutely love, it's the KBC Mighty Cascade Brut IPA. It's a really interesting beer in that they're using cascade hops, which is a traditional west coast IPA hop. But then it's more of a modern take on it cause it's using champagne yeast. So it has this really nice dry Brut finish. It's about 5.4% ABV. So it's a light beer and really great for summer.

[News bulletin sounder.]

Matt: I want to break in with a retail jargon alert, A, B, V, what the heck is that?

Tara: Yeah, go for it.

Matt: Alcohol by volume. Basically how much of the hard stuff is in the beer. So how much alcohol. So if it's often expressed as a percentage so, 5.4% means however much you drank of that beer, 5.4% of it is actual ethanol, alcohol.

Catherine: And some other items that recently launched as well is we've expanded our Shell House Hard Seltzer line.

Tara: Oh yeah.

Catherine: Seltzers are extremely popular right now. People love them because they're lower in carbs, lower in calories than beer. Ours also happen to be gluten free because they're using sugar to create the alcohol instead of grains. And the two flavors that we've added are a raspberry as well as a lime.

Tara: Those are just out.

Matt: So how come seltzer is beer? What's happening to beer?

Catherine: People are gravitating to non-beer is what we've seen in our stores. Which has been really interesting for me just to see the transition. But I do think it's, people are looking for alternatives. They want the lower carbs. It's more of a lifestyle. Healthy choice I guess.
(laughs)

Matt: I'm drinking my way to a better tomorrow.

Tara: At Trader Joe's we have the category of beer that we've decided to put all these other things in because they don't really make sense in any other category.

Matt: It's almost like we need to rebrand that as adult beverages or something.

Tara: Right?

Catherine: There about 120 calories per 12 ounces, which is less than a regular beer, but more than a light beer.

Tara: I know people who have switched from like a light beer to the hard seltzer just because it's a better drinking experience. It tastes better. You talked about a couple of things that are in stores now, what's coming?

Catherine: The one I'm probably most excited about is the Cookie Butter Beer.

Matt: Under the heading of Reinheitsgebot be damned like this would not pass that frightening Germanic purity law. And I'm kind of excited about that because this has got a bunch of weird stuff in it and it also, at that higher ABV level, at that sort of dessert cookie profile, I don't think this is something that you have while mowing the lawn. I mean, maybe you do, I don't know.

Tara: As beer has evolved and there are all these styles of beer and all these craft breweries, you see people drinking beer differently. It's not just, you know, hanging out watching football with a 12 pack.

Matt: It's people watching polo with Cookie Butter Beer, you know what I mean? It's like, okay.

Tara: (laughs)

Catherine: I would have it as an after dinner dessert beer and you could pair it with anything with cookie butter on top of it.

Matt: I might give it the Elvis treatment. I might have cookie butter with banana slices and the Cookie Butter Beer on the Speculoos Cookies.

Tara: Wow.

Matt: And I guess the full Elvis treatment would be with a side of bacon.

Catherine: This is a project that's been two years in the making. Trader Joe's is cookie butter headquarters so we couldn't have an okay Cookie Butter Beer. It had to taste just as good as what's in the jar.

Matt: So how many iterations did it take?

Catherine: I would say this is probably version number 18.

Matt: Nice.

Catherine: It originally started off as a porter base, but you really couldn't taste the cookie butter at all or really pick up on the aromatics. So we switched over to an Imperial ale and that was really the trick to making it work. It's 9.5% ABV and it tastes just as good as what we have in the jars.

Tara: When is that? In the fall? In the winter? When is that happening?

Catherine: It should be around September. Sticking on the dessert beer trend, we also have a Coffee Peanut Butter Cup Porter on its way. So this will be in stores around Halloween. So while the kids have candy...

Tara: (laughs) No, the adults can have candy while the kids are having candy. I totally get it. I'm going to remember that.

Matt: Road soda for trick or treating.

Tara: (laughs)

Catherine: What they're using here is a peanut butter powder.

Matt: So it's Coffee Peanut Butter Porter.

Catherine: And chocolate note.

Matt: And chocolate.

Tara: OK so that one's a sort of around Halloween time. Okay, what else?

Catherine: Last fall we had a Howling Gourd Pumpkin Ale as well as a Gourd Tree Pumpkin Cider. Our customers love them so we wanted to do something similar for the winter. We're going to launch a Ginger Beard Spiced Stout as well as a Toasty Cookie Spice Cider. They're using really warm winter spices, so cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice and clove. And the one thing that's really important to point out about the cider is it's a 100% fermented apple juice. It's not from concentrate. It's definitely more expensive to use that as the ingredient, but it's a much better product.

Tara: Are the Howling Gourd and the Gourd Tree coming back?

Catherine: They are coming back, yes.

Tara: This year?

Catherine: They'll be in stores this fall. Late September, early October.

Matt: Another question, cans or bottles? Glass or aluminum?

Catherine: It's definitely been a transition towards cans. Cans are lighter weight, so it's less expensive to ship. And so a lot of breweries have switched over to canning lines. It's also more efficient packaging process for them as well.

Matt: Aluminum cans are interesting because they block out light and you know, I mean brown glass was introduced, you know, early 1900's on a large scale basis to protect beer from light. But cans have been déclassé for so long, right? Sort of low end, but now they have more of a high end treatment going on. Why did that change happen?

Catherine: It was all of a sudden if I were to go into a bottle shop, everything was in bottles. I guess now we have to call it a can shop, but everything since switched over to cans. There's different formats. There's 12 ounces now there's 19.2 ounce cans or 16 ounce cans.

Matt: I mean we used to have one, we called it the tall boy, but now they're all these other sizes. It's like the Big and Tall Shop for beers. I had to shop there when I was a kid.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: I still might have to actually.

Catherine: But then there's other beers that you want to see in a bottle, a barrel aged beer. It's more higher end and you want to see the nice little cork at the top.

Tara: Is there anything else that you want to get out there about beer and what you're doing and what's happening in beer world at Trader Joe's?

Catherine: We're not going to have every beer available to you, but our buyers work really hard to have a local selection that's interesting.

Matt: I actually think that the beer section in a given store is probably the most locally tailored part of the store.

Tara: I think we've covered most of the stuff that we wanted to ask you about.

Catherine: So I think there's someone you should really talk to.

Tara: Who?

Catherine: It's Dan. He's one of the world's foremost recognized experts in beer.

Tara: And he makes beer for Trader Joe's?

Catherine: He does. He's one of our favorite partners to work with.

[Transition to Dan conversation.]

Tara: As Catherine just said to us, we are going to talk to somebody who knows a thing or two about beer.

Dan: Well I guess my background is what, uh, has put me on the map. And that is as a German educated brewing engineer.

Tara: So Dan, are you currently working from home or are you working at the brewery? What's happening right now?

Dan: Well, I go back and forth, but right now I'm speaking to you from my kitchen table.

Matt: What prompted you to go to beer school and find a beer school in Germany?
That's a pretty neat story.

Dan: I loved that the tangible and satisfaction elements that come with producing something. And I love beer. So I put the two together and I said, "Where can I learn the from the best of the best?" And that was at the Technical University of Munich.

Tara: You've been responsible for a lot of the most popular beers that we sell at Trader Joe's.

Dan: We were successful right out of the gate. And it was a huge honor by the way, to be selected by Trader Joe's to develop this program. Starting with our classic styles and then evolving into some really creative and different thematics. So just taking the Hotspur's Hard Cider, we were approached originally because the qualitative level of the hard cider being produced for Trader Joe's didn't really reflect the philosophy, I'd say, of Trader Joe's is to go as natural as possible all the time using the purest ingredients. We did eliminate every ingredient except for fresh pressed apple juice. So there's some technology we put into place to enable us to go all natural, which none of the other cider companies were able to do. When you use fresh pressed juice, it's just such a unique flavor and you can tell the difference right off the bat.

Matt: How did that go over for your people? It's like, "Hey, we're going to make apple juice tomorrow."

Dan: Oh, everyone was all in. We love taking on new projects and being challenged. Last year we did the Pumpkin Ale. We infuse all natural ingredients and not pumpkin essence or pumpkin flavorings, but actually pumpkin. Just think about an 18,000 gallon tank with close to 5,000 gallons worth of pumpkin in it.

Matt: Wow.

Tara: The end result proved super popular and will be back, which is great.

Matt: What are some of the crazier things that Catherine's asked you to do recently?

Dan: Our winter seasonal that's coming up was pretty unique. It's a gingerbread theme beer. So we're dealing with natural spices and some natural sweeteners to create the same flavor profile.

Matt: And you know as sort of cutting edge as that sounds, that sounds to me like a backwards in time thing. That sounds like fruit or like a spiced herbal addition to beer.

Dan: Yeah, that's how we approached it.

Matt: Not like "I am Groot" from the Avengers movie. Everyone was like looking at me like, "Why are you talking about the tree guy?" No, it's different.

Tara: (chuckles)

Matt: I mean, so like gruit was sort of like, before hops were used, gruit was this sort of like the 11 secret herbs and spices of beer making.

Dan: The history of beer is as far as what the ingredients were prior to 1516, when the Reinheitsgebot came into effect in Germany. If you go back, what was used to, and most mostly to cover up flavor flaws from the spontaneous fermentation that occurred, it wasn't just yeast. They had all kinds of bacteria falling into that to the witch's brew mentality.

Matt: And it's like this magic potion.

Dan: So you'd get all these off flavors. Twigs, branches, some things like cow bile were used. Orange peel was used because of the bitterness and tart flavor impacts. So there are all kinds of different elements that were used instead of hops for a long, long time.

Tara: I mean we could talk to you about beer, in general, for hours. When the time comes that travel is more feasible and sensible, I need a visit.

Dan: It'll be a lot of fun.

Tara: Thank you again so much for joining us.

Dan: I have three podcasts I subscribe to. This is one of my favorite. Thanks for including me on this.

[Transition to David conversation.]

Matt: I thought we were going to talk about snacks in this episode.

David: Did someone say snacks?

Tara: That's why David is here. He did a great job of pairing up our wines with holiday candy last year. And so, David, do you think that you could pair beer with snacks?

David: Oh, every day. Are you kidding me?

Tara: Let's start with something that is sort of new in the store. It's called the Many Things Snack Mix. And it kind of is exactly what it says, right? There's a little bit of spicy, there's a little bit of sweet. It's crunchy.

Matt: It doesn't have chocolate or sauerkraut.

Tara: Right.

Matt: So it's many things, but not all things.

David: I really like our Shell House Hard Seltzers with it, particularly the Meyer lemon. We just came out with recently the lime flavor as well. Those are gonna go really well with the mix of flavors that are going on there and just be nice and refreshing.

Tara: Another new one, the Honey Mustard and Onion Pretzel Pieces. Beer and pretzels is a no brainer, right?

David: It's one of those classic flavor combinations. These pretzels are particularly good for that cause you've got a little bit of sweet from that honey. You've got a little spice from the mustard, then of course all the crunch and salt. Our Josephs Brau PLZNR spelled P-L-Z-N-R. Sort of like pills ner. That's really good. Uh, it goes well with that.

Tara: Yeah, how do you pronounce that? Josephs Brau?

David: Well, there's no vowel, so I like PLZNR, maybe?

Matt: It's like a Czechoslovak license plate.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Okay, I'm going to go fancy. Oven-Baked Cheese Bites. These are so ridiculously, dare I say, painfully good.

David: And I'd actually go with a cider for this. Sort of like a classic cheese board and fruit pairing. Henry Hotspur's Hard Pressed Cider. The nice tartness is going to cut through some of the fat in those cheese bites and really just make something phenomenal.

Matt: Speed round. Probably our most popular snack...Plantain Chips.

David: I actually liked something that's maybe a little more mellow with that. Something like our Trader Jose's Lager. A phenomenal, nice, almost Kölsch style lager.

Tara: So this one's a weird one. The Grand Slam Caramel Popcorn. That is sort of our take on a baseball stadium classic. Ballpark beer really hasn't been the kind of beer that you aspire to drink.

David: And it's like \$16, yeah.

Tara: Right?

David: A red ale is really good for that cause you get that nice deep amber flavor. The malts going on there that have kind of a caramel feel to them.

Matt: International round.

David: (chuckles)

Matt: Bonus round from the land of the rising sun. From Japan, our mochi nuggets. I need a beer pairing.

David: So these ones are phenomenal. If you've never had these, they're just basically all crunch, all salt. I find that kind of flavor profile is really good for something kind of weird and fruity. And actually I, for this one, I'm just gonna go all the way I think our Elossa Lemon Ginger Hard Kombucha. Really, really good for that.

Tara: I have not really ventured into the land of the Hard Kombucha so much yet.

Matt: It's like Candy Land for grownups.

Tara: (laughs) David, thank you so much for taking time...

David: Absolutely.

Tara: ...to come and talk to us. We really, really appreciate it.

David: Party on Tara and Matt.

Tara: Party on David. (laughs)

[Transition to phone calls to stores.]

Matt: So it turns out in looking at per capita beer consumption, New Hampshire is way up there. I figured we'd just give a call to Newington, New Hampshire. I want to talk with Ray, the Beer Section Leader there.

[Phone ringing -- from caller's perspective -- in background.]

Ray: Hello, this is Ray.

Matt: Ray, it's Matt from the office. How's it going?

Ray: Hi Matt. Good thanks. How are you?

Matt: In just a little bit that I've heard your voice, I'm going to bet you're not from New Hampshire.

Ray: Ha, not originally, not originally. No, I'm a, I'm an implant.

Matt: An implant, that sounds like a dental device.

Ray: (chuckles) I am originally from New Zealand.

Matt: Oh fantastic, ok. In this episode, we're talking a lot about beer. What's been going on with the beer section recently?

Ray: Yeah, we're getting a lot of new breweries bringing new beer into the store, which is really great and the customers love it.

Matt: Are they after out-of-the-ordinary stuff? Or is it the tried and true?

Ray: Obviously during the winter the customers are looking for your darker beer, so your porters or your stouts and then right now with having a lot of requests for citrusy [inaudible] IPAs, so a little lighter on the alcohol side and more full fruity beers to enjoy on the hotter days.

Matt: If a customer were to come up to you and say that he was going to serve macaroni and cheese with smoked trout for dinner, what would your beer pairing recommendation be for that?

Ray: Hmm, Macaroni and cheese and smoked trout?

Matt: Not that I know anything about this combination, Ray. But if I were gonna have such a meal.

Ray: If you were going to have such a meal, I would probably give him a safe bit and go with our Stoneface IPA.

Matt: Stoneface.

Ray: Stoneface, yes. So that's a really local beer actually. Just a few minutes down the road at Stoneface Brewing. It's a 7.2% IPA. Really hop forward also with lots of citrus, hazy, just a really good all around beer.

Matt: What is your personal pick recently? What are you really enjoying?

Ray: Harpoon Wannamango. So Harpoon releases, obviously seasonal beers and I eagerly await their release of Wannamango each year.

Matt: Do you have any particular snack that you like to pair with that?

Ray: I tend to lean towards making some nachos and in use using our Restaurant Style Tortilla Chips.

Matt: Nice. I mean I find that those restaurant style chips you almost have to go full Dagwood because they're so texturally...

Ray: They are.

Matt: ...rigid and they're large. It's like you have to like unhinge your jaw like an Anaconda to eat that thing. Well Ray, thanks so much. I know you guys have work to do there in Newington at the store, so I'll let you get back at it.

Ray: Thank you.

[Phone hanging up.]

Tara: He was great.

Matt: Absolutely.

[Phone ringing again. Picks up.]

Daniel: This is Daniel speaking.

Matt: Hey Daniel, it's Matt from the office. How's it going?

Daniel: Going well, man. How are you?

Matt: We're thinking about and talking about beer. And beer always makes me think of, cliché as this might sound, Portland, Oregon. So I thought I'd give you a call. Your neighborhood in the city of Portland is known as Hollywood.

Daniel: It definitely is a special neighborhood out here in Portland.

Matt: How's the beer section these days?

Daniel: It seems that we're getting more case sales than we are anything else. A lot of people at home. We're also seeing a lot of like sessionable beers go out the door quite often and low alcohol beers as well.

Matt: Sessionable. What does that basically mean for us?

Daniel: Oh,

[News bulletin sounder.]

Daniel: Do you mean a retail jargon alert?

Matt: Perfect, man, you're hired.

Daniel: Usually it's going to be something that's around, you know, low 5% and below.

Matt: To knock back a bunch and still be able to stand afterwards. What about your personal pick?

Daniel: Oh man. Well, right now, you know, Ecliptic Brewing that's out here in Portland, we carry their Starburst IPA and it's just a really nice, juicy IPA. It's crafted by John Harris, who's been in the Portland beer games since the mid eighties.

Matt: I'm curious if you had anything on your mind that you wanted to share to talk about, just reflections from recent times in the stores or anything particularly of note.

Daniel: I just think over the past few months it's really nice you've seen a lot of people helping each other. One of our customers has actually made masks for us out of our own kitchen towels here at the store.

Matt: That's cool.

Daniel: But also there's been like, just a lot of support with the crew supporting each other. We had a recent college graduate that we were able to give her a little graduation ceremony in the morning one day and we made her a cap out of cardboard and then used the silk from a corn cob to make the tassel.

Matt: Yeah, it's like Little House on the Prairie graduation. Did someone hum Pomp and Circumstance?

Daniel: So we played it over the loudspeaker.

Matt: Excellent.

Daniel: We kind of, you know, socially distanced and created a little line so that she can walk through. Yeah, it was really nice. Brought tears to her eyes and made her a big bouquet. And it was just a good moment.

Matt: I'm so glad you guys did that. It's cool. I'm having a goosebump moment myself here. That's really great to hear.

Daniel: It's nice to see just a lot of people helping people.

Matt: Daniel, thanks so much for the time.

Daniel: All right. Thank you very much, Matt.

[Hangs up phone. Closing theme music begins.]

Tara: Matt, this episode had a little of everything. We had fun talking about beer and snacks, and actually it was really nice to check in with some folks at the stores as well.

Matt: And I'd love to buy each and every one of them a beer or the seltzery adult beverage of their liking.

Tara: So until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.