

# Transcript — Episode 37: Trader Joe's Spices Up Your Shopping List

Tara: Here's a quick preview of what's coming up.

*[Preview montage. Upbeat music begins.]*

Jasmine: We continue to still sell a lot of spice blends. I think as people kind of settled into their homes, they began to experiment a little bit more.

Matt: Sometimes heat is just hot.

Tara: It is a complicated topic...spicy and spiced.

David: I think that's the spiciest thing we, as a company, have ever produced. It's super hot.

Jasmine: The other product I'm very excited about is this Cajun Alfredo.

Matt: Mama Mia! This is a spicy episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

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

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

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

Tara: Have a glass of milk handy. This episode is about spices and spicy things.

Matt: Now sometimes spices aren't that spicy and sometimes spicy food doesn't include a lot of spices. So spices and spicy are two different topics.

*[Theme music ends. Light upbeat music begins.]*

Tara: Ok let's start with the whole spices aren't necessarily spicy. And if that's the case, why are they called spices? I'm confused.

Matt: Well, I think spices as a word started out with some version of a French term for something like species or just different ways to identify things, oftentimes plants or the seeds from plants used to season food. Chemically, I'm thinking of things like piperine, capsaicin, even gingerol, the chemical compounds found in peppercorns, chili peppers or ginger, respectively. Now pepper, and I'm thinking black pepper, like salt and pepper, classic pepper,

was one of the widest traded spices back in the way, way, way back days of the spice trade. And peppercorns have something that's kind of like a heat, like a spicy heat. That's from the piperine in them, that chemical compound, and black pepper grows in this grapelike cluster that, maybe, could be said to look like a chili pepper. And maybe that's why some people, at some point, maybe in like the 1600's, started using the word pepper for chili pepper, but really in Central America, Mesoamerica, the Nahuatl language chili, that's what they were using to describe chili pepper, at some point, we kind of get goofed up on the whole thing, pepper... chili peppers. But really the difference between spiced and spicy comes down to the chemical compounds in some of those spices being spicy. And depending upon how much you use and how long it's been in that sauce or that food that will also affect the level of heat.

Tara: It seems like spices could more accurately in a modern language be called seasonings. And spicy can still remain that descriptor for things that are hot on your palette or in your throat.

Matt: Yes, I think that that does help clarify the matter.

Tara: It is a complicated topic because the words are sort of interchangeable yet they don't really mean the same thing. Spicy and spiced. Why do spicy foods give you that sensation when you eat them?

Matt: So you have receptors uniquely situated to receive capsaicin. Some people are more sensitive than others and it causes certain neurological things to happen. There's some study that even has identified things that look like strenuous exercise or the release of endorphins or those kinds of physiological biochemical reactions. And sometimes people sort of get into that and they want to replicate that because you get a bit of a rush.

Tara: Spicy is not one of the five tastes, right? It's sweet and salty and bitter and sour and umami, but not spicy.

Matt: Sure. And it's probably as much a physical reaction as it is anything. And the spicy quality that heat often doesn't have its own distinct taste or flavor. Sometimes heat is just hot. Highly acidic things, vinegar, citrus juice, they feel like they amplify or they activate stuff. Now sometimes that's just the sensation of the acid on your palate.

Tara: Some of those products that we have, the acid from the citrus seems to amplify the heat. You know, the Yuzu Hot Sauce is a great example of that. Or even the Chili Lime Rolled Tortilla Chips.

Matt: Or the Chili Lime Spice Powder.

Tara: Which is not super spicy on its own, but like when you put it on stuff, it really does bring a great level of heat. But as well as all of that bright flavor that comes with the citrus. One of the more interesting ones to me is ginger.

Matt: Gingerol is the chemical compound in ginger root that provides that kind of sinus clearing head rush, not dissimilar from wasabi or a fresh horseradish where it has sort of this like block out the sun eclipse factor for a couple seconds, and then it goes away. Whereas like a chili pepper can sometimes linger and hang around.

Tara: So since spices and spicy are two different topics, let's start with spices.

Jasmine: Hello, my name is Jasmine and I'm the category manager of grocery at Trader Joe's.

Matt: We love a good category name, like grocery. Wow, how descriptive!

Jasmine: (laughs) When I tell people what I do, cause they'll say, "Well, what category do you oversee?" And I still, I say, "Grocery." And to your point builds that you mean the whole store.

Tara: It's like things that don't need refrigeration.

Jasmine: It's things you put in your pantry.

Tara: Jasmine, we are so excited to have you back. We haven't spoken with you on this podcast since October of 2019. If you think about it nothing's really happened since then, right?

Jasmine: (giggles)

Tara: Can you remind us Jasmine, what it is that you do here at Trader Joe's?

Jasmine: So I'm essentially responsible for a slew of sub categories about 30 of them. One of which is spice blends.

Tara: From a trend perspective, when we spoke with you in 2019, it was blends, blends, blends, blends, right? Like spice blends, seasoning blends were all the rage. Has that changed?

Jasmine: We continue to still sell a lot of spice blends. I think as people kind of settled into their homes, they began to experiment a little bit more. So a lot of them were kind of reaching for these spice blends that were so convenient to use. I think something we did see was people using more, kind of, global seasoning blends. I think a lot of people just miss going out to restaurants, a lot of people miss, you know, traveling. When you smell the spice, it literally smells like what the restaurant smells like. Like when you walk into a Cuban restaurant and you kinda have that like aromatic experience kind of take over you.

Tara: What is the Cuban seasoning blend called?

Jasmine: We officially call it Trader Joe's Cuban Style Citrusy Garlic Seasoning Blend. Essentially, this is what that jar does is it allows you to kind of recreate those types of experiences at home and they're able to kind of experiment with it. So instead of just using it on like pork, they could use it on chicken or they could just, you know, cater it to whatever their needs are.

Matt: Like popcorn.

Jasmine: Every time we have a successful seasoning blend, I always reach out to our developers and I say, "Hey, this is selling really well. We should try to put it on popcorn. We should try to put it on chips or we should on some nuts."

Tara: As I was listening back to the episode where we last spoke with you, Jasmine, we talked about putting the Everything But The Bagel Seasoning Blend on chips and those are delicious. You talked about global spice blends. Are there others?

Jasmine: So we launched this really amazing Ital...this is another somewhat wordy one, Italian Style Soffritto Seasoning Blend. And the descriptor says, "An aromatic flavorful blend of crispy onions, sun dried tomatoes, sea salt, garlic, peppers, parsley, rosemary, and sage." What's unique about this spice blend is it's honestly, it's just aesthetically really beautiful to look at.

Matt: But it is just a jar, right? It's a pretty jar, but it's a jar.

Jasmine: Yeah, and it has this beautiful copper lid.

Matt: Recently it's hard to get that jar. It's like a jar of heartache.

Jasmine: One of the biggest impacts to our customers from (every) all things COVID has been a shortage of, you know, components. This was actually a special mold that the vendor created for us because, you know, we really didn't think that that regular kind of square jar would do this spice blend any favors. Cause it just kind of has this beautiful array of colors happening. We felt like it would feel too cramped in that tiny little jar. This spice blend performed extremely well during the holidays. We sold out in a matter of weeks and frankly, we placed reorders with our supplier sometime in December and we're just barely now getting back in stock. Do you want me to go through those za'atar and black garlic?

Tara: Yeah.

Jasmine: So the black garlic, what's really fun about this is it, it doesn't taste like anything else. Like it's such a unique kind of... has this like umami character to it. And it smells like garlic, it smells like it's kind of burnt, but it's very, very aromatic. It's great. It's sold out very,

very quickly. And now we're just trying to get it back in stock. So it should be back on ourselves fairly quickly.

Matt: I think that that's, that's our business model made real though. Our business model is predicated on things selling quickly and continuing to do so. So it's the idea of inventory turn and spices don't get better. They get less pungent. They get less interesting with time. So if you sell things quickly and the product's fresher because of it, you're going to wind up with something better, more aromatic, more tasty, which is the whole reason to use the spice in the first place.

Jasmine: I mean, our Everything Bagel Seasoning, because we can't talk about spices, right, without bringing that up, uh, that one is very garlic forward.

Matt: Still.

Jasmine: Yeah. I mean the sales are still continuing to increase. I mean, to the point where I'm thinking like how many can people consume? (laughs)

Matt: Should we start worrying?

Jasmine: Did you want me to talk about this?

Tara: Oh, we absolutely have to talk about za'atar. Absolutely.

Jasmine: It's so good. There are a lot of recipes out there with chicken marinade using za'atar. I think Ottolenghi has some. I love his recipes. I love za'atar sprinkled over bread, like with some olive oil, like flatbread, like a pita or something or a lavosh.

Tara: This episode is not just about spices, but it's about spicy. There's some, some spicy stuff happening.

Jasmine: We have these Crispy Jalapeño Pieces, which are, imagine the Fried Onion Pieces that we have during the holidays, but the jalapeño version. Our supplier basically kind of just coats these in some flour and then just, I believe it's a deep frying process. It has to be as delicious as these are. So these, oh my gosh, so good! I think people would be putting this on top of salads. I could see them kind of crunched up on top of some macaroni and cheese.

Matt: You could make a spicy green bean casserole.

Tara: Totally that's what I was thinking.

Jasmine: And you know, those really fancy burger spots that you go to that kind of do something really unique? I could see people kind of recreating a lot of those kinds of burger experiences and then putting these on top for that kind of crunchy, textural, spicy element.

Matt: I need to get out more cause I do not have fancy burger experiences.

Jasmine: Really?

Tara: When should we expect to see those Crispy Jalapeño Pieces in the store?

Jasmine: Towards the end of May.

Tara: And what about the Spicy Dill Pickles that I am so anxiously anticipating because those are delicious.

Jasmine: This is a really, really amazing product. I eat these as well. I can only kind of eat like one at a time.

Tara: And those are coming around the same time, right? The middle of May?

Jasmine: Yeah.

Tara: Another product that Jasmine has coming in later this summer, the Chili Sesame Oil.

Matt: It's spicy too. Wow, it's spicy.

Jasmine: You think so, Matt?

Matt: It's just sesame oil and chilies, dried chilies. Yes, I think it's really spicy. Take sort of like a boring soup that needs some help and then this would just totally energize it.

Tara: Are there other spicy things you want to mention? Are there other spices you want to talk about?

Jasmine: I don't think we have a lot of products in Trader Joe's from the Republic of Georgia. I think a lot of times they see Georgia, people think it's the state, but we actually have a new seasoning blend coming in from Georgia. It's called Ajika. What one of our innovators did during...she was on a trip to Georgia and she kind of had this idea to convert this very, very popular Georgian condiment into a spice blend. And it's actually really, really good.

Tara: I'll look forward to that. When will we see that?

Jasmine: We're hoping to open it within the next month. I think in May, again. The other product I'm very excited about is this Cajun Alfredo. It's an Alfredo sauce. It's actually made by the same supplier who makes our, you know, Limone and the Truffle Alfredo. And we kind of

went to them when we said, “Hey, there's this recipe on the internet. Can you kind of replicate it?”

Matt: And they said, “What's the internet?”

Tara/Jasmine: (laughs)

Matt: This is so cutting edge here, so cutting edge. “Hello, pasta sauce guy.” “Yes.” “I want you to use the internet.”

Tara: So if we come back to you in another year and a half, we'll have a whole bunch of new, interesting things to talk about, yet again.

Jasmine: Hopefully you'll invite me back sooner.

Tara: Noted.

Jasmine: Thank you.

*[Music ends. Transition to David.]*

Tara: All right. That's spices. Let's move on to spicy. Our Crew Member David has played many roles on this podcast.

*[Light upbeat music begins.]*

Matt: And he has played each and every one of them exceptionally well.

Tara: Today you're back with us in your capacity as our resident aggressive foods conoussier.

Matt: And David, we're wondering, or really just hoping, I guess, for some insight into what life is like with a palette that can accommodate such intensity of spicy foods.

David: It can be a challenge particularly when you want foods that are so challenging.

Matt: Does this change with time in the way that you become less sensitive? Like, do you need to up the ante with each round?

David: Yes, this is, it's almost like a year's long project of just sort of deadening my taste buds to certain things.

Tara: But I would imagine at the same time that's awakening your taste buds to other things that, you know, previously you might not have been able to taste because it would have been too painful.

David: Absolutely, yes.

Tara: We thought we'd play a little game.

Matt: (clears his throat) Okay, may I?

Tara: Go ahead Game Show Announcer Guy.

*[Tympani roll. Game show announcer voice.]*

Matt: Live from Hollywood...

Tara: Not, not quite.

*[Tympani stops. Normal voice.]*

Matt: That's true. You know, but they always say that on TV when it's anywhere within 50 miles.

*[Tympani roll. Game show announcer voice.]*

Matt: It's time to play Spicy, Spicier or Spiciest.

*[Game show fanfare. Game show music begins.]*

Tara: David, we're going to give you the name of a Trader Joe's product.

David: Okay.

Tara: You are going to tell us, is it spicy...

*[Bell dings.]*

Tara: Spicier...

*[Bell dings twice.]*

Tara: Or spiciest.

*[Multiple rapid bell dings and explosion booms.]*



Tara: I'm surrounded by spicy Trader Joe's products. I'm going to begin with Trader Joe's Apple Fruit Snacks, Apple Mango Jalapeño Fruit Snacks.

David: Now these are surprisingly spicy. You really wouldn't expect it but they actually do kind of creep up on you. I would rate those a solid spicy.

*[One bell ding.]*

Tara: I was surprised when I first tasted those. And I've had a lot of them since, because I really enjoy them.

Matt: So, you know, as the kids get back into being on campus at school, maybe just take some out of the pack and into a smaller container in their lunchbox for a little surprise.

David: (laughs) Exactly, yeah.

Tara: Matt, do you have one you wanna, you want to put in front of David?

Matt: I do. I feel like this is sort of like the lob pitch, but I'm going to go with the Sweet Chili Sauce. Spicy, spicier, spiciest.

David: I would call that a soft spicy.

*[One bell ding.]*

David: Because it really is more about the sweetness of it. Really good for cutting into like fat.

Matt: That's why I'm holding it.

David: (laughs) The spice is really more of a, kind of just an extra little cutting thing on there, more so than like the dominant flavor but quite delicious.

Matt: That was a very politic answer to that.

David: (laughs)

Tara: Looking at the ingredients, it's water, sugar, and the third one is red chili. So I mean, it has a lot of chili in it.

Matt: When you read the ingredients, I'm thinking it should go on top of a snow cone. It's like, huh.

David: Actually that's not a bad idea.

Tara: I'm going to go to, oh, this is one of my current favorites, Trader Joe's Spicy Chakri Mix.

David: So these I find to be, again, on the soft spicy scale.

*[One bell ding.]*

David: They're really more about the spices and seasonings, a lot of that cumin and coriander. The heat is really kind of like a, it's a slow burn where the more you snack on it, which is very easy to do. They're very, very snackable.

Matt: Spiced not spicy.

Tara: I'm going to open up a bag. (chewing crunching noise)

Matt: It's like a Grape Nuts commercial.

Tara: That's really good. You're right though. I mean, it's not super spicy.

David: It's a good entry-level spicy snack.

Matt: All right. Let's stick with snacks, uh, for 200. Rolled Corn Tortilla Chips, the chili and lime flavored ones. Those neon pink and yellowish green bag. The brightly colored seasoned rolled tortilla chips. How would you rank those?

David: These, I would actually rank spicier.

*[Two bell dings.]*

David: And part of that has to do with how actually citric they are, it really primes your tongue. Also, the more you eat them, the more like it just builds and builds until you're eventually like sweating. It's great.

Tara: We're going to stick with snacks, okay? Crispy, Crunchy, Spicy Mochi Rice Nuggets.

David: I would actually rate spicier also.

*[Two bell dings.]*

David: Especially because you can just keep eating them. And the more you do, the more that that does develop, like in the back of the throat, on the cheeks. That's a fantastic one.

Matt: Man, I think those things are hot to me.

Tara: Me too. We obviously are not as strong in spicy shape as David is.

Matt: So good. I mean, it's like, you want to just jump right into that bag.

Tara: I want to give you a taste, so to speak, of the ingredients, black pepper, white pepper, Chipotle pepper, habanero pepper, red chili pepper, and Sancho peppers. They're spicy.

Matt: Let's mix it up a little bit. This is one of my favorites, Green Dragon Hot Sauce.

David: This is spicier to me.

*[Two bell dings.]*

David: It's so nice and fresh. It can really burn, like, that one I think that's my favorite hot sauce that we've got.

Matt: Oh, interesting.

Tara: So I want to stick with green, but move out of the grocery aisle and into the refrigerated case. And I want to ask you about Zhoug. One of my faves, where do you put this one?

David: I would put Zhoug spicier as well.

Tara: Spicier.

*[Two bell dings.]*

David: Again, very aromatic, very herby. It's very, very easy to get overwhelmed with that one, but very worth it.

Tara: We haven't been able to get you to spiciest yet.

David: I'm a harsh critic, but...

Matt: Can we go there? Can we get to spiciest? The Italian Bomba Sauce, the Calabrian Bomba Sauce. Where does that land for you?

David: That is just on the edge, but I would still rate it spicier.

*[Two bell dings.]*

Matt: (whispered) Oh man.

David: It is exquisitely hot, like super sharp and tangy. But I can eat that by the spoonful still. (chuckles)

Matt: Okay, great. Okay.

Tara: Wow, okay. Let's go off the beaten path here. Ginger Juice Shot.

David: Oh, okay. Well now this is a different kind of spicy, but I would actually, just based off of how pure, like that does overtake your sinuses and make your eyes well, that actually that I probably would put in spiciest. You've thrown me for a loop, but I think, yeah, you've got me with that one.

Tara: Yes!

*[Rapid bell dings, explosion boom and alarm horns. Audience applause.]*

Tara: Well, cause it's not just the ginger, you know, it has cayenne too. If you drink this whole shot, which is the intention, right. It's just...boom!

David: It's a great way to induce like your eyes popping out and like becoming like a slot machine, like a cartoon.

Tara: Okay. I feel so proud of myself.

David: (laughs)

Matt: I'm going to give it my best grocery aisle, Japan, our friend yuzu, the Yuzu Hot Sauce. What says you for that?

David: That's a spicier for me and it's a solid spicier.

*[Two bell dings.]*

Matt: Dang it.

David: (laughs) It's quite hot. It's also maybe the most unique hot sauce I've ever come across. The Yuzu is so nice and tangy. There's almost something comforting about the heat on it. But I don't know, that one is fantastic.

Tara: All right, Matt.

Matt: Okay. Harissa. Where does Harissa rank for you?

David: Harissa is nice and spicier.

*[Two bell dings.]*

Matt: Ohh.

David: And you can put it on everything. I really like it on eggs.

Tara: It's not easy to get to spiciest. Alright I'm going to try one more thing. Chili Mango.

David: These are another one I would actually put in spicier.

*[Two bell dings.]*

David: You get one or two of those going and, uh, you, the tears come to the eyes. It's fantastic.

Tara: One of my all time favorites.

Matt: What about the Thai Style, relatively new, grocery aisle, little jar of sauce, Thai Style Green Chili Sauce? This is the one inspired by nam prik noom.

David: I love this. This is a pleasantly spicy for me.

*[One bell ding.]*

Matt: I'm going the wrong way.

David: The spice is just sort of a pleasant, uh, side effect.

Tara: Even on the jar it's described as slightly spicy.

Matt: Unless you're Matt who thinks it's spicy and hot.

Tara: What do you do with this?

Matt: If you have leftovers, like you roasted a bunch of vegetables and they're in the fridge and you have like, even some leftover rice, those two with a good amount of this poured on top, mixed up, all of a sudden, not boring, super tasty. This one, feels like it's just like, kind of like, uh, like with all due respect, but it just feels like, I don't know, Chili Onion Crunch. What are you going to say? I love this stuff. It's tasty.

David: That one's a spicy for me.

*[One bell ding]*

David: Because it's more about the savoriness of the onion.

Matt: So there's fried garlic and fried onion, and it's got a good amount of salt, like it's nice and salty. So that just really ramps up all those oniony roasty flavors. It can get pretty hot for me, but...

Tara: So there's a product that we just recently had that is currently out of the warehouse. But I'm wondering if you had a chance to have it before it was gone. It's the Crunchy Habaneros?

David: There that has a place of honor in my fridge right now. It is spicy-EST.

*[Rapid bell dings, explosion boom and alarm horns. Audience applause.]*

Tara: Oh my gosh.

David: I think that's the spiciest thing we, as a company, have ever produced. And it is, by no coincidence, my favorite. It's super hot. I put that on everything that I can. I made a vegan chili the other day and just put like the faintest teen, uh, like quarter of a teaspoon of that into it, and it totally changed the whole thing.

Tara: Wow.

Matt: Could you still eat it afterwards?

David: Of course, yeah.

Matt: Okay, I was wondering, like it changed the whole thing and we composted it.

David: No.

Matt: People who are excited by this product have just been so taken with it and so in love with it, which makes me so nervous because we sold out, we ran out so quickly. I know that the grocery team is working hard to get more back in stock but...

David: It's rather extreme, but, you know, there's a lot of us out there.

Tara: Well and I think that maybe five or six years ago, we wouldn't have sold that as well as we are now. I do think that the palettes of Americans, they're just expanding.

David: The other one that I am often taken aback with how spicy you can get is the Thai Spicy Shrimp Fried Rice in our frozen case. That one will actually occasionally like, knock my socks off. That's fantastic.

Matt: Glad to hear you say that cause I was wondering if it was just me like every so often, do I get the lucky bag?

David: There are just little rings of pepper in it. It's awesome.

Tara: Would you put the Yuzu Hot Sauce on it?

David: Never say never I'd say. If I really wanted to go nuts with the Thai Shrimp Fried Rice, probably I'd go with the Green Dragon Sauce.

Matt: It's really good on dumplings and actually French fries. It's really good with French fries.

Tara: Most things are good on French fries.

Matt: That's true.

Tara: I may have been tried on the tater tots the next time they come out of the air fryer.

Matt: Spicy tots.

Tara: I think we've covered lots and lots of products spicy, spicier, spiciest and I think what the game has demonstrated...what's spicy to one person is not necessarily spicy to another person. You could say it's spicy is on the tongue of the beholder.

Matt: You could, yes. You could say that.

Tara: David, we have some lovely parting gifts for you.

David: Oh my gosh!

Tara: And thank you, as always, for playing with us.

Matt: Absolutely.

David: Absolutely. Anytime.

*[Music ends. Closing theme music begins.]*

Matt: Okay, I think it's time we extinguish this particularly hot episode.

Tara: When it comes to discovering spice, whether you're looking for the seasoning kind or the, "Oh my goodness, that's spicy!" kind, you'll find it at Trader Joe's.

Matt: And that treasure hunt is what shopping at Trader Joe's is really all about.

Tara: And now that you've discovered Inside Trader Joe's, please give us a rating or review and be sure to hit that free subscribe button to automatically receive our next episode.

Matt: It *is* free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.