

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 54: Product Hacks, The Sequel

[Music begins with a cymbal strike.]

Tara: We don't keep track of this podcast's download statistics.

Matt: No, we don't.

Tara: But if we did, we'd know that our hacks episode was one of the most popular ones.

Matt: *If* we did. So we've assembled a list of more great hacks from crew members and customers all over the country.

Tara: From the Trader Joe's mothership in Monrovia, California, and lots of other places.

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

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

Tara: Just as we did back in episode 49, we are about to share some hacks.

Matt: Solutions or workarounds as in the phrase, life hacks or in this case, Trader Joe's product hacks.

Tara: I wanna start with one that is actually an old favorite of mine. Years and years and years ago, I think right around the time that we first started selling the Organic Broccoli Slaw in our produce case, you know the one I'm talking about?

Matt: Yeah I do. I know it full well. I love it.

Tara: I guess you could just call this a recipe.

Matt: Someone hacked the language and turned 'recipe' into 'hack.'

Tara: Okay, so it's really just shredded broccoli stems, more or less, and shredded carrots. The word slaw tells a lot of people, "Oh, I should make it like a coleslaw. So I should have it with some kind of mayonnaise-y type dressing or whatever." Don't treat it like a

coleslaw. Treat it completely differently. So here's my hack for the broccoli slaw. A whole bag of broccoli slaw. Dump in, to a bowl, some peanuts.

Matt: Salted?

Tara: I like lightly salted, so I like the half salt peanuts and I usually use like half a bag of peanuts cuz I like a lot of the crunch, right?

Matt: Okay.

Tara: And then some raisins.

Matt: Oooh.

Tara: Okay?

Matt: Okay.

Tara: And so that gives you a little chew and a little sweet. And then for the dressing I use the spicy peanut vinaigrette.

Matt: Oh yeah. Okay, yep. I'm all over this now.

Tara: So you get the peanuts in the salad itself, you get peanut in the dressing, you get sweet from the raisins, you get a little spice from the peanut vinaigrette. It's not super spicy, but it does have a kick.

Matt: And you're cooking the vinaigrette, right?

Tara: No, I'm serving it cold.

Matt: Oh, you're serving it cold.

Tara: I'm serving it cold, but you know what? Okay, so here's another hack on a hack. I'm gonna try this cooked because I've never cooked it. I've always served it as a salad. It is such a great summer salad.

Matt: I also think that would be phenomenal on, like, a grilled fish taco.

Tara: Oooh.

Matt: You could totally stir fry that, right?

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: You could stir fry that broccoli slaw. But then I started thinking about, I guess I'll call it the shishito pepper treatment, where it's basically a hot pan, doesn't have to be a cast iron skillet but it could, and you blister those shishito peppers, high heat, just getting a little bit of

char and you can throw some salt on them and there's so many other vegetables that are great given that treatment: sugar snap peas, even snow peas, green onions, scallions, given a little bit pan char are so good.

Tara: That's very like Southern California taqueria.

Matt: Oh, it's delicious, delicious. Cooking over direct heat or even an actual flame, like it just totally re-energizes a tortilla or frankly, any kind of flatbread. And I'm thinking of that frozen pizza kind of thing from the Alsatian region, the Tarte d'Alsace also known as Flammkuchen in some places or tarte flambée, but it's kind of like a pizza and yet very, very different. I always struggle with getting the crust crispy, but not too overcooked. So I've come up with a cooking method that I really like, and I start with a cast iron skillet or a pan that can go from oven to stove top, back and forth. And I put the pizza in frozen and the pan is cold and I put it into a hot oven, say like 425°, and I watch it. And just as the cheese gets melty and starts to bubble, and gets ever so slightly browned, then I pull it off and I put it on the stove top and put some fire under that pan for just a few minutes.

Tara: Okay, I'm gonna try that, but I have started using a different method of cooking our frozen pizzas in general. I'm like a broken record. I put them in the air fryer.

Matt: The whole pizza?

Tara: The whole pizza.

Matt: Does an air fryer allow for something like a pizza to go in? Like, is it big enough for a pizza?

Tara: So, what won't be quite surprising to you is, I have multiple air fryers. And one of them is sort of a multi...

Matt: Is pizza sized?

Tara: (chuckles) Yeah. One of them is kind of a multi-functional air fryer. And it is large enough to fit an entire Trader Joe's frozen pizza. If you use the air fryer setting, it gets much crispier.

[Transition to Trader Joe's kitchen.]

Tara: We're now in the Trader Joe's kitchen with our friend, Alex, for some H-Q-A.

Matt: Wait a minute, H-Q-A?

Tara: Yes. That would be Hack Quality Assurance.

Matt: Right, right, gotcha. But I think it's more like H-P-H. Hungry Podcast Hosts.

Tara: Alex, how are you?

Alex: I'm doing great. How are you guys?

Tara: Uh, we are doing well.

Matt: Great.

Tara: We were talking to you about helping us out with this podcast and you said, "Ooh, I have a great hack."

Alex: This is one of my favorite hacks and it uses one of our products that I think is actually very versatile, is very hackable. It is a recipe based off of our fresh pizza dough.

Matt: So it's not just for pizza.

Alex: Not just for pizza. I mean, we could fry this dough, we can make donuts, we can make rolls. But what I like to do with it is make monkey bread and it's super easy. I use four ingredients and 30 minutes of time and we have, like, an awesome hot, sticky, sweet, cinnamony bun concoction.

Tara: How did you do this and what are the four ingredients?

Alex: Okay, first one's pizza dough. Second one is brown sugar, cinnamon, and melted butter. That's all you need.

Tara: Okay.

Alex: You don't have to let the dough rise, but if you do, you just get kind of a bigger, more airy roll. I start with our pizza dough. I let it sit on the counter for 10-15 minutes, but again, you don't have to let it sit at all.

Tara: Or you could let it sit longer, right?

Alex: You could let it sit longer, yeah.

Matt: For like a giant monkey loaf.

Tara: Yeah, yeah, like super airy.

Alex: You definitely could.

Matt: A gorilla loaf.

Tara: Yeah, exactly (laughs).

Matt: The silver back.

Alex: That's a fun name.

Tara: (laughs)

Alex: That's a fun name. And I lightly roll it out, just, it doesn't have to be super flat, super thin, but maybe about a half inch thickness so I end up making, kind of, five or six inch round.

Matt: So you're rolling it out. Now, my experience with this pizza dough is that it has a lot of, what they call in the business, it has a lot of memory.

Alex: It does.

Matt: It wants to, it just wants to pull right back into its normal shape. So does letting it sit help a little bit with that?

Alex: The longer you let it sit, the easier it is to kind of let it stretch out, to get it to stretch out. And it doesn't have to be thin by any means. It just helps with the next step, which is to cut it into little nugget size pieces. And these don't have to be consistent, anywhere from like an inch to maybe inch and a half, two inches.

Matt: And what do you use to cut those nuggety pieces?

Alex: So I roll it out and then I use a pizza cutter just because it's easy. I can just go back and forth.

Matt: Thematically on point.

Alex: Yeah, just make a bunch of little crisscross cuts and then we're good to go. I start with a stick of butter.

[Microwave beeping then start up noise.]

Alex: I melt it in the microwave for 30 seconds just until it's all liquified. I take the dough nuggets, dip 'em in the butter and then dip 'em in a brown sugar cinnamon mixture. And I make this cinnamon mixture with a cup and a half of brown sugar, and then a tablespoon or two tablespoons of cinnamon.

Matt: So we have a stick of butter and a cup and a half of brown sugar. What could go wrong?

Tara: Nothing.

Matt: Sounds delicious.

Alex: But I think it's worth noting, not every last bit of that sugar and butter mixture is gonna end up in the recipe. We just have to make sure we have enough to coat evenly all the pieces.

Tara: You know what, we'll put the recipe in the show notes too.

Alex: Beautiful.

Tara: I think that's kind of a fun idea to do and then people can grab it.

Matt: Show notes.

[More beeping].

Alex: And then we're gonna preheat our oven to 375 degrees. So once we're done, um, rolling out the dough, cutting it up in our crisscross pattern, getting a bunch of little dough nuggets. I take a 9x5 loaf pan, I lightly grease it and then it's very simple. I take the nuggets, dip it in the melted butter, into the cinnamon sugar mixture into the pan.

Tara: Okay. I know you've been busy in the kitchen getting this ready. Can we give it a try?

Alex: We definitely can. And it's ready to go.

Matt: I'm ready.

Tara: All right.

Matt: The big reveal.

Tara: So you've inverted the loaf pan.

Alex: So we bake this in the oven for about 30 minutes at 375°. Once it comes out of the oven, I let it sit for a minute or two, just so it's not screaming hot, and I want it to hold its form just a little bit when it comes out. But after about a minute or two, the sugar starts to kind of thicken back up and it's perfect to turn it over onto a baking tray. So here we go.

Matt: It's like cinnamon upside down monkey bread.

Alex: It is

Tara: It is.

[Alex inverting the loaf pan onto a tray.]

Alex: I just give it a couple taps.

Matt: Wow. It looks like a brain.

[Music ends.]

Alex: Bon appétit.

Tara: Oh my gosh.

Matt: Is it hot lava, hot?

Alex: It's not hot lava hot. It should be good.

[Light music begins.]

Tara: It's hot though.

Alex: If you want to add some crushed nuts, you can do that. I also sometimes like to make a really kind of watered down cream cheese frosting and just drizzle it over the top. And that's really, really good too.

Tara: Wow.

Matt: It kind of eats like a collection of cinnamon donut holes.

Alex: Yeah, and I think that's actually a good segue into, it's another adaptation of the same recipe, but it's savory. So instead of dipping our dough balls into cinnamon sugar, we actually dipped it into a mixture of butter, melted butter, and our new ranch seasoning.

Matt: Ooh.

Tara: That looks really good.

Alex: And this came out surprisingly delicious.

Tara: Never tried this one before.

Alex: We've never tried it.

Tara: . Ooh, that smells really good. Mm-hmm, that's really good.

Matt: butter and the ranch seasoning, [00:16:00] that's it. That's it. And

Alex: it. So

Matt: it's really tasted and

Tara: It's really Herby and it's it. That's a really nice seasoning on the bread.

Matt: . Who would've thought.

Tara: Hey Alex, do you have another experimental hack for us?

Alex: I have. I have,

Tara: Okay. We'll let you get that set up and we'll come back to you in a few minutes

[Transition out of kitchen]

Matt: This is not a brand new trick, this hack. I mean, it's been around for a while. I'm thinking about crusty crusts and how important they are, I'm thinking in particular of the organic baguette, that's in the white paper bag with blue printing and some red elements on it, too. What a great baguette and so much better. If you do the reanimation trick that I like to do, run it under a little cold water. You don't get it. Soaking wet, just damp on the outside and throw it into a hot oven, like four 50 directly on the rack, just for a few minutes. And that. Cold tap water creates like a shatteringly crusty crust, but the inside is still the soft crumb it's tender. And just a few minutes that baguette is transformed into something wonderful. So good. And then you can do that with the chaat rolls. Chabo baguette. All of those things.

Tara: It also has the secondary effect of making your house smell like freshly baked bread,

Matt: Is always a plus,

Tara: Which is always a plus,

Matt: That's like the weird realtor trick. Chocolate chip cookies are a freshly crisped up baguette.

[small transition]

Tara: So once again, we got a bunch of great hack suggestions from crew members at stores around the country. One of them came from Chris at store six 19 in Ashburn, Virginia. It's really just a quick twist on a pizza sauce, it's just. One third mix of Baba sauce, which is the Calabrian chili sauce that we have in our grocery case. And two thirds of the garlic dip that we have in our refrigerated cases, blend that together and use that as a sauce on your pizza.

Matt: That garlic dip is an oil-based dip. That's gonna soak right into the pizza crust and it is going to be so tasty. Or for like easy, quick garlic bread. Or tossing over roast vegetables, things like that.

Tara: He suggested maybe using it as sauce to toss with just plain old Gnocchi, which sounds delicious. Actually, I think it would be really good on the Cauliflower Gnocchi too, a spread for a grilled cheese sandwich...

Matt: We had an opportunity recently to speak with some folks taking part in a trader Joe's university class, a TJU session, and the idea came up to use the Crunchy Chili Onion as a secret ingredient for grilled cheese sandwiches. So, you would take a heaping spoon of Crunchy Chili Onion, throw it into a pan and then fry up your grilled cheese sandwich in that. I cannot wait to try that.

[small transition to new hack]

Tara: I think one of the best hacks for so many different kinds of products is throwing it in the freezer. Putting cookies in the freezer. Like that's a hack I can completely get behind.

Matt: We've had those Key Lime Cookies. Or something citrusy would be fun.

Tara: Oh, the lemon cookies.

Matt: There's the classic idea of throwing a bunch of grapes in the freezer and they become almost like little icy bon bons.

Tara: Yeah. If you're preparing recipes and you need grated ginger, it's a whole lot easier to grate ginger if it's frozen...

Matt: Oh, gosh yeah.

Tara: Yeah. Because ginger can be really messy. But if it's frozen, it grates really easily.

Matt: And I've even heard talk of putting things like the facial mist or the moisturizing gel in the fridge.

Tara: The facial mists that we have in the summertime, that coming right out of the fridge is super refreshing. The gel moisturizing cream that we sell in the little tub. That's an everyday product that coming right out of the fridge is extraordinary. I don't recommend eating those things out of the fridge or freezer, but I do recommend putting them in there and then using them on your skin, um, to have a little, just a little refreshment in the, in the middle of a day.

[Transition to a kitchen with background noise and people talking]

Matt: All right. We're back in the Trader Joe's test kitchen with our friend, Alex. He set up another hack for us to try.

Tara: Among the hacks that we received was from a mate who said they, they didn't come up with this hack, but that it's kind of making its way around social media. And that was using sparkling water and balsamic vinegar to make a version of soda. So, I'm very skeptical about this. It's supposed to taste kind of like a Cola. We're gonna try it. We're gonna open the sparkling water and have...

Matt: It smells like we're dying Easter eggs.

Tara: It totally does. And now we're gonna drink that. So, we have one that is classic Balsamic vinegar. One that is our product that's called glaze.

Matt: Glaze

Tara: That's like a balsamic vinegar based...

Matt: Glaze.

Tara: Glaze, that's a little thicker. And one, it's a new product in our stores called Aguadulce, um, which is a white wine vinegar with grape must. I don't know which one to try first.

Alex: I'll start with the regular Balsamic.

Matt: I'm liking this way more than I thought I would the Aguadulce was fantastic, 'cause it's sweet.

Alex: Dolce is very good. Yeah. That one, you get the least amount of vinegar-y-ness, and the most sweetness.

Tara: Ooh. The regular balsamic vinegar is really good, actually.

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: Oh, that's strange. 'Cause it does almost taste like Cola.

Matt: I think this is interesting. If you drink a bunch of vinegar, it does a number on your tooth enamel and the American Dental Association's probably gonna write in and tell us we shouldn't recommend this, but...

Tara: But would it be worse than drinking a whole lot of soda?

Matt: Probably not.

Tara: I mean...

Matt: There you go.

Tara: You know. Oh, the Aguadulce one is delicious.

Matt: Yeah. Cause that's like...

Tara: Actually, I would – I would actually drink that.

Matt: So, it turns out you can make soda

Tara: You can make with out of vinegar and sparkling water. Okay. That this is a hack that I was very skeptical of. Uh, I think we're good, Alex, as always. Thank you for joining us.

Alex: Thanks for having me.

Matt: And hack on the fly. That was quick!

Tara: Right? Hack on the fly. *[Laughs]*

[Transition – kitchen background ends]

Tara: We had a bunch of product hack suggestions from a particular store in Minnesota. They are a hotbed of hacks.

[Music starts]

Tara: Store 715 in Woodbury, Minnesota. I went ahead and made one of those hacks this morning. It's, well, it's a cake.

Matt: I like cake.

Tara: Using our cake mix, I followed the package directions. I added two eggs, I added butter, but instead of adding milk, I added a can and a half of our Sparkling Pineapple Juice Beverage.

Matt: Hmmmm...

Tara: Ok. So, this is kinda a riff on, um...

Matt: Is this gonna be like a quasi-pineapple upside down kick that's right side up?

Tara: I did make a huge mistake in that it said to cook it – on the box – it said a 9x13 pan. And I took what I thought was a 9x13 pan, but it's really like an 11x15 pan. So I made a very thin cake. However...

Matt: We're gonna get you a tape measure for your birthday.

Tara: ...it looks delicious.

Matt: ...it looks great.

Tara: It's very moist. It's very light and airy.

Matt: I think you came across an accidental hack by cooking the cake in an extra large pan. I like the really thin it as thin as like, it's even thinner than a, than a brownie.

Tara: That's a really great hack. I kind of love that. There were so many great hacks from store 715 in Woodbury, Minnesota. Matt, I think we should call them.

Matt: Let's do it. Let's get on the horn. Dial 'em up.

Tara: All right, here we go.

[Background phone noises]

Jenny: I'm Jenny and I'm the person that incessantly emails you. *[Laughs]*

Tara: Love it. Who's next to you, Jenny?

Lily Ann: Um, I'm Lily Ann. I like to make things.

Tara: Where is Woodbury?

Lily Ann: We're about 10 to 15 minutes east of St. Paul, Minnesota, which is the capital of our state.

Tara: Jenny, you submitted this really cool, cake mix hack...

Matt: The super easy, two-tier.

Jenny: Our newest one is the yellow cake mix. You make a thinner, thinner pan, uh, thinner height. And then in the middle, you can put a big glob of either the raspberry jam or your favorite jam. We have peach jam right now, too, so you could use that. And I always love a, a raspberry and Lemon Curd mix. So, by putting a big glob in the middle and spreading it out and then surrounding it with, uh, the Lemon Curd and then you place the other half of the eight-inch pie tin, uh, pan on top of that, and then cover it with whipped cream.

Matt: Jenny, you just got bonus hack points for mentioning a product that deserves a bigger audience. Trader Joe's Lemon Curd is among the world's greatest things. It's made in a small town in England, not too far from the location that was used for the exterior shots of Downton Abbey.

Tara: I also love any cake idea that is topped with whipped cream out of a can because, I get that aerosol can and sure I can spray it on top of the cake, but I really just wanna spray it directly into my mouth. Jenny, was it also you that, that sent us the idea about the, uh, Ghost Pepper Potato Chips?

Jenny: Yes. That was actually brought to my attention by a customer. I actually showed him a way to open the bag that you open it from the underside, so that all the goodies float to the top and cover the bigger pieces at the top. And he said to me, 'Well, I open it regular and I save all the goodies and the bits at the bottom. And I put my chicken strips in it. And then I fry them in a pan and I have a quick and easy meal for the night.'

Matt: This is a hack within a hack. Hold on.

Tara: Seriously. You flip the bag of Ghost Pepper Chips upside down, so that all the little, little mini bits...

Matt: They're known as goodies, apparently in Minnesota.

Tara: Goodies. Wait, that's the hack right there. I mean, the chicken I'm sure is really delicious, but that's the hack.

Matt: Are there other chips that you've used this on?

Jenny: You have to open the bag from the bottom.

Matt: Like yeah. Matt, come on. Where have you been? Well, apparently not in Minnesota where I don't, I don't understand this, science stuff.

Tara: Lily Ann, I wanna talk about, the taco nachos.

Lily Ann: What you're gonna do first is take either, um, the chicken or the beef tacos, and stick them in the air fryer first. So that you get like the nice crispy, with like the full cooked chicken. And then you're gonna take your cheese, and put it all over those tacos – as much cheese as you want, which, um, I live in Wisconsin...so it's a lot of cheese.

Matt: This little shout out for Wisconsin cheese.

Tara: Right?

Lily Ann: And you're gonna stick it in the microwave for like a minute, and then you take it out and you have crunchy, um, like crunchy little mini beef tacos or chicken tacos, um, covered in hot melted cheese.

Matt: Wait a minute, what else could we do it? Like any salsa, guac, anything else going on? This sounds almost like a self-sufficient meal.

Jenny & Lily Ann: Anything you wanna put on it, really. Sour cream, guacamole, chopped lettuce, tomatoes, salsa. You can put maybe some scions on there.

Tara: Okay. I think that we don't wanna take up any more of your time

Matt: Woodbury is, it turns out the eighth, most populous city in Minnesota, but I think it's the first place to go for hacks.

[laughs]

[music ends]

Tara: What is another great source for hack style inspiration?

Matt: My neighbor, Dennis.

Tara: Maybe, but also, the world of social media.

[new music starts]

Tara: Here's one, a really cool one. You know, those, um, Scallion pancakes that we have in our freezers?

Matt: Oh yes. Yes.

Tara: Think of those, sort of crisp up a little bit on both sides and used as a taco shell.

Matt: Wow. Okay. Wow. That would be, that would be a really filling taco. Yeah. you might be like a one and done, but that would be great!

Tara: Yeah. Yeah. Have you, are there any you've seen?

Matt: Well, I did see one because like one of the youngsters around here showed me how to like, get onto the Innerwebs and look at this stuff – our frozen Naan in particular, the Garlic Naan from India – as a grilled cheese bread. So, thaw it out, it thaws quick quickly, and then use it as you would making a grilled cheese. Just about any kind of melty, gooey cheese would be phenomenal.

Tara: It's a cool hack.

[small transition]

Matt: I wanna make sure that we have time for some shameless plugs. These are maybe hacks, or maybe just products so good that you gotta give 'em a shot. First up on my list: Persian cucumbers. Everyone needs to eat more Persian cucumbers. They are so good. The ratio of nice crispy outer skin to the juicy interior, almost melon-like part of the cucumber is perfect. Appetizers, crudité, on a salad, as a snack...Persian cucumbers.

Tara: You know, occasionally I do the, uh, I do the keto style of eating. Right. I'm like, like sort of higher fat, moderate protein, not a whole lot of carbs. Right? One of my favorite foods is guacamole. It's very hard to enjoy guacamole without chips. However, a hearty slice of Persian cucumber, cold, dipped in guacamole is a revelation.

Matt: So, so good and fun. And, also from produce land, shallots – shallots are so good, and they have such an interesting flavor. Of course, they're onion adjacent, but there's that little extra. And I just think that they're underappreciated here. So I think everyone should try, just try a shallot.

Tara: I don't really cook with shallots. So, if I'm new to shallots, what do I do with them?

Matt: Well, I would say if you were gonna do anything where you would sort of have like sauteed onions or caramelized onions, you can use a shallot. I love to just like chop up a bunch of shallots, slow-cook them in a pot with a little bit of olive oil- maybe that nice Spanish Garlic Olive Oil, and then just put them on top of things. If you're making a little pizza, like some of the pizzas that we've made, if we're making some of those grilled cheese sandwiches, it would be great in there.

Tara: . All right. I'm with you on that. What's up next on your list of shameless plugs?

Matt: Farro. Farro. It's kind of like wheat berries. We sell a great little bag. It's a quick cook, um, they're from Italy. I like to just throw 'em in the rice cooker, maybe with some broth. I like to eat it hot. Like you would rice. I like to cook it and chill it and make like a little sort of a pilaf salad with it. A good amount of protein, wonderful hearty flavor. So, I think Farro is just wonderful. And one last thing- Pound Plus Chocolate Bars, one of the long running amazing values that we have— a giant slab of chocolate. And of course you can just break off the little squares and eat them, but if you grate them and put 'em on top of a hot chocolate or a coffee, if you grate them and throw the grated shavings on top of ice cream- they're, they're great. It's such great chocolate for such an amazing price. Just use it whenever you need chocolate. What a treat those bars are.

[music ends]

Tara: If you want more Trader Joe's hacks, you'll find them on social media. *[closing music starts]* You can even share them with other people on social media. How about we start our own hashtag – how about we go hashtag...

Matt: We can do that?

Tara: Yeah, we can go #TraderJoesProductHacks

Matt: #TraderJoesProductHacks

Tara: Yeah. Maybe we'll talk about 'em on the next hacks episode, 'cause I like doing these, these are fun. You might also find occasional hacks on trader Joe's own Instagram feed. Meanwhile, in your podcast app, to make sure that you get every episode of Inside Trader Joe's deposited neatly with very little effort on your part, hit that free subscribe or follow button.

Matt: It is free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time. Thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.