

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 75: Store Recipe Contest

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: I don't know about you, but I submitted some pretty good recipes in the Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest.

Tara: You did?

Matt: Yeah, like this one, start with a box of Joe's O's.

Tara: Okay.

Matt: Inside the box of Trader Joe's O's you'll find a bag. Now place your left hand and right hand in opposing positions near the seam at the top of the bag. With a firm yet gentle motion pull your hands apart to open the bag, then tilt the bag over the bowl, allowing the O's to cascade in a graceful arc.

Tara: Okay, let me guess. Then add milk?

Matt: Good idea. Lemme just write that down.

[Scribbling on paper.]

Tara: Okay, we are ready to announce the winners in the Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest. And, sorry, Matt, these winners are a little better than that.

Matt: Okay, I have another one. I call it Ice Water.

Tara: Let's go *Inside Trader Joe's*.

[Theme music begins with no 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 culture and innovation guy at Trader Joe's.

Tara: The crew at your neighborhood Trader Joe's really knows their Trader Joe's products and they know what to do with them.

Matt: Yeah, like eat them.

Tara: Well, yes, they are good as is. And in the spirit of cooking from scratch, we thought it'd be fun to have a little recipe contest among all of our stores across the country.

Matt: So, you might say that this is a culinary creative endeavor.

Tara: And we're sharing the top recipe, the winner of the Trader Joe's Store Recipe Contest 2024, on our Instagram feed, on our website, [TraderJoes.com](https://www.TraderJoes.com).

Matt: All right. All right, fine. Who won?

Tara: Wait. First, let's meet the judges.

[Theme music ends. Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: All of them? How long do we have?

Tara: No, not all of them. We couldn't get everybody in the room and everybody has things to do, but we do have Emily and Eric.

Emily: Hi!

Matt: Welcome, welcome.

Eric: Hello.

Tara: We got 423 recipes submitted for this contest by stores around the country. So, that's like 77% of our stores submitted a recipe for this contest. Pretty awesome. Emily, how did we go through 423 recipes?

Emily: Entry by entry. We had stores send a photo of their recipe so that we could see what it looked like at the finished product. And detailed instructions, including the list of ingredients, what you needed to do to get you from start to finish. It had to be something that we were excited to make and thought we could make over and over and incorporate into our sort of meal plan, if you will. It had to have five everyday Trader Joe's products. Products that are available on our shelves all year long. What's really great about the rules though, is we have freebies. So, butter, cooking oils, salt, black pepper, sugar, and water are all freebies. So, you can get really creative with that five ingredient limit, plus the freebie ingredients to come up with something really spectacular.

Matt: Thank goodness for water.

Emily: (laughs)

Matt: I mean, man, talk about wiggle room.

Tara: Several of the recipes used powdered sugar. It's sugar.

Matt: Wow, okay.

Tara: It's sugar.

Matt: Okay.

Tara: That's a creative use, I think, of the sugar freebie.

Matt: And while I'm sure there are times and places where AI is an appropriate resource, I'm glad to hear that no AI was used in the culling through of all of these recipe ideas. Eric, how did you even start to look for things that sound delicious?

Eric: One of the things that I did was look for the creative titles. Some of them caught my eye. I love a good pun. You know, there was one called This Pizza is on a Roll.

Tara: Was it a rolled up pizza?

Matt: Or pizza sandwich.

Eric: We had Jicama Chickama Tacos, Shrimply the Best Scampi Pizza, an Ode to Tina Turner.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: And let's just take a moment to say thank you for that. (voice cracks)

Eric: That's right.

Tara: Right? Exactly.

Eric: And those...

Matt: My voice cracked I was so excited about that.

Tara & Eric: (laughs)

Matt: Shrimply the Best.

Eric: Another one was My Big Fat Greek Fries, which I think made it to our finals.

Tara: It did make it to our finals.

Matt: I really liked that recipe.

Eric: Yeah.

Tara: I did too.

Matt: That was good eating.

Eric: Chicky Chicky Dog.

Matt: Chicky Chicky Dog.

Eric: Chicky Chicky Dog. Marry Me Stuffed Salmon. I don't know if that's saying, "Stuffed salmon marry me? Or the salmon will make you marry me?"

Tara: So, it's like the, what you make for a proposal.

Eric: I suppose.

Tara: So, it's really like a one-time dish.

Eric: I suppose.

Tara & Eric: (laughs)

Matt: Did you have a one and done category?

Tara: (laughs)

Emily: Well, first and foremost, it had to sound delicious.

Tara: Actually, I wanna get to the finals.

Matt: Make some fast forward sounds. (makes fast forward sounds)

Emily: (laughs)

Tara: Hopefully, we end up with better fast forward sounds on that.

Eric: (laughs)

[Fast forward sounds.]

Matt: Now we're in the kitchen.

Emily & Eric: (laughs)

Emily: We each brought in a selection of our top six, out of all 423 entries. We brought them into a room and debated the merits of each one. Everything was measured out for us, so we were able to just come in and cook and follow Kathleen's directions. Our Resident Recipe Developer Kathleen.

Tara: Okay, so, podcast listeners are familiar with Kathleen.

Matt: We know Kathleen.

Tara: Right. She's been, she's joined us on the podcast a couple of times, so...

Emily: Absolutely.

Eric: She made it easy for us. It was an Excel sheet and it said, "One o'clock preheat the oven, 1:30 take the ingredients out of the refrigerator."

Emily: We had workstations.

Matt: Was the phrase, "Yes, Chef," uttered at any time?

Eric: It was.

Emily: Multiple times.

Eric: Yes, it really was.

Matt: Check.

Tara: (laughs) So, the recipes get made.

Eric: There are actual judging sheets with some lines to write some notes, but also, one through 10, what do I think about the creativity of this recipe? What do I think about the flavor? We tasted it and we wrote our notes and almost didn't have time to write our notes and we were onto the next one, just to make sure we got through everything.

Tara: It's very hard to complain about having to taste things as part of your job...

Eric: (laughs)

Tara: but at the end it was like, "Oh boy, that was a lot of food."

Matt: I thought that it was appropriately methodical and dispassionate. There was a level of objectivity that I found helpful.

Tara: I actually think the winning product was one of the last things we tasted.

Emily: It was.

Tara: Even towards the end when everyone was really kind of full, it was the runaway winner.

Emily: We definitely wanted to reward the crew for their time and effort and energy put into this contest, working together, taking the time to figure out a recipe that they could all get behind. So, every crew member at the winning store received a gift card. They received a super special limited edition T-shirt, naming them as the winning store. And then the super-secret prize was this amazing trophy. We have the winner's store name engraved on that trophy, and next year's contest, it'll be passed on to the next winner.

Tara: That's pretty cool.

Emily: It's pretty awesome.

Tara: It's like the Stanley Cup and I mean the hockey one, not the like beverage one.

Emily & Eric: (laughs)

Tara: Like going from...

Matt: Thanks for the clarification.

Tara: Well, you know, it's...

Matt: These days, who knows?

Eric: Sure.

Tara: Listen, until today, the day this podcast is released, they didn't even know they were getting a trophy, did they?

Emily: Nope. They had no idea.

[Music transition.]

Tara: I loved reading the submissions from so many stores saying, "We had so much fun with this. We had six different recipes that our crew submitted, and we had our own contest in the store to come up with the best one from our crew to submit to the overall contest." They put so much effort into it and that was what led me to make sure I read all 423 recipes very carefully. Everyone did such a great job.

Matt: Were there many, if any, sort of regional cuisines wrapped up in any of the recipes submitted?

Tara: I don't remember there being a whole lot of super regional...

Emily: Not that I can think of.

Eric: There were a lot of Asian fusion, Asian style.

Tara: And that could be Korean inspired ingredients and Thai inspired ingredients and Chinese inspired ingredients, kind of altogether, which I thought was really interesting

and a lot of mashups of flavor that I wouldn't have expected to put together, but that sounded really good when you looked at them.

Eric: And tons of tacos. It's like...

Tara: There were a bunch of birria tacos.

Eric: Yes.

Tara: Yeah. That's a, that's a thing right now for sure.

Eric: Yes.

Tara: And the bulgogi.

Eric: Yes, tons of bulgogi.

Tara: Yeah. Both the beef and the vegan version. These are the things that our crew really like, the birria and the bulgogi were definitely two big ones.

Emily: There was a refrigerated cream pie that used freeze dried blueberries blended into the crust so that the crust tasted like blueberries, but it was also made of cookies. So, you had this blueberry cookie crust action going on that was super delicious and also really unexpected.

Eric: We also had lots of Unexpected Fill In The Blank. Unexpected Cheese Bake...

Room: (laughs)

Eric: Unexpected...(laughs)

Tara: What are some of the other recipes that made it to the final judging?

Emily: We had Churro Fried Joe-Joe's.

Tara: Wait, what?

Emily: Churro Fried Joe-Joe's.

Tara: Right. I had forgotten about those. It's like state fair food.

Emily: Totally.

Tara: Yeah. And those, oh, those were good.

Emily: Korean Caramel Corn. It was this really interesting popcorn mix you pop the seeds from scratch, and then you coat it with toppings, with the gochujang paste.

Matt: I gave that one a lot of points for creativity.

Tara: I did, too.

Matt: I was, I was really intrigued by that.

Tara: It was a really good time.

Emily: Yeah. We all ultimately got some really great ideas on what to make for dinner.

Tara: Thank you both for coming over and hanging out with us.

Emily: Thanks for having us.

Eric: Thank you.

Matt: Enough with the suspense already. Who won?

Tara: Through the magic of podcasting, we take you to Trader Joe's store number 209 in Woodland Hills, California, about 40 minutes west of where we're sitting at the Trader Joe's mothership in Monrovia.

[Short wave radio-like tuning & interference noises.]

Matt: Woodland Hills, come in. Woodland Hills, do you copy? Over.

Off-Mic Voice: (mostly covered by short wave radio-like tuning & interference noises) We, we do.

Tara: This is exciting. So, first of all...

[Timpani drum roll.]

Tara: Congratulations store 209 for winning the Store Recipe Contest 2024. Yay!

Matt: Amazing!

[Music, explosions, streamers, applause.]

Tara: Oh my goodness, this so much fun!

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: If you all would be so kind as to go down the line and introduce yourselves.

Jenny: I'll start. I'm Jenny. I've been with Trader Joe's for two and a half years.

Mikey: My name is Mikey. I've been here for 16 years.

Sean: I'm Sean. I've been here for about three years. I have 20 years with Trader Joe's.

Kevin: I'm Kevin. I've been with Trader Joe's about 19 and a half years I'd say, something like that.

Tara: We got a lot of longevity here making recipes at Trader Joe's.

Matt: Very nice.

Tara: How'd you come up with this recipe and how did this recipe end up being the one that your store submitted for the contest?

Matt: Well, what is the winning recipe?

Tara: Well, what is it? Oh, okay. Okay, yes.

Sean: So, the winning recipe was a Brooklyn Babka Ice Cream Pie.

Tara: And it was delicious.

Sean: Oh, you guys got to try?

Matt: We did.

Tara: We were on the judging panel.

Mikey: Oooh.

Kevin: Oooh.

Sean: Like, that could be the best job ever.

Tara: Yeah, it wasn't terrible. So, tell us about the Brooklyn Babka Ice Cream Pie.

Sean: The ice cream started around a year ago. We had a surplus of babka, so we were trying to think of things we could do with it. And Chief Ice Cream Maker Jenny and I decided to mix it with our vanilla ice cream. Just those two things by themselves were mind blowing. They were amazingly good combination and just so simple, but it was so good. The babkas bitter and chocolatey. Our ice cream is so rich and creamy. It just worked perfect. And everybody who tried that a year ago, blew their mind. So, then, we know, Mikey...

Mikey: Chief Pie Maker.

Sean: Chief pie maker decided, you know, what are we gonna do for this recipe contest? A couple ideas were kicked around, but we had brought up the ice cream, but what else could we do with the ice cream? So, chief pie maker said...

Mikey: How about if we make a Babka Vanilla Ice Cream Pie? Then Kevin, the cookie guy...

Room: (laughs)

Mikey: We needed a garnish.

Kevin: I like being involved with all kinds of recipes and I think more people should try and do that and get in the kitchen with their friends and have fun.

Matt: Did you share maybe the earliest stage the babka and the ice cream with customers? What did you do with that idea?

Jenny: We ate it. (laughs) We had seen on Instagram, Babka Ice Cream Sandwiches, so, we thought, how can we make that even more unctuously delicious? We mixed it all together and got it out for the crew and crew loved it, and we just kind of held onto it from there.

Kevin: We kind of brainstormed on what to do and Mikey came up with the thought of, you know, using the Speculoos cookies as the crust and we had originally thought maybe using some chocolate covered espresso beans for the toppings, but a lot of people had

complained about the caffeine that would be involved with that. So, that's how we came up with the cookies.

Matt: How many iterations did this go through? Were there many stops along the way?

Kevin: There wasn't a lot of stops. It was one day of us kind of throwing ideas around and Mikey went home and made the pie, and...

Mikey: I'm going to make this pie. So, grabbed the five ingredients and came back with a pie.

Matt: Incredible.

Tara: So, it was a one and done kind of situation.

Mikey: Yeah, I made one pie.

Tara: Wow. I'm even more impressed then. Our store crew members really know our products, and really know how to make them taste great because we did not taste any recipe that wasn't delicious.

[Music transition.]

Matt: It was an interesting twist to consider cooking with ice cream.

Tara: Mm-Hmm.

Matt: And both the babka and the vanilla ice cream together were a totally new and different thing from each of those products on their own. What was so interesting about that is that it became this totally different thing. So much so, and let's keep expectations low, but what if we made this ice cream a thing that we sold? I mean...what if?

Tara: Oh, we got a high five on the screen.

Matt: I don't know if this is gonna happen. But I think that that's where the inspiration really found favor with the people evaluating all these different recipes where it was like, whoa. This is a new way to think of each of these things together and with the crust and with that garnish on top. And I have to admit, and this is somewhat embarrassing, several of the judges were new to those double chocolate wafer cookies.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: And so thanks for introducing people who should know better to those cookies.

Kevin: I didn't want something that was gonna be overly sweet. I know those have kind of like more of that bitter chocolate taste to 'em, and I thought that they would pair better with the ice cream being super sweet, and that's kind of why I had chose those in the beginning and they seem to work out well, so.

Sean: The other bonus of those cookies, which we didn't realize till after, was they stay crunchy after you refreeze the pie.

Mikey: Mm-hmm.

Sean: They're still crunchy, so it works out even better.

Mikey: And they make a beautiful garnish.

Matt: For sure. The visual held up and the textural variety across the different layers and components was really impressive.

Tara: So, you all made this as a pie. I'm gonna take this recipe and I'm gonna try it as an ice cream cake in a springform pan.

Mikey: Yeah. That was my second option, but I just went for the traditional pan 'cause I thought people would understand it.

Tara: That was a great move. We wanna make sure that the, any recipe that we're choosing is gonna be relatively easy for customers to make at home. And not everyone has a springform pan.

Mikey: You could do muffin tin too, large muffins.

Sean: Yeah, like individual cupcakes in a muffin tin.

Mikey: Very versatile.

Tara: Oh.

Jenny: Every ingredient that we put in there is something that we all love. So, that's why Sean and I wanted to do something with all those extra babkas that we had at the beginning of all of this 'cause we really like the babka and we wanted more people to get a chance to like the babka. Um, and so mixing it with the ice cream, which is already a crowd favorite, using those Speculoos cookies, just, it all kind of made sense.

Tara: All those flavors really went well together. Never in a million years would've occurred to me to chop up the babka and put it into the ice cream.

Jenny: I will chop up almost anything and mix it into ice cream, so. (laughs)

Tara: You could do this with a lot of things, right? Like you could do a, you could do a cinnamon roll ice cream pie. You could do lots of different things here.

Jenny: Don't take our next recipe. We have next year's contest to be thinking about.

Tara: Oh no, next year it can't be ice cream. You can't go to the same well twice. You're gonna have to find something entirely different.

Matt: Is that an official rule?

Mikey: We will.

Tara: No, I'm just sayin'.

Jenny: I think we'll be okay. We'll come up with something.

Sean: This group of people right here is probably the four biggest foodies in our store.

Kevin: I have plenty of other recipes that I was thinking about too.

Tara: We love this recipe. It's going to be available on [TraderJoes.com](https://www.traderjoes.com) in the recipe section, it'll be on Instagram, it'll be in the podcast.

Sean: And is this gonna be podcast number 75?

Tara: It is 75.

Mikey: Whoo-hoo.

Tara: Yes. This is number 75. I'm super impressed that you knew that we were on number 75.

Matt: Parting thoughts, shout outs, messages to customers, to crew? What do you want people to hear from Woodland Hills?

Jenny: If it sounds good and you've seen it in the store, try it. You never know what delicious combination you're gonna come up with and like Kevin said when you do it with people that you enjoy working with, it really is just...you make really delicious things.

Kevin: Like your friends, your family, like get in the kitchen, have fun. I mean, who knows what you're gonna come up with. You just gotta get in there and do it.

Sean: Anyone can cook.

Kevin: Yeah.

Mikey: You can cook.

Tara: That's exactly right.

Matt: You heard it.

Tara: I think that's the message here.

[Transition music to close.]

Tara: Big thanks to all of our stores who submitted an entry into the recipe contest. So many good recipes and what's the moral to the story?

Matt: Always keep French Vanilla Ice Cream on hand.

Tara: And when you're looking for some fun, easy recipes, check [TraderJoes.com](https://www.traderjoes.com). Check out our Instagram, and most of all, check with a crew member at your neighborhood Trader Joe's.

Matt: They know the answers to so many questions. Things like, where's the Brie? Do you have any Chili Lime Rolled Corn Tortilla Chips? What's for dessert?

Tara: We'll have more recipes, inside tips, and stories and more interesting crew members for you to meet on *Inside Trader Joe's* coming soon. To make sure you get the next episode, 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.