

# Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 45: Hummus a Few Bars with Trader Joe's

Tara: All right, Matt, Episode 45: Hummus.

*[Stopwatch begins to tick.]*

Matt: Okay. (inhales) (Hums Inside Trader Joe's theme song)

*[Stopwatch clicks to stop.]*

Tara: I knew you couldn't wait to do that joke, but wow, only took you five seconds. Here's what's coming up.

*[Preview montage. Upbeat music begins.]*

Katie: We're making five different types of hummus for Trader Joe's. And then we also have the three layer hummus.

Matt: I never know how to eat that.

Katie: Stir it all into one.

Sam: There's sweet hummuses, there's chocolate hummus, there's vanilla hummus, there's pumpkin hummus, there's sweet potato hummus.

Christine: And it's naturally vegan so it's hitting on an additional trend for us right now.

*[Upbeat music ends.]*

Tara: From the other Trader Joe's mothership in Boston, Massachusetts...

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

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

Tara: Happy New Year, Matt.

Matt: Yes, we can still say that. Happy New Year, Tara.

Tara: All year round, we sell a lot of hummus.

Matt: And in January and February, well, some of us buy a little extra. It's so great to snack on while you're watching football or the Westminster Dog Show.

Tara: Although it's really been gaining in popularity, hummus has been around for a while, like a long while. Do you think it might be possible to get a brief history lesson from professor Matt?

*[Theme music ends.]*

Matt: (clears throat) Now then...

*[Light music begins.]*

Matt: Let's set the record straight about beans. Beans, the magical fruit, actually beans, not fruit, not really vegetables per se, they are part of that group, legumes with beans, peas, things like that, even lentils. So chickpeas are probably one of the earliest beans to be discovered and then cultivated. And, whether you call them chickpeas, garbanzos, some people way back knew them as the Egyptian Pea, you probably think about hummus because in Arabic, the word for chickpea is hummus. Probably where we got the name for the dip that we all love so much. And hummus has been around all over the place for thousands of years. It seems that those chickpeas, that those garbanzo beans, likely originated around Turkey, Syria. But trade routes in that part of the world, the spice trade, et cetera, moved them all over. And they're found in Greek and Roman cultures and really just around the world now. And hummus is such an amazing way to experience chickpeas because there's something about a chickpea, a garbanzo bean, when it's cooked and mashed sometimes almost in a whipped up fashion that the protein structure, the starches in that chickpea...

*[Stopwatch begins to tick.]*

Matt: ...lend themselves so well to this creamy, textually rich, dip...hummus.

*[Stopwatch clicks to stop. Music ends.]*

Tara: Two minutes, wow, it didn't seem that long.

*[Upbeat music begins.]*

Tara: All right, Matt, we are in an undisclosed location somewhere on the west coast of the United States so I'm going to leave it really vague like that. Okay, I will say that you will hear traffic, maybe, behind us.

Matt: Because it's Southern California.

Tara: Oh, okay, fine. We're in Southern California. We're at a supplier that makes a whole bunch of products for us, including some phenomenal hummus.

Matt: So I'm going to call this supplier...I'm going to, sort of, do a fill in the blank name. I'm going to call the supplier Hummus Land.

Tara: Okay, Hummus Land. We've been walking around this hummus factory... Hummus Land, excuse me...we've been walking around Hummus Land. It is very much like a little amusement park.

Matt: Yeah, don't get stuck in Hummus Swamp. I mean, it's just like Hummus Land, that great board game we all loved as kids.

Tara: You could totally eat your way out of Hummus Swamp though.

Katie: Hi, I'm Katie. I'm the senior process technologist here at Hummus Land. So I've had some good...

Matt: Excellent use of the pseudonym for the factory. That was great. So natural, Katie.

Katie: (laughs) So that means I've had a lot of hands-on experience in the past couple of years supplying hummus for Trader Joe's.

Tara: Okay, senior process technologist...

Katie: So fancy.

Tara: ...like, that's a very fancy title.

Matt: Did you come by this interest in hummus from a familial connection? Like did you grow up on a hummus ranch?

Katie: I was always interested in food and ironically I did actually eat Trader Joe's hummus before I ever got involved in the background of it.

Tara: I'm going to imagine that most of our listeners probably know what hummus is, but there might be some who haven't had hummus yet because they're just not familiar with it.

Katie: It's primarily made of garbanzo beans and you have tahini added, garlic, lemon juice, salt, and other seasoning spices depending on what flavor you want it to be.

Tara: Can you call something hummus if it doesn't have garbanzo beans in it?

Katie: I think it depends on who you're talking to because now you see a lot of hummus - hummus in air quotes if I will - on store shelves that is made with a different type of bean, whether it be black beans, cannellini beans, any type of bean. You can make something with it and call it hummus but what I like about the Trader Joe's products is, they are all authentic and that they are based on garbanzo beans or chickpeas.

Matt: There's probably a regulator in Washington, DC drafting the hummus paper right now to make sure that everyone gets the same version of it. But I think we're going to stick with it, more or less, has to have those things...

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: ...and then added stuff. How do you even figure out how many chickpeas, how many garbanzo beans to buy? There's probably gotta be this really giant math problem. I mean, it's like 1, 2, 3...someone's counting all of those beans...the bean counters!

Tara: Oh, you were waiting for that.

Matt: I was waiting for me to say that and then I did, and now I'm excited. But seriously, how do you go about sourcing something as important? Like, without garbanzo beans, there is no hummus.

Katie: They come from Washington.

Matt: DC or state? This is important.

Katie: Washington state.

Tara: Do they grow garbanzo beans in Washington, DC?

Matt: Well, there's a lot of hot air in DC, so I was just wondering...it's a bean joke!

Katie: The beans are grown all, I'll say widely locally within the U.S. and from different areas within the U.S. They're transferred to Washington, which is where our supplier is based, and at their facility there, they'll clean them and package them to send out to their customers.

Matt: When we were walking on the production floor of the facility, there seemed to be so many aspects of control happening all at once in this really involved interdependent dance of processes. And so consistency has gotta be really key. So, how long does it take to make a thing of hummus from start to finish? And how many steps might there even be in that process?

Katie: We could do it in a day. And we do but it is multiple steps. We have the milling step, which is the first step where we take the dry garbanzo beans and break them down. And there's a quality check at that stage. So we're checking for the pea size of the garbanzo beans using a sieve and ensuring that we have the right amount of fine particulates and larger particulates to create the bean puree, that's the texture that we're looking for. And then once we do make the bean puree, there's another quality check at that stage. So we're checking that the bean puree is the right viscosity and that there aren't too many large particulates left in the bean puree after it's cooked and from there, there's further testing done on the hummus when once the final product is mixed.

*[Music ends.]*

Tara: And we saw that mixer. That was pretty cool. I mean, it kinda sounded like an airplane taking off.

*[Large mixer blending loudly.]*

Tara: The speed at which it was blending, those ingredients was kind of, was really impressive actually.

Matt: It looked like a giant mixer, like a giant bowl, almost. How much hummus was in there?

Katie: The vessel does hold about 1,000 pounds of hummus, but that's a typical batch size.

Tara: Thousand, so thousand tubs or so of our hummus.

*[Large mixer winding down. Upbeat music begins.]*

Matt: That on the surface sounds gigantic, 1,000 pounds of hummus, like where would you put it? And yet that's really not many containers of Mediterranean hummus relative to how many customers want to buy it.

Katie: On a weekly basis, we're making about 85,000 pounds of Mediterranean hummus, which equates to 85,000 cups because it is a one-pound container. We make over 4 million pounds of that flavor every year, which we've looked into it, and you can visualize it as about 13 blue whales.

*[Whale talk.]*

Katie: Or about 180 African elephants, which is about 15 herds of elephants.

*[Elephants trumpeting and stampeding.]*

Katie: So roughly three elephants worth of hummus per week. And these are large African elephants.

*[Train whistle, train passing at full speed.]*

Katie: So you can also visualize how much hummus we make by the form of a train. So that would be about three Union Pacific Big Boys every year.

Matt: Do you have it worked out in number of feathers?

Katie: I wish I did.

Tara: I bet she could though.

Matt: I thought you were going to do, how many trips to the moon and back.

Tara: Wow, how many different kinds of hummus do you make here at Hummus Land for Trader Joe's?

Katie: We're making five different types of hummus for Trader Joe's. And then we also have the three layer hummus, which has the classic, the cilantro flavor and the spicy hummus flavor.

Matt: I never know how to eat that.

Tara: You just got to dig in.

Matt: I know, I know.

Tara: Get all three at once. That's the key.

Matt: I have a compartmentalization thing I do when I eat and it's just that really throws a wrench in that.

Tara: Food can't touch?

Matt: Never can touch.

Katie: Stir it all into one.

Matt: Oof, that's just sort of like a nightmare inducing scenario for me.

Katie: That's even worse?

Tara: That's never even occurred to me to stir that. I mean, I'd like to get them all at once, but it's never occurred to me to stir them together cause there's something so very satisfying about seeing all the layers. In fact, when we were on the production floor, watching those depositors put the different layers in on top of one another, was so ridiculously satisfying to watch. It was mesmerizing. I didn't want to leave.

*[Machinery in the background.]*

Matt: I just loved the sound of it.

Tara: It felt very Willy Wonka-ish to me. Why do you think hummus is so popular? It feels like in the last 20 years in the U.S. it's become like a staple food.

Katie: Part of the appeal of hummus is that it is a plant-based dip and an alternative to maybe a salsa or a cheese dip, anything else that you might have at a party, but it's so versatile.

Matt: There's some moment in the collective American consciousness that said, "Now is hummus."

Tara: Okay, so the question that we get asked maybe the most about our hummus...

Matt: Hands down.

Tara: I've seen this question on Instagram. I've seen this question on Twitter.

Matt: Everyone at my house asks me this question.

Tara: What is up with the seals on the hummus tubs? They're impossible to remove.

Katie: So this is a fair question. It's because we conduct seal testing on every single batch of hummus that we're making, just to ensure that it arrives at the store fully intact. We don't want open tubs of hummus on the shelves because this is something that does need to maintain quality throughout its shelf life and we want people to be confident that the product is safe and it has a nice, intact seal.

Matt: I mean, it's super intact.

Tara: (chuckles)

Matt: And I think the thing that I actually now I enjoy the most, is the little tease of a tab that hangs off there just saying, like, "Yeah, sure, buddy, just lift me up and I'll come right off." No way is that coming off like that. And that's okay, because as you said, the alternative is hummus everywhere or hummus that's gone off. I don't want either of those things, but that is a safety seal. Man, is it ever.

Tara: That is a safety seal. It's like a super seal. It should be wearing a cape or something.

Matt: Maybe we need to put some words on those tubs to help or something like, even if it just says, "Good luck."

Tara: "Try me."

Matt: "The sword and the stone."

*[Music ends.]*

Tara: If you are serving hummus at home...

*[Light upbeat music begins.]*

Tara: ...how are you going to serve it? Are you just going to eat it out of the tub? Or are you going to put it out in a bowl? You can put it on a tray? What are you doing with it?

Katie: One of the things that I like about the Mediterranean hummus is the appearance of it and the visual appeal of having the pine nuts and the parsley and paprika over the top of it, because it looks appetizing and it makes you want to eat it. So when I'm serving hummus, I'd like to almost make a board and serve it with vegetables, for the people who want a healthier option or with pita chips, breadsticks, anything you can think of, just make some nice type of hummus board and have different types of flavors of hummus on the board. Maybe the spicy hummus for people that like spicy food and Mediterranean hummus for those that want a more classic style hummus, but have different options.

Tara: I like that idea.

Matt: You could make it like a Hummus Land board. And you have like Hummus Mountains and you can do an Olive Oil River, and the Fields of Za'atar you drag your pita through. I'm all about that. I even like taking that can of those cumin lemony chickpeas and go chickpeas in the hummus. It's like crust and crust and crust with Guy Fieri. You can't have enough chickpeas. I mean, I think a hummus board is going to be the new "it" appetizer set up. I love that idea, seriously.

Tara: Yeah, that's a really cool idea. Katie, we're going to not take up any more of your time.

Matt: I know what's on my list the next time I go shopping.

Tara: What?

Matt: Some Mediterranean hummus, truly.

Tara: Seriously.

Matt: I'm going to get some.

Tara: Yeah, I can't wait that long. I want some right now.

Katie: I might go join them for sensory testing now.

Matt: Oh, good.

Tara: We call it a tasting in our office.

Matt: Actually, I'm going to use that, be like, "Matt's always eating at his desk." It's sensory testing everybody.

Tara: (chuckles)

*[Music ends.]*

Matt: Are we rolling?

Christine: Hi, I'm Christine. I'm the deli category manager.

Matt: That's the part of the refrigerated case in the store where the hummus lives.

*[Upbeat music begins.]*

Tara: Okay, we are back in Massachusetts and one of the reasons we're here is for you, Christine.

Christine: Thank you.

Matt: There's a lot of hummus action going on.

Christine: Hummus is a great, versatile, healthy dip, and it's naturally vegan. It used to be just a snack and truly now there are so many different ways to use it. It's very versatile. Our customers have just gotten really creative with it. And so you can use it, um, traditionally with pita chips. But beyond that, we've started to see customers choose it as a better for you option than say mayonnaise and put it on a toasted bagel and have a yummy veggie sandwich.

Matt: Mayonnaise on a bagel is just a terrifying concept to me but would you use it in lieu of mayonnaise like where you would make a salad? I guess like there's the vegan angle, so I bet you could use it in a chicken salad or a tuna salad.

Christine: Absolutely. Yes, no, you can add it to salad dressings. You can add it to different sauces. It just provides an additional creamy texture and gives an additional source of fiber and protein.

Matt: What are you hearing from the crew about this part of the deli category?

Christine: Our crew let us know that, “You know what? In the beginning of this year we had too many.” And they were right. We had too many. And so we took a hard look and said, “Okay, what are the customers telling us that they want? And what are they telling us that they don't want?” And so we have close to half of the hummus SKUs now that we did in the beginning of the year. And when I was touring stores in New York, I spoke to a captain and I said how do you handle when customers come to you and say, you know, “What happened to my Tabbouleh Hummus?” And he said to me, you know what I tell the customers? I tell them that we break their heart to make them fall back in love.

Matt: That's like tough love.

Christine: (laughs)

Matt: Defined.

Christine: Absolutely. It's not something that we take lightly.

Matt: The producers of the different hummus products that we offer have mentioned this bifurcating path, these two directions, the tried and true, the classics and the new and interesting, almost faddish or trendy. How do you balance that?

Christine: We've had a lot of success with seasonal products that come in and go. So for example, our Dill Pickle Hummus. This fall we had our Pumpkin Hummus.

Matt: Nice.

Christine: One way that we keep our costs down for the customer is by standardizing our case packs.

Matt: Well, wait a minute case packs.

*[Retail jargon alert news sounder.]*

Matt: I think we need a retail jargon alert here. The case pack is the number of units in a master case. So if you have a case pack of 12, it means there are 12 retail unit packages inside that case. And some retailers, other retail grocers, might ask a producer of hummus to give them a six count case, a nine count case, a 12 count case, an 18 count case, a 24 count case because their different stores sell hummus at different rates. And that degree of complexity is costly and complicated for that vendor.

Christine: We work backwards. We say, “Okay, how many are the customers interested in each week? How many do they buy?” We'll find the case pack that makes the most sense for the crew and the customers.

Matt: Sometimes for a product like this, the producer, the maker of say hummus, they might have to cover other things beyond making the product. They might have to figure out how to deliver and merchandise, display and work through, culling through, older product. We don't do any of that, right? Sort of we cover the distribution to our stores. We do all of that work so that the producer can just focus on producing, making great hummus.

Christine: For us, our value equation is the intersection of price and quality. And so if by removing all those extra steps for the supplier, we are able to get a better price and pass it on to the customers.

Matt: Christine, chocolate hummus. How on earth did we arrive at that point?

Christine: Just looking for an alternative.

Matt: To what? Like chocolate?

Christine: (laughs) Exactly.

Matt: No one needs an alternative to chocolate.

Christine: (laughs) Oh, a healthier alternative, dessert option. I've actually even seen it used in a recipe as a replacement for oil in brownies.

Matt: It's almost like eating brownie batter. It's pretty good. I've got a small wager riding on the outcome of this next question. It has to do with pluralizing the word hummus. Three choices here: hummus, hummuses, hummi. What say you?

Christine: I say hummus.

Matt: Like shrimp and fish and sheep.

Christine: Right, and deer.

Matt: Oh, dear.

Christine: (laughs)

Tara: In writing in the Fearless Flyer I have on more than one occasion written hummi because it made me laugh.

Christine: (chuckles)

Tara: Christine, thanks so much for taking time out of your day to talk to us for the podcast.

Christine: Was that okay?

Matt: That was fantastic.

*[Transition music.]*

Tara: While we're here in Massachusetts, we thought we'd pay a visit to a production facility nearby that makes quite a bit of hummus for Trader Joe's.

*[Car door closes. Car interior noise, car motor softly in background.]*

Tara: Matt, it's good to be on the road.

Matt: Yeah, we're sort of off the road having flown and driven and traversed most of the country to be where we are now.

Tara: Yes, we did the planes and the automobiles, but I haven't done a train.

Matt: Um, I did. I did a train last evening. And then I was flashing forward to the scene where someone's using John Candy's underwear to dry their face off. Isn't that from *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*?

Tara: (laughs)

[Transition.]

Sam: I'm Sam and we make hummus and we're proud to make Trader Joe's hummus. We're making delicious Pumpkin Spice Hummus for the holiday, and we're making Roasted Garlic Hummus and Organic Classic Hummus.

Matt: What makes hummus, hummus?

Sam: So hummus in its simplest form is chickpeas and tahini. And some kinds of oils and some kinds of spices.

Tara: I grew up in New England and we always called them chickpeas. And when I moved to California, everybody called them garbanzo beans and it took me a minute.

Sam: You know, when we talk to our farmers in the Pacific Northwest, they call them garbs.

Matt: Gobs of garbs.

Tara: While we're here in Massachusetts, we'll refer to them as chickpeas. And when we head back to California, we'll go back to garbanzo beans. If we go to the Pacific Northwest, we'll...

Matt: Call 'em garbs.

Tara: Call 'em garbs

Sam: Hummus evolved in the Middle East. Sesame seeds were grown in North Africa and the trade routes brought that sesame seed up into Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries.

Matt: And then as things evolve and certainly culinary applications are always changing and very, very fluid, we start tinkering with these things, and then we come up with Pumpkin Spice Hummus? I mean, really, and why not? But some people might ask why?

Sam: There are purists who think that we're violating every rule. There's sweet hummuses, there's chocolate hummus, there's vanilla hummus, there's pumpkin hummus, there's sweet potato hummus. It's a terrific base for a lot of different treatments.

Matt: So if you're cooking chickpeas, do you have all this leftover chickpea water? And if so, what do you do with it? Are you making aquafaba stuff?

Sam: We have no aquafaba.

Matt: How so?

Sam: Because unlike, if you were to cook chickpeas at home, the way that our ancestors made chickpea in the old countries, where they would soak the beans overnight and then gently boil them in water, well, we soak them overnight, but we don't do the boiling stage. We steam our chickpeas.

Matt: So there's no broth left over.

Sam: That's exactly right. The flavor is cleaner and nuttier, and more consistent since we steam them rather than boiling them.

Matt: And now I'm thinking of like this steam bath, where each chickpea has a little towel around it.

Sam: We're putting those dry chickpeas into big tanks, filling the tanks up halfway with chickpeas and the rest of the way with water and 12 hours later, there's no water left. The chickpeas have doubled in size and absorbed all that water.

Matt: That is so cool.

Sam: It's one of the things that our folks here have worked very hard at. Our goal always here is to make hummus as good as it tastes in our kitchens at home. And when you're making as much as we make, we've found that by steaming, rather than boiling, we're able to much more closely approximate that kind of homecook taste of the hummus.

Tara: How much hummus are you making for Trader Joe's?

Sam: Well, we make almost 8 million pounds a year of hummus for Trader Joe's.

Tara: Say that again?

Sam: Eight million pounds a year of hummus for Trader Joe's.

Tara: That's just three varieties?

Sam: That's three varieties, yup.

Tara: Wow, okay.

Sam: So the Classic Organic and the Roasted Garlic are the core items. But we've made the Pumpkin Hummus that I mentioned. In the past, we've made Tabbouleh Hummus for you. We've made different seasonal items along the way. And we're working on some things right now that we hope we get right for Trader Joe's because I think they'd be pretty exciting.

Tara: So those are still top secret.

Matt: Do you have a dream hummus flavor? That you sort of like every so often you start up in the middle of the night and it's like, "I've got to go make that."

Sam: No.

Tara: (chuckles)

Matt: That's okay. I mean, I'm a little crestfallen.

Tara: I think maybe Matt does. Do you?

Matt: It's not a specific flavor. It's sort of the preparation. It's so easy to just open that tub and just dig right in and I love that, but I find if you just take an extra, and it really is maybe five minutes, take it out of the tub, put it into a shallow bowl, make a little well, put some olive oil, maybe some za'atar, and put that in the well. I mean, there's so many things and that makes it feel so fancy. I just did that this past weekend with my dad and he said, "Oh, fancy lunch."

Tara: (laughs)

Sam: When our grandmothers serve hummus to us, it's at room temperature to bring the flavors out, it's drizzled with olive oil, there are usually a few chickpeas sitting on top and there's a sprinkling of paprika. I think those things are the ways to really dress up hummus, and it's the more authentic way to eat it.

Tara: How do you make sure that the hummus that leaves your facilities and goes to Trader Joe's around the country is safe to eat when that customer gets it home?

Sam: You know, it's our most important job. There are no chemical preservatives in the hummus we make for Trader Joe's and so we rely entirely on our good manufacturing practices so there's no way that contamination can occur in the hummus. It's a very, very clean plant. It's almost sterile, which is it doesn't have great sex appeal.

Matt: An important fact though.

Sam: And every batch of finished product gets tasted before it gets released. If it doesn't pass, we don't sell it.

Tara: There's a question that we've been talking about that we haven't really gotten a good answer for yet. Why do you think hummus is so popular in the U.S. and when did that happen?

Sam: Well, it really happened starting in the early 80's. The folks who started our company came to this country from Lebanon in the early 80's and began delivering hummus to supermarkets all over New England. We're proud to make Trader Joe's Hummus. I actually think Trader Joe's probably helped make hummus an everyday household item in the United States.

Tara: Sam, thank you so very much for taking the time and talking to us about all this stuff.

Sam: Well, thank you so much for visiting us.

*[Closing theme music begins.]*

Tara: Matt, I checked the Old North Church. It's one if by land, two if by sea right?

Matt: Yeah, that's right and we'll just fly commercial. Now, before we leave for home, a big thanks to our crew here in Boston for such a great time.

Tara: And thanks for teaching us about the past, present and future of hummus at Trader Joe's.

Matt: If you enjoyed it and want to receive more Inside Trader Joe's episodes, hit that free subscribe button or follow button. It *is* free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.