

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 86: Pie-ning for Pizza at Trader Joe's

[Italian music begins with crowd chatter in background.]

Tara: We have flown all the way from Southern California to Bologna, Italy.

Matt: And boy, are my arms tired.

Tara: Oh, wow. If we translate that old joke into Italian, I wonder, will it be funny?

Matt: You know, I'm hoping so, because it's absolutely not funny in English.

Tara: Sometimes, Americans travel to trace their family roots. We are in Italy to trace the roots of a whole bunch of pizzas in the Trader Joe's freezer.

Matt: Mamma mia, this is going to be a tasty episode. Let's go *Inside Trader Joe's*.

[Theme music begins accompanied with two bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's. Crowd chatter continues.]

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

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the culture and innovation guy at Trader Joe's. Speaking of culture, we are surrounded by it here in the Piazza Maggiore in Bologna. We're at sort of the top of Italy, the top of the boot.

Tara: As they say here, "Mangia bene, ridi spesso, ama molto." Which holds its meaning when translated into English but doesn't sound nearly as romantic.

[Theme music ends. Romantic Italian music begins.]

Tara: "Eat well, laugh often, love much."

Matt: We are going to eat, and hopefully we will laugh, and we're going to have to figure out some place to grab a bite right here in Bologna.

Tara: No matter where we go, I have a feeling it's going to be delicious.

Matt: Well, let's start walking.

[Footsteps.]

Speaker 3: Buonasera.

[Bell ringing as opening door.]

Tara: We got here just at the right time.

Matt: Oh yeah, the menu is legit.

Tara: (laughs) Oh, but do I have to choose one thing?

Matt: Are we ready?

Tara: Could we have the Mortadella Alla Griglia?

Female Server: Si.

Tara: And the Parmigiano.

Female Server: Yeah.

Tara: And I would have the gnocchi, Gnocchi Bolognese.

Female Server: Si.

Matt: I'll have the Tagliatelle Bolognese, and then...

Female Server: And the mortadella and parmesan cheese, you share in the middle?

Tara: Yep, yes. Yes, thank you.

Female Server: Okay.

Matt: Oh, bologna.

Tara: The original bologna, yeah, that comes from here, it's really thick cut.

Female Server: Mm-hmm.

Matt: Thicker, grilled.

Tara: It's the good stuff.

Matt: I love it.

Tara: It's kind of interesting that Bologna, which a lot of Americans just see a package of bologna in a supermarket and don't understand that the origins of that are Bologna. That's where we are. It is known as the culinary capital of Italy, which is saying something.

Matt: I'm thinking that other regions might take issue.

Tara: So tomorrow I'm going to be really interested to see how all of those pieces come together using ingredients from all over Italy.

Matt: Absolutely, because it's something that is so deeply connected to/associated with Naples.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Matt: But we're not in Naples.

Tara: Nope.

Matt: Different part of the country, to go see and talk about pizza.

Tara: Cheers to Bologna.

Matt: Cheers.

[Music ends. Car doors closing. Upbeat Italian music begins.]

Tara: Hey, Matt, you get a good night's sleep?

Matt: Yes, I did. I was dreaming such intense dreams of margherita pizzas.

Tara: That sounds like the best dream ever. That pizza and a whole bunch of others are made at the place where we're headed right now and we're going to get to talk to Christian who founded this company.

Matt: From what I understand, Christian was introduced to Trader Joe's by a really hard-charging customer, making long distance calls to Italy.

[Transition to Christian, speaking in heavy Italian accent.]

Christian: She was Italian, this woman, and she told me that, "In Trader Joe's is a traditional American pizza. They don't know the traditional Italian pizza like we have. So can you send me samples?" I sent a sample to this woman. She tries. She said, "Wow, this is like in pizzeria." I go to speak with Trader Joe's. She contact somebody and say, "Oh look, there is this." And after I sent samples and say, "Oh, wow, it is a very good product." But I was so excited to develop this product, and we was the first company that supply traditional pizza from Europe.

Tara: It's worked out.

Christian: Yeah.

Tara: It's worked out for everybody.

Christian: When I started with Trader Joe's was 1994. I was very small.

Tara: Right, so you were new still.

Christian: Yes.

Tara: Wow.

Christian: In California, Los Angeles, in Pasadena the Trader Joe's was a very, very small company. I don't remember if Trader Joe's has 15 or 30 stores at that time.

Matt: I started in the company in 1993.

Christian: Oh, okay.

Matt: We had 45 stores then.

Christian: Okay.

Tara: We were a small company. You were a small company.

Christian: I started in 1991 in an area very famous for... is called the Motor Valley because there are factories. In an area of 50 kilometers, there are Ferrari, Maserati, Pagani, Lamborghini, Ducati. In Bologna is an area very famous for the food, also. The parmesan cheese, Grana Padano, Parma ham, balsamic vinegar, the Mortadella formaggio is all located in this area. So the pizza for sure is our core business. There are a lot of producers of pizza in an industrial way, but we produce, with industrial numbers, a pizza that keep the product traditional. We produce more than 1,500 recipes. We supply around 60 countries, 1,754 employees.

Matt: I love that the number of people who work here is exact and not rounded up. Because I imagine if you're balancing tradition and technology, every single person counts.

Christian: Absolutely.

Tara: Was Trader Joe's your first export?

Christian: The first one was in France.

Tara: Which makes sense.

Christian: And Trader Joe's two years later.

Tara: Okay.

Christian: In Italy, one pizza out of the store of every two is produced by our group. So we are the...

Matt: Wow. That's amazing.

Tara: That's a lot of pizza.

Christian: Yeah. On the Italian market, we are very, very strong. And for Trader Joe's, we make this item with, I think, five cheese, the Sicilian style, the Spicy Sicilian Pizza with the nduja. And now there are probably new item. For example, the margherita, which is a historical product in Trader Joe's, to move the crust from the existing one to this one.

Matt: Yep.

Tara: Right. I remember tasting that. It was such an improvement over what was already a good pizza. The Margherita Pizza is something we've been selling for a very long time, but that newer version, that crust, is tremendously good. The airiness and the chewiness, it was incredibly different. Just elevated, just more premium.

Christian: Okay, so the main point, 24-hour leavening of the dough and the stretching and a real wood-fire oven. I would say real because there are some producer that declare wood-fire but it's not a real wood-fire. They use a pellet.

Matt: Oh, yeah.

Christian: They put the pellet like a part of the cooking system. We use only wood of oak and beech. All the wood come from the mountains between Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. On this area, there is a community, there are around 35 person that work on this area to take out the dry wood and to replant. So all the wood come from here.

Tara: That's great. Okay.

Christian: Okay, so if you agree we move to the production, we move downstairs.

[Music transition, loud production noise.]

Tara: We'll follow you.

Christian: Come this way. Now we start from the beginning. So we see the proofing of the dough totality.

Matt: There are different containers in there. How much dough is in each one of those?

Christian: Each one is 600.

Willie: 600.

Christian: Exactly 600 in each container.

Matt: 600 pizzas?

Willie: Kilos.

Christian: 600 kilos, kilos.

Matt: Ah, yeah, yeah. Okay.

Christian: Kilograms.

Matt: Yeah, yeah.

Tara: How many pizzas can you make with 600 kilos of pane?

Christian: Depends on the size, on the weight. But, for example, for Trader Joe's the average is 400 grams.

Francesca: Yeah.

Willie: 400 grams, yeah.

Christian: 400 grams.

Willie: We have two or three.

Christian: 2000, 2000.

Willie: Yeah, 2000.

Tara: Yeah, okay.

Christian: 2000.

Tara: Wow.

Christian: Okay.

Tara: It smells so good in here. It smells so good.

Christian: Yeah. The consistency of the dough, you see how humid it is. The humidity, it is the numero uno.

Tara: This is easy to stretch. Easy to stretch right now.

Francesca: Very easy, yeah.

Tara: Talk about tradition.

Matt: What we have here is a line, a line of people all very carefully stretching the pizza dough by hand.

Francesca: You see there are one, two, three, four wood-fire oven. So we can see one, two, is all the same technology.

Matt: Whoa, Nellie, it's getting hot in here.

Tara: That is amazing wood-fired oven. What is the ideal temperature in the oven?

Christian: In the oven, we reach around 400, 420, 430 degrees for almost one minute.

Tara: Celsius, not Fahrenheit?

Christian: No Celsius.

Tara: Celsius. Okay, yeah.

Christian: Okay, now we move to the after cooking area, so the topping area.

Tara: Okay. You see the cheese happening right there. It's out of the oven and is now on a conveyor belt where I think it's headed into a freezer. They all look similar, but no two are exactly the same.

Christian: They're not.

Tara: And they're all just great.

Christian: I said also to my marketing team, is better to write this on the packaging, that the product is made by hand, is wood-fired. It would be not the same. Forty-five minutes from the beginning to the packaging. But you will see how it works. It's fantastic.

[Leaving the production line room.]

Tara: Okay, that was a fascinating tour.

Matt: They make pizza in a way that preserves Italian tradition and uses very contemporary technology to make a tremendous amount of pizza. So many pizzas.

Tara: Yeah, and they are enjoyed by a tremendous number of Trader Joe's customers, and others frankly, around the world.

Matt: And then they freeze the pizzas, stopping time, so that when you heat it at home, well, it tastes just like it does here in Italy.

Tara: Hey, speaking of tasting, we are headed to the test kitchen next with Christian, Francesca, and Chef Willie.

Matt: Okay. I mean if we have to.

[Transition to test kitchen.]

Francesca: These are the Trader Joe's pizzas.

Christian: Yes.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Francesca: This is the...

Christian: This is the Trader Joe's, the new pepperoni. Made in Italy.

Francesca: Okay.

Christian: Look, I really want to show you the...

Tara: Oh. Oh, yeah.

Christian: ... the consistency, really, and the structure of the dough.

Tara: And that's 24 hours of fermentation. That's what does that.

Christian: Twenty-four hours. But in this recipe, there is also a mix of flours that helps to keep the humidity inside, because more humidity and more proofing time give this extra bubbles.

Tara: Yep.

Matt: Yeah, if you're making bread, the same thing. All right, so we're all the way here just outside of Modena and I have this very important question related to pizza. Is it socially acceptable to eat pizza with a knife and fork?

Christian: No.

Tara: (laughs) Okay.

Matt: Definitely no.

Christian: No.

Tara: So we need to use our hands.

Christian: Si. For pizza, yes.

Tara: Okay. And this is the New York way.

Matt: To fold.

Tara: You fold it.

Christian: Ah, yes. It's also for us.

Tara: This was just heated from frozen, yeah? This didn't come out fresh.

Francesca: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Christian: No, no.

Tara: It tastes like a fresh pizza.

Christian: It also still be after.

Matt: It's fantastic, yeah.

Tara: Delicious. That's very good.

Matt: Christian, I'm so curious. Thirty or more years ago, what were you thinking about? Pizza? What got you started and how did you think it would go?

Christian: It was study at university, with nothing regarding food, okay? I had an experience. Every year during the summer period, I went to work my uncle at the factory in the mechanics sector. And since when I was a baby, in the summertime I went there to work different area of the production. In the process, I liked the process, I liked the area of the production. So this helps me to think about this. And when I was at university, there was a friend of mine that had a small restaurant and started to frozen product pizza, and he started to sell this product to the local supermarket. And I know a person that had a bakery, a small but high quality bakery. So it was a mix of these three things. I started to rent a place, 300 square meters, very small. I make that to buy the small machine at the beginning. And I started in this way with the local supermarkets. So it was, for sure, a lot of difficulty at the beginning. Willie knows. The big changement was the circular wood-fire oven, because it gave us the possibility to make on line the production to increase the capacity. And after, what you see today.

Tara: No, I'm obsessed about the...

Matt: The structure of the...

Tara: ... the structure of the crust. Yeah.

Matt: In the U.S., pizza is just the middle. You think of that's the good stuff. You don't even think of the crust as being good, because a lot of pizza crust in the U.S. is not very good. So you think only the sauce and cheese or the other toppings, that's why you're eating pizza. More recently, people think that's where all the carbohydrates are. "I'm not eating so many carbs, so if I don't eat the crust it's not so bad." But I think we need...

Tara: All the carbs underneath don't count.

Matt: It's not that it's true, it's just what we feel. And I think you have to get back to the crust is the whole thing and the toppings are just to amplify what's going on with the crust.

Christian: How many people that you know leave the ring and don't eat the...

Tara: A lot. A lot of people.

Christian: Also with this quality of ring...

Tara: I wouldn't leave this, but people do.

Matt: Yes, and it's like maybe... if you want to talk about some sort of marketing campaign, the crust is so good that you start with the ring. The crust is so good is that you wouldn't want to leave that behind.

Christian: This is the way how to teach with this product.

Tara: Yeah, yeah.

Matt: Yeah. I think, too, in America in restaurants, or certainly with frozen pizza, it's overcooked. We need to revisit our cooking instructions.

Christian: Cooking instruction.

Matt: And I think a lot of people think, "I know how to cook a frozen pizza." But they don't all cook at the same rate or for the same amount of time.

Christian: Because different is, if you put the product directly from frozen or if you defrost a little bit before, changes totally the timing.

Tara: Well, and I know on ours the instructions do say, "Take it out of the freezer, then turn on the oven and wait."

Christian: I suggested this.

Tara: Yeah, it was a good suggestion.

Christian: Because is the way I do. The time that the oven have to in temperature you can keep outside and defrost a little bit.

Tara: Yeah, yeah. My son makes the Margherita Pizza in an air fryer oven and it's perfect because it's just a convection. It just circulates the air in a smaller space.

Christian: Yeah, that's true.

Tara: Perfect every single time.

Christian: I visited a lot of pizza factory also in U.S., but everybody are focused on the topping.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: Yeah.

Christian: So everybody think have two topping, the crust is not important. Is like a plate this, yeah. For us, was from the beginning totally opposite. So we have to start with the right plate because the topping everybody can do, but if you don't have the right crust, everything start from the crust. And this is Italian mentality.

Matt: And I think that plus your early experience in a bakery and thinking about pizza as a bread product.

Christian: For sure, for sure.

Matt: And everything in the U.S. is topping. Everything is about topping, more topping, this topping. So what I mean, it's like, blah, blah, blah. But that's how everyone measures the quality of a pizza is by more and more and more on top of it and it's getting always farther away from the crust. On our packaging, you can't stop telling the story 24 hours fermentation.

Francesca: If you think about it, one of the most popular pizzas here in Italy is Marinara, which is that one.

Matt: Yes.

Francesca: Which is basically just...

Tara: Just sauce.

Francesca: ... just pizza and tomato sauce and that's all, which is an opposite concept than the Americans' super full of toppings and everything.

Christian: It's only tomato and crust, yeah.

Francesca: Yeah, it's just tomato and crust. Yeah.

Christian: The Marinara, yeah.

Francesca: Yeah.

Christian: This I think is too less for U.S.

Francesca: Yeah. (laughs)

Tara: Yeah, probably.

Matt: I agree.

Tara: Probably.

Christian: Even the tomato is very good is...

Matt: It's too subtle. Yeah.

Tara: Yeah.

Christian: In Italy, a lot of people buy the Margherita. Simple product is a 70% of the sales is Margherita in Italy.

Matt: Hmm.

Christian: No, no, no.

Tara: I think people are going to be very happy with that new version of the Margherita.

Matt: Christian, I'm curious, when you've talked about technology, sometimes that's related to wood-fire, what are the important technological advances that you've been able to put in that still allow for human touch where it's important?

Christian: The ingredients, starting from the ingredients of the dough, the timing, the temperature, and the humidity in the time of the proofing. The preparation of the dough, the stretching of the dough, and the cooking system, all the rest you can improve. There are part of the production that you can automatize more. For example, now we are thinking if this product will be very successful probably in the future, why not to try to make more production per hour? Yes, we can do, is a huge investment, but is important is to not change the parameter, the equilibrium of these three points. All the rest you can do.

Matt: In Italy, is pizza the whole meal?

Christian: Usually, yes. In the pizzeria, yes. When you eat pizza, you eat pizza.

Tara: Yes, yeah.

Matt: Okay.

Christian: But one for each, so everyone chooses the best.

Matt: Sure, okay.

Tara: Yes.

Matt: Yeah.

Christian: And usually in Italy with pizza, we drink beer.

Francesca: Beer.

Tara: Yeah, not wine.

Christian: Not wine.

Willie: Yeah.

Christian: We started to change, but the tradition is...

Willie: The tradition? No.

Christian: ... traditional.

Matt: Why is that?

Willie: (speaking Italian)

Matt: Yeah, without the tomato. He said, with the white pizza we start to drink also some sparkling wine.

Tara: With the white pizza.

Christian: Yeah.

Willie: (speaking Italian)

Christian: For example, the garlic one, if it's without tomato, just the cheese and garlic he said is very good also with the sparkling wine. If you don't finish the pizza, you throw away or you put it in the refrigerator, you eat later.

Tara: Yeah, always eat later.

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: Yeah, and sometimes you might eat it cold after.

Matt: Always. Yeah, always.

Tara: You might eat it just cold right out of the fridge.

Christian: If you recook it, the traditional become more...

Tara: It gets very crispy.

Christian: Yeah.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: Maybe a small number, but basically no one is recooking pizza. Everyone eats it cold.

Christian: Yeah.

Tara: Sometimes I recook pizza.

Matt: Really?

Tara: Yeah. It depends on how much there is. I'll pop it into the oven for a few minutes. Not in the microwave.

Matt: But sometimes, like my youngest son, he's 13, if we have pizza, he wants to have extra to have it cold the next day for breakfast.

Christian: Ah, for breakfast also.

Tara: Yeah. I have a friend whose favorite breakfast is cold pizza from the night before. That's her favorite thing to eat for breakfast. So her family does the same. They always order too much pizza.

Christian: (speaking Italian)

Francesca: Also for me.

Tara: Yeah? (laughs) Matt has talked on our podcast before about freezing food. It stops time. So the food is fresh, and you freeze it and then it's like time stops and you take it out of the freezer and cook it and it's fresh again. Does that make sense to you?

Christian: So to freeze the product to keep is the best way to preserve the pizza. We make also chilled pizza. We produce chilled pizza also, not only frozen, for French market, Swiss market, but the product day-by-day has a decline in term of visual, in term of consistency of the dough, in terms of quality. The only product on the pizzas that in the time change a little bit when you make the freezer, when you freeze it, is the tomato. The tomato sauce, month by month, time by time, don't lose the quality but change the color.

Matt: Hmm.

Tara: Hmm.

Christian: If you take a pizza, for example, the Four Cheese Pizza in the Trader Joe's stores, after two, three months, will still be okay. After four or five months, you see the color is oxidation. So change the color, become more orange than red. So what you see here is red.

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Francesca: Bright red.

Christian: If you freeze this, for sure more topping there is on the tomato, if it is covered is better protected.

[Music transition.]

Tara: Food is culture.

Francesca: Food is culture.

Tara: You know?

Francesca: Totally, totally. Yeah.

Tara: And if you think about food as culture and how people understand other cultures, if you can sit and share a meal with people and share the foods that they grew up with that are important to them, pizza is hugely important to a lot of people.

Francesca: Totally, totally.

Christian: In Italy, the culture is everywhere. We are so full of tradition, of culture in Italy that nobody think about food in the past. We are freezing a culture and a tradition of our country. So we think at this more than more is true.

Tara: Not to overstate the importance of a grocery store, but I love that about what we do.

Christian: Three, four times a week I eat for lunch in our pizzeria, because I like carbs.

Francesca: (laughs) Yeah.

Matt: Oh, yeah.

Christian: I eat a lot of carbs.

Tara: None of you look like you eat carbs.

Christian: I don't know about that. This is genetic. I don't know. But even if I'm on holiday outside of Italy, I would like to go to Italy to eat pizza at a pizzeria. Si.

Francesca: Yeah, we're all in love with pizza, I guess, here. Right?

Christian: Si, it is never too much.

Tara: Well, we thank you very, very, very much for giving us all of the time and showing us so much and feeding us.

Matt: Yeah, yeah.

Francesca: Thank you, thank you. Yeah, we're so, so happy, right?

Matt: Thank you.

[Music ends. Transition to airport.]

Announcer: Air Italia (speaking Italian).

Tara: Well, all good things must come to an end.

[Closing music begins.]

Tara: And we have a flight to catch. This has been quite an adventure.

Matt: And we hope that shopping at your Trader Joe's is an adventure for you. Our product development team, they sail the culinary seas, traveling every continent on the hunt for great food.

Tara: And I'm not just talking about the pizza that I have in my suitcase. You think it'll get through customs?

Matt: If it doesn't, don't worry about it. There are so many more frozen pizzas from Italy sailing out on the open seas right now, they're going to be at your Trader Joe's soon.

Tara: And we'll have more food and travel adventures to share on the podcast soon. Hit that free subscribe or follow button.

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

Tara: Until next time, grazie for listening.

Matt: And grazie, for listening.