

## Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 77: Chocolate & Mustard for Back to School

*[Light upbeat music begins.]*

Matt:            Alright. It's back to school time.

Tara:            Hey, remember when you had to write an essay about what I did on summer vacation? That's kind of what this is, but it's a podcast.

Matt:            Yes. But not so much what we did on summer vacation. This is a what we did on a summer work trip episode.

Tara:            It was a little like over the river and through the woods to vendor visits we go.

Matt:            Except over the ocean and on some trains.

Tara:            Yeah. It was totally worth getting squashed in that subway door, by the way.

Matt:            Yeah. That was off the rails. I mean, loco, I mean, not something you trained for.

Tara:            Okay, Matt. Even for you, those are bad.

Matt:            I'm not sorry.

Tara:            (laughs)

Matt:            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. Now, when I think about Trader Joe's back-to-school products, well I think about chocolate from Belgium and mustard from France.

Tara:            You do?

Matt:            Among other things. I mean, you can fit so much into a lunchbox.

Tara:            And that's where this podcast is going, to Belgium and France. We joke about traveling to learn about our products and to look for more ideas because you know, you gotta admit it's not a bad part of the gig.

Matt:            And it is truly key to what we do at Trader Joe's. Our product development team goes on what you would call little adventures or treasure hunts around the world.

Tara:            So that every time our customers shop at their neighborhood Trader Joe's, they can go on their own little treasure hunts.

*[Theme music ends. Jet taking off, then train.]*

Tara:            Now Matt, we are in Belgium.

*[Light upbeat music begins.]*

Matt: We're about a 40-minute train ride outside of Brussels at a chocolate factory. What could be better than that?

Marc: Yeah. Brussels is nice. Belgium, it's such an old country. It's started in the 19th century. It's interesting. There's a lot of creativity. There's a lot of energy going on.

Matt: And we're here with some very important people. Some people who produce one of the mainstay products at Trader Joe's, something that we've been offering for decades. The team behind the Pound Plus Chocolate Bars.

Tara: Give it up.

Matt: And lots of other chocolate bars.

Tara: We need applause there.

*[Sudden burst of canned applause that starts and ends abruptly. Music transition.]*

Peter: My name is Peter, and I'm the primary contact for the Pound Plus Tablets.

Marc: My name is Marc. My role is CEO of the company. But I'm representing a big group of 200 top colleagues, more than 30 different nationalities walking around. We prove every day that we are able to work together and make one of the best chocolate products in the world.

Tara: It just struck me that your, the initials for your title, you really are the chocolate executive officer.

Marc: Yes. You could see it like that.

Tara: I like that. How did Belgian chocolate become such a thing?

Peter: It all starts in Africa where you have the harvest of the cocoa. And then it comes from Africa to Europe, where you transform the cocoa beans into a liquid chocolates, the way we refine our chocolate, is so good that you have really a smooth feeling and not that sandy feeling that you sometimes have with different chocolates. And then the last part the tempering of the chocolate is essential to get a good shine of the chocolates and also a good snap of the chocolate so that you, if you bite on the chocolate, you hear, really hear the knock, or the cluck, uh, of the chocolate.

Marc: The Belgians were the first to produce the famous praline, and others followed the way how we make our chocolate. It's very, very elegant in taste. The Swiss do it different. The French do it different. The German do it different.

Matt: If there are all these differences, and we're talking about texture in a lot of ways, about the mouth feel, is that a result of the conching process?

Marc: Yep.

Matt: What exactly is conching?

Peter: When you mix the different ingredients starting from the cocoa, then you can add some, for instance, for a milk chocolates, some milk and sugar and so on, you have to make it to a kind of dough?

Matt: Almost like a paste.

Peter: Yeah. And then you have to conch it so, it's like, um, how would you...

Tara: Like kneading bread?

Marc: Exactly, exactly. Little bit like that.

Peter: You do that for 48 hours approximately, and that conching process is very important to develop all the aromas of the chocolate to have a good mixture.

Matt: And then that lecithin, if it's soy lecithin...

Peter: Or other.

Matt: ...that emulsifies it.

Marc: Yeah.

Peter: You put a drop into the conching tank, and then you get from a liquid chocolate. It's really a miracle.

Matt: It is amazing. Conching is about time and temperature and some amount of pressure.

Marc: Mm-hmm. So, in the end, you have a couverture. We call that a couverture, which is in fact a recipe. And that recipe we keep in our big dedicated storage tanks, so, recipe A is there dedicated, we don't use that tank, let's say, when we have recipe B. We have a lot of recipes: dark, milk, white, whatever. And they wait until we use them on the line and they go over there via a piping, big pipes. We pump then the chocolate from the storage tanks, which are at certain temperature, let's say around 40, 45 degrees. They stay there. And then they go to...

Peter: To the chocolate liquid.

Marc: Yeah, the liquid chocolate. So, let's say if we are gonna make your fantastic product, we pump it up your chocolate to the line, first it has to pause the tempering machine because you can't use the chocolate when it has the temperature from the storage.

Tara: Hmm.

Matt: If the chocolate, if that couverture recipe is held at 45 degrees, that's 45 Celsius...

Marc: Exactly.

Matt: ...which is quite warm, that's like 113 degrees Fahrenheit.

Peter: Mm-hmm.

Matt: Is the tempering warmer than that?

Peter: Lower.

Matt: Cooler?

Tara: It's cooler than that?

Marc/Peter: Yeah.

Matt: So by how much?

Marc: It's around 30 depending on white, milk, or dark, 26, 27, 28, 29, Celsius.

Matt: And if I think about the Pound Plus Chocolate Bars, how do you achieve that level of consistency, not just from batch to batch, but even over years?

Peter: We have many in Africa with all different taste profiles at different moments. So, we always make a blend of the beans that is as consistent as possible, we use the same recipe over and over with the same percentage of sugar, cocoa, butter, liquor, and so on.

Matt: Is it always the same type of sugar? Is it always from a, the same kind of source?

Peter: Same suppliers. Exactly.

Marc: Absolutely. And also for the cocoa beans, you have different qualities of beans, so you need to be focused on the same quality of beans. That is also very important.

Matt: Beans are harvested once or twice a year. How long do they store beans?

Marc: They can store the beans because we have some strategic stocks for beans could, let's say last for 1, 2, 3 years.

Matt: Then you must be producing more cocoa than you're using to be able to have a surplus to hold as a stock. Things are changing now.

Marc: It's not only in cacao, we see the climate change.

*[Music transition.]*

Marc: Some things are much worse than before. The droughts are taking longer than before. There is much more rain than before. So, everything is getting more extreme. The existing producing countries and agriculture are really under pressure. And of course also the production facilities like ours. But in the end, I think we have to stay positive. It's a crisis. But each crisis also means there are opportunities.

Tara: You all have been working with Trader Joe's for a really long time now.

Matt: When we started working with your team on the Pound Plus, I think there might have been four or more bars.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: A dark, a milk, and an almond dark, and milk.

Peter: And an extra dark. Yeah.

Tara: Is the dark still the predominant preference?

Peter: Dark has always been the most popular chocolate at Trader Joe's also, because I think your consumers really appreciate good taste, and they're more gourmet, uh,

consumers. So, they always tend to buy more dark chocolates. Now, in the last two, three years, we really see a shift towards more and more milk chocolate products. So, the best-selling reference is still the extra dark 72%. But if you take all the darks and all the milk chocolates, the milk chocolate is now a little bit more popular than the dark chocolates.

Tara: In addition to the Pound Plus, you also make the little three packs of mini bars.

Peter: Correct, yeah.

Tara: The milk chocolate version of those little mini bars with the crispy rice, I haven't found another crispy rice chocolate bar that has the same quality of milk chocolate. But then you buy these bars from Trader Joe's and it's like, Oh, that's really great milk chocolate. I'm gonna buy that again." Yeah.

Peter: Exactly.

Tara: Do you have products currently in development with Trader Joe's? Are there new things that you're working on?

Peter: Yes. We have now one product and that, uh, will come into the stores, I think Q1 of next year.

Tara: Which is that?

Peter: It's a bar with a crunchy cookie, brownie, uh...

Matt: Yes.

Tara: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Peter: ...chocolate bar.

Matt: Yes. That is a great product. I don't even know that we've landed on a name for that yet.

Tara: At the time of recording anyway, we should be getting close to Cornflake Bar time, right?

Matt: It's coming back. There was such overwhelmingly positive reaction to it. Have you already made another round of Cornflake Bars and you've shipped them or is that happening?

Peter: Yeah.

Matt: Or...

Peter: There are now on the sea traveling to the US.

Matt: Man, let's all just take a moment and say, let's, I hope those bars have a pleasant journey.

Tara: They might be gone again by the time we air this podcast episode.

Matt: I thought you were gonna say by the time we get home.

Tara: No (laughs).

Marc: (laughs)

Matt: Check our flight.

Marc: Ah, would be nice.

*[Small transition.]*

Tara: Next Peter's taking us on a tour of the chocolate factory.

Matt: Oh I hope I can get a selfie with an Oompa-Loompa.

*[Upbeat music begins. Factory noise.]*

Peter: So, we have in total, we have three production lines. So, this is the first line where make the Pound Plus Tablets. We have second one where we make the little three packs that you find at the check-out.

Tara: Yep.

Peter: And then on the last line, we make products like the Cornflake Bar.

Tara: Oh yeah.

Peter: And that's made on that line.

Tara: That's my favorite.

Peter: The molds were put there on the line.

Tara: So, this is Dark Chocolate Pound Plus Bar here coming into the molds.

Peter: They're going up, up, up, up, up like that, and a little bit heated so that the mold is little bit warmer when it gets here. And when it gets here, they put the chocolate into the mold.

Tara: Kind of mesmerizing.

Peter: There, goes into there.

Tara: Oh yeah.

Peter: And then for cooling, cooling, cooling.

Tara: Oh, they look good enough to eat.

*[Transition to good-bye to Belgium.]*

Tara: Peter and Mark, thank you so very much for hosting us here today.

Peter: You're welcome.

Matt: The only reason we came to Belgium in the first place was come to where the Pound Plus Chocolate Bars are made. For my three kids who their entire existence has been

with Pound Plus in their lives, and it is the yardstick by which, it's almost as long as a yardstick, it's the yardstick by which they measure chocolate quality, truly.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Matt: Where they always have this and then they taste something and they're like, "Eh, I'd rather have the Pound Plus."

Tara: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Matt: Cause that's amazing. Thank you.

Peter: So many compliments.

Tara: I know.

Peter: I'm getting emotional.

Marc: Pleasure.

Tara: And uh, Matt, next stop France (laughs).

Matt: France. That was like your best midwestern. Did you ever see the movie Fargo?

Marc: Yeah, yeah.

Matt: It almost sounded like she was in Fargo, how she said France.

Marc: Yeah, yeah.

*[Music ends. Train. Quaint French music begins. Light rain in a small French city.]*

Tara: We've made a long journey from Belgium to France. Okay, it's not that long a journey from Belgium to France, but from home it's a long journey to come to Dijon in the heart of Burgundy in France for a very specific reason.

Matt: We want to see how mustard is made and not just any mustard, Dijon mustard. We're in this ancient city. We're taking a walk on the street. It's a rainy Thursday morning here in Dijon.

Tara: Thank goodness for hotel umbrellas. So, before we head to the Dijon mustard folks, we thought we'd visit a little market.

Matt: Les Halles, the marketplace of Dijon. It's like your green grocer. It's like your meat counter. There's wine merchants.

Tara: Yeah, I'm looking at the cheese monger over here, the fromagerie. Am I saying that correctly in French?

Matt: It sounds great.

Tara: But it all looks delicious. It's cheese and cheese and cheese and cheese.

Matt: Want some Chèvre?

Tara: What's in it?

Matt: Some herbs. Bonjour, merci beaucoup.

*[Conversation in French.]*

Tara: Oh. Ah. Merci. Thank you.

Male: Merci.

Tara: Oh!

Matt: Wow.

Tara: That is wonderful. Mm.

Matt: That is good.

Tara: Oh, that Chèvre with herbs is really good.

Matt: When we're out in the world as a buying organization, there are lots of different things that we pick up on when visiting a place like Les Halles in Dijon, this big marketplace. I think the trick is this isn't vacation visiting. It's an incredibly romantic place. This wrought iron classic French open marketplace, and everything looks so good because it's so fun to be here. Our product development team, when they're in a place like this, they are laser focused and they're thinking about the product and they're not getting caught up in the romance of this moment. And that's really a skill and that's hard to maintain that balance. But they're looking at two from the 300 cheeses that they see in the market to say that's different, that's interesting.

Tara: We have a bunch of different kinds of goat cheese at Trader Joe's. And we have Chèvre with herbs, but it's soft and in a log shape. And this is more of a sliceable, semi firm cheese with herbs. And that is, that's delicious.

*[Small transition. Music transition.]*

Matt: We're gonna make our way just outside of the city to a long time centuries old moutardier, mustard making place, a factory. I can't wait.

Tara: Centuries old, and makes food that we sell at Trader Joe's? That's fascinating.

*[Car doors slamming, car accelerating, traffic noises. Arrival at factory.]*

Tobin: So, some introductions first.

Tara: You know Tobin, right?

Matt: Yeah, we go back a ways.

Tobin: I was thinking around 2010.

Matt: Something like that.

Tobin: But Tara, I don't believe we've ever met.



Tara: We've not, no. It's nice to be here though. It's really nice to be here.

Tobin: So, Luc is our general director or managing director, I guess we'd say in English. I am key account manager, export. Our story starts in 1840, the factory was located just above a river, called the River Ousse, for hydraulic power to turn the mustard grinders basically. Dijon is located in a wine growing area, so obviously we always had access to grapes. This is our old facility, the one that dates back from 1840, which is still standing, by the way. This is the picture from the outside. If you saw pictures from the inside, you would not want to buy our mustard. (laughs)

Tara: (laughs)

Tobin: I love these old pictures. And there are the guys that actually built this new location. Would that have been, Luc, '97?

Luc: Yeah. Building in '96. And we moved in 7th of July 1997.

Tobin: Today we're actually in 2024, the third biggest mustard producer in France. So, mustard, interesting factors from the same botanical family as things like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflowers, turnips, radishes, horse radishes. The cruciferous.

Matt: So, it's like the Brassica family.

Tobin: That's right. The mustard plant makes pods, like a pea, if you like, and inside those pods are the seeds.

Matt: Mm.

Tobin: Typically two major varieties are used today. So, we have the brown mustard, Brassica juncea, brown or Asian so-called, and this is the kind of mustard we use to produce Dijon or French style mustards. Another variety, or the most common variety I would say is yellow mustard or sometimes white. And that is mustard seed used to produce more US style mustards. We could also say the brown mustard makes hot and spicy mustards. Yellow mustard makes mild more condimentary mustards, I would say.

Luc: Yeah.

Tobin: As with all rules, there's always an exception. We have this, so-called spicy brown mustard, for example.

Matt: Yeah. Which is not really spicy and not even very brown as a color.

Room: (laughs)

Matt: Um, that's why we call it spicy brown mustard.

Tobin: So, actually, it's, I mean, typically it's, there's a bit of brown mustard seed in there to give it the spiciness. And the advantage to this product is that when we make Dijon mustard, we have to take away all of the husks. And that's, in the spicy brown, the pieces of brown that you see are mustard seed husks.

Matt: Oh, wow. Okay.

Tobin: What makes mustard so hot? Mustard seeds contain enzymes after grinding in a liquid environment that gives the burning sensation in your mouth or in your eyes.

Matt: So, that physical grinding has to be in a liquid state for that to take place?

Tobin: Yes, absolutely, yup. So, you have a heat curve that goes up hours after production and then eventually comes down because it's volatile. So, mustard after time will lose its heat and spiciness.

Matt: Yeah. So, the mustard that you make for Trader Joe's, we sell so quickly...

Tobin: Yes.

Matt: ...that when people, it's their first time having it, it's the spiciest mustard that they've ever had, and they can't believe it. Why is it so hot? And then it calms down over time.

Tobin: Yeah. Even with a vacuum sealed lid.

Matt: It will change over time.

Tobin: Yes. It will change over time.

*[Small transition.]*

Tobin: So, why Dijon for mustard? Dijon became famous for mustard in the 13th century with this famous pope, John the 22nd. And at that time in history, the Popes lived in Avignon rather than in Rome.

Matt: Yup.

Tobin: And the Pope was a mustard fan and wanted to be sure he always had mustard available. And it happened he had a nephew in Dijon. (laughs) So, the pope named that nephew, the must maker to the Pope. The Nobles and the other wealthy people saw that the Pope got his mustard from Dijon, well, they wanted their mustard also from Dijon. (laughs) So, that put Dijon on the map. Well, back in the 1800's, it was a prominent mustard producer in Dijon, who was called Jean Naigeon, who invented today's modern recipe. And that's basically where they said, let's stop using acidic grape juice and replace it with vinegar because vinegar is available all year round and the quality is always the same. We used the brown mustard seed to produce Dijon mustard. We are only allowed to use Brassica juncea brown mustard seeds. We're not allowed to mix with other varieties, et cetera.

Luc: This is forbidden by law.

Matt: There's like a secret club of Dijon over watchers.

Tobin: Since 1937, Dijon is a protected recipe in France and in Europe. Dijon mustard technically can be made anywhere as long as the recipe and the process is respected. And what we find is in France and in Europe generally it is respected. But outside of Europe, you can find a lot of products that have Dijon on the label, but that we could not call Dijon here in France or in Europe. Yeah.

Luc: Some people use the name Dijon, sorry, but you don't respect the European rule.

Matt: And would that difference mainly be the ingredients?

Luc: Most of the time what we see is that they are using yellow seeds.

Tobin: We can say that the Trader Joe's product is 100% authentic.

Tara: Yeah. And I think our customers, they get it.

Tobin: They get it, yeah.

Tara: We've seen how Trader Joe's chocolate is made on this trip. Let's see where the mustard comes from.

Luc: If we go downstairs to the factory, of course we have to get dressed and put the clothes and safety shoes, take off the jewelry, et cetera. This is not a problem. We are used to it.

*[Music transition. Transition to the factory floor.]*

Matt: All right. We're all suited up and ready for the mustard factory floor where all the production happens. And that production, well, it's a bit loud.

Tara: We may find ourselves screaming a little bit, so bear with us.

Luc: So, we have three tanks for the mustard seeds, but we have two outside on top. We have outside also a special tank where we receive salt. And we have a special salt because of Trader Joe's. And this salt is without any additive. We only use natural colors. Basically what we do is that we mix the seed with the liquid phase. It's vinegar, water, maybe white wine. We have the salt in the liquid solution, no preservative. From there, we have this grinding process. So, we have a total capacity of more than 300 tons of storage of semi-finished products. Then we have a packing line. So, we turn down each jar.

Tara: And there's a blowing system underneath them that blows into the jars to make sure there's nothing left inside. And then as it goes up and around they're turned...

Luc: We put them back on the right upright position.

Tara: And once they're right side up, everything's covered. So nothing can get in.

Tobin: I love this part.

*[Conveyor belt clacking.]*

Tara: Ah, it's like a ballet.

Tobin: Yeah, yeah. It's hypnotizing.

Tara: Yeah.

Luc: We fill the jars.

Tara: The mustard jars are getting filled.

Matt: Very beautiful. That's so great.

Tara: Could watched that all day.

Tobin: The most complicated thing is everything has to work together.

Tara: Yeah.

Tobin: So, the speed of the conveyor belt, the speed of the filling, the labeling.

Matt: Cool how the jar moves, but the depositor stays in the same spot.

Tara: As long as you, you've programmed the system correctly, it will do the right thing.

Tobin: Exactly, yep.

Tara: Every single time.

Tobin: Yep.

Luc: This is a good way to make product at a competitive price.

Tara: I don't think anybody in the US has Dijon mustard of this quality, or anywhere near this quality, anywhere close to the price that we offer. You can take an old world recipe and make it into a new world product.

*[Small transition, location change.]*

Tara: Tobin and Luc, thank you so much for having us here today. This was fantastic.

*[Music transition.]*

Tara: Something can say Dijon without being from Dijon, but ours actually says product of Dijon, France.

Matt: For us, for Trader Joe's, it's important that it is from this place. So, it's not just a style, it's a point of origin, and it's all the rigor that goes into making sure that the recipe holds up to what it needs to be every single time, every single jar. So, thank you so much.

Tara: Yeah.

Luc: Thank you for coming and visiting us. We have been working together for so many years.

Matt: How many years?

Tara: How many years?

Luc: I don't know.

Tara: Before you?

Matt: I think so.

Luc: I arrived...

Tara: Okay. So, before he arrived, which was 27 years ago.

Luc: Yes, but, I know that it was at least 10 years more than that.

Matt: When I was in high school shopping at a store with my dad, he would buy the mustard.

Tara: Wow. And you're old.

Matt: I know.

Room: (laughs)

Matt: Yes.

Tara: Sorry.

*[Music ends. Transition to close.]*

Tara: Authenticity is important to us. And really nobody in the world knows Dijon mustard, like the people in Dijon, France.

*[Closing music begins.]*

Matt: And while there is amazing chocolate all over the world, well, Belgian chocolate, it's just Belgian chocolate.

Tara: Next, I think we might need to visit our winemaker friends up in the Napa Valley, or maybe the Kimbap factory in South Korea. Oh, oh, or some pasta vendors in Italy.

Matt: Okay. Now it just sounds like you're thinking of places that you'd like to go.

Tara: Matt, it's for the podcast. Hey, so that you get every episode of *Inside Trader Joe's* wherever we go and wherever you go, please do 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.