

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 88: Trader Joe's Goes to Modena, with Vim and Vinegar

[Upbeat theater music begins.]

Matt: Through the years millions of people have come here to California to see where movies are made.

Tara: Yeah. That's called film tourism.

Matt: And global wine tourism generated almost \$51 billion last year.

[Music transition to upbeat music.]

Tara: That's another big one in California, along with France, Italy, Spain, Australia, Argentina, Chile, a whole bunch of other places.

Matt: But where would you go for vinegar tourism?

Tara: Oh, yes, vinegar tourism is a thing.

Matt: It is, and we were vinegar tourists ourselves when we went to Modena, Italy, the birthplace of balsamic vinegar.

Tara: We didn't take a lot of pictures while we were there, but we did record some good audio.

Matt: Perfect for a podcast. Let's go *Inside Trader Joe's*.

[Theme music begins with 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: Oh, Chris, this is the part where we introduce ourselves.

Chris: Well, I'm Chris. I'm the senior category manager. Get ready folks, I oversee frozen, grocery, candy, cookies, snacks, nuts, and dried fruits.

Matt: That is a lot of stuff.

Tara: That's like most of the store.

Chris: It's a third of the store.

Tara: Okay.

Chris: The most important part though.

Tara: Vinegar.

Chris: Vinegar is the single most important thing at Trader Joe's.

Matt: (laughs) For this show.

Tara: (laughs) At least for right now.

Chris: For this podcast.

Tara: Yeah. In this moment vinegar is the most important thing because we had this really great visit with an impressive group of people in Modena, Italy.

Chris: Well, it's a great thing to talk about. It's a great thing to consume. It tastes fantastic.

Matt: A perfect Trader Joe's product. It's got a great story, a great point of origin in that story.

Tara: Most accounts say that what we now call balsamic vinegar began where we were recently in northern Italy about 2000 years ago.

Matt: And Cesare covered about 2000 years of balsamic vinegar history in about two minutes.

[Theme music ends. Light upbeat music begins.]

Cesare: In year 44 before Christ, Vergilius, a famous Italian poet, he was writing 44 before Christ, he wrote that [foreign language]. That means the concentrated must. When you crop the grapes, you squeeze them and you get a liquid, which is must, its grape juice. The must was cooked by the Romans up to get a kind of a syrupy liquid, which was given in leather pouches to the military, to the soldiers. They added it to water to make the water more drinkable. Probably the water was coming out from the horses, but...

Matt: Yeah.

Cesare: (laughs) So they thought they was making the water healthier. The cooking was done in order not to make a wine, because if you leave the must in the air the yeast transform it into wine. So they were cooking because they were basically concentrating and sterilizing. This liquid was called sapum, but he said strange because here sapum, which is not supposed to become a wine, becomes a vinegar. So we don't know anything else up to 1300, when the King, the Emperor, Henry III, who was German, was sent to Rome to get a crown from the Pope. He sent some messengers from Parma to Reggio Emilia, next to Reggio Canossa, asking for some of that vinegar that you make so special. They knew that here there was a special vinegar. Strange, isn't it? He sent a carriage pulled by two oxen, with a barrel made of silver, containing this vinegar. And then in 1700 we discover that family living in the countryside used to store barrels of different sizes, they put things upstairs. And upstairs there was a natural evaporation because it's very hot in summer. So there was a big fermentation in summer, so a big evaporation, and it was a concentration. So they started making the barrels smaller and smaller because the evaporation. Every year they moved the product to a smaller barrel, then to a smaller barrel. The families started doing this as a tradition. Every time a newborn was born, they dedicated the barrel to the baby. And when the baby married, it took this as a dowry. With the industrial revolution people moved from the countryside to the town so they couldn't have

space for the barrel. Some shopkeepers started buying these barrels and they made it, say industrially, they were selling this.

Tara: Did you follow all that?

[Music transition.]

Matt: Yes, but what he left out is when Trader Joe's got into the balsamic vinegar history books. I mean, when did that happen, Chris?

Chris: Well, I've been around for coming up on 37 years. I feel like we've had balsamic vinegar pretty much the entire time that I've been here.

Tara: So we got into the game early. We're all of similar ages here, and I don't remember balsamic vinegar being a common thing when I was growing up.

Chris: Well, thank you for the similar age thing first.

Tara: You're welcome.

Chris: So it's a very Trader Joe's thing as we look for the best product that we can to fit a particular need. In this case, balsamic vinegar is it. That's the best there is.

Tara: What do we have at Trader Joe's that is Balsamic Vinegar of Modena?

Chris: Every day we have four things that we offer. We have our basic Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, we have our Gold label, we have our Glaze, and we have our Organic. And then most holiday seasons we bring in one more special offering, our Platinum.

Tara: Okay. What's the difference between a Gold and a Platinum?

Chris: There are different metals.

[Ba dum tsh.]

Tara: (laughs) Thanks.

Chris: Sorry. The Gold's fantastic, we carry it every day. It's our top end. But the Platinum is something special. A little more rounded, little deeper flavor. But it's by degrees, the Gold is fantastic.

Tara: Yeah, I think the Platinum one has a little more viscosity to it, right?

Chris: Yes, absolutely.

Tara: It's a little thicker.

Chris: Little bit thicker, little bit more mouthfeel.

Tara: And that, as we're going to learn, that comes from the aging.

Chris: Yes, it's the aging. It's how long they cook the must. It's the ratio of the must to the red wine vinegar. So the way they make balsamic vinegar, it's a combination of grape must. Grape must is the pressing, it's grape juice. It's the pressing of the seven grapes that they use in Italy.

Matt: So must is grape juice?

Chris: It's grape juice.

Matt: Okay.

Chris: They concentrate it, they cook it down, and they blend it with red wine vinegar, and then they age it.

Matt: Time is the critical ingredient, and this stuff is like an investment in the future. It sits around for a long time, or some versions, like the Gold sits around for a certain amount of time, the Platinum even longer.

Chris: So it has to be aged at least 60 days to be balsamic vinegar, and it's somewhere between 60 days and three years or three years and beyond.

Matt: Are the levels.

Tara: So let's talk about that a little bit, because I'm also going into the way back machine of my brain right now and remembering that there used to be vinegars on shelves, including at our stores, that had ages on them. Like, this is 10 years, this is 15 years. And at a certain point in time they no longer had those numbers on them because the regulations surrounding how you can label balsamic vinegars changed.

Chris: The original balsamic vinegar is what is now the PDO vinegar. So that's the product that starts out in a large barrel. As it evaporates it concentrates, it goes into a smaller barrel, and then a smaller barrel. That's the really long aged product.

Matt: You know, Chris, Cesare walked us through, actually walked us next to those barrels and explained how it all works. Let's have a listen.

[Music transition. Transition to conversation with Cesare.]

Cesare: We have 5,600 barrels here, the largest vinegar factory of traditional existing.

Tara: Can you explain again why some of the barrels are small and some of the barrels are big?

Cesare: Come here and I show you. You start by filling all of them with must, all of them. In a year, it must be written here which year is this, this bottle was starting in 2004. You start filling the whole thing and they start an alcoholic fermentation. Then the second year you fill the whole thing. So there is some alcoholic fermentation. After one year you take out up to half of this barrel, which is not half of the barrel because there is a little bit less because of evaporation. You take out 2 liters and you put 2.5, and you wait another year. The year after, again, you understand? That's why you cannot clip the age.

Tara: Right.

Cesare: Because in the end, after 25 years you understand that there is a part of 25, but also part which comes from seven years after, and so on and so on and so on. So it's a mixture, but what is important is the taste. Every batch is sent to the consortium. There are panels of five people. They sit there and they taste the quality, and if it is not correct they send it back, so you cannot cheat.

[Music transition. End of conversation with Cesare.]

Tara: Yeah, that was interesting to see that.

Matt: It's amazing.

Tara: Extraordinary.

Chris: Yeah. The library of vinegar, it's just beautiful.

Matt: Yeah.

Chris: The PDO is the stuff that's aged at least 12 years, and you can also make a declaration if you age it as long as 25 years.

Tara: Right. That's the traditionale stuff.

Chris: Yes.

Tara: In Modena we tried some of that 25 year aged vinegar.

Matt: It's something that I know it's really special and it has a lot of time, so much time obviously in it. And its price bears that out and that's the really expensive stuff. I wonder if customers would be interested in that.

Chris: Maybe.

Tara: It was really good, Chris.

Matt: This is with Cesare, and Chris, a different Chris, and Niko.

[Music transition. Transition to conversation with Cesare, Chris, and Niko.]

Niko: Cesare, what do you think? Shall we try it now?

Cesare: If they want.

Niko: Yeah, sure. They want to try it, yeah.

Cesare: You have the spoon here, so you will see that it's very thick. You see this is 25 years old aged traditional balsamic vinegar, so only one ingredient.

Matt: It tastes like when fortified wines, like port, go through maturation, it tastes very similar.

Cesare: Because maturation is given by the oxidation in the wood.

Matt: Yeah. Yeah, so it tastes very, very similar.

Niko: Super sweet, dense.

Matt: But it's like the skin of walnuts, there's like a tannic quality.

Niko: Little tannic, yeah.

Matt: It's different.

Tara: That would be really good on panna cotta too.

Cesare: Ah, see, this is great on everything.

Niko: Yeah, Parmesan cheese also. I used to call it the Sunday Balsamic because it's super premium and super expensive and special, compared to the other balsamic, which I always try few drops on Sunday, like on Parmesan, on sweets such as panna cotta, and so on.

Tara: Yeah. Special occasions.

Matt: Yeah.

Niko: It tastes like jam also.

Tara: It does taste a little bit like jam, almost like a plum jam.

Niko: Yeah, yeah. It's lovely.

[End of conversation. Music transition.]

Matt: That was really nice.

Chris: Oh, that stuff is good. And then as the demand for balsamic vinegar grew, there was a need for something that didn't have to age 12 years before you could sell it, so they came up with the PGI version, which is aged for a much shorter duration before it can be sold. They're the same product basically, except that the PDO is just the must that has been aged for an incredibly long time in the solera system, in the smaller barrel system. Whereas the PGI version they start with adding some vinegar, red wine vinegar, and they age it for a much shorter duration. Still both aged products, still both balsamic vinegars, just very different versions of each other.

Tara: Right.

Chris: That's the age thing. And the regulation now is you can declare 12 years or 25 years on the PDO. You can't put an age statement on the PGI.

Tara: There was a time when everything, all the really good stuff that you would buy, even at Trader Joe's, seemed to have a number on it, and then suddenly that was gone.

Chris: And my guess is that the folks in Modena were trying to help differentiate between the two, because the process of aging the product for 12 years or 25 years is an investment in a large portion of your life before you can sell this product. These are all PGI, so not glazed because that doesn't qualify because that's not balsamic vinegar.

Tara: Right.

Chris: Everything that we carry that's balsamic vinegar is PGI. So if you look for the little seal that's blue, surrounded by yellow and really fine print, you'll see that on each of those labels of balsamic vinegar.

Tara: That stands for Protected Geographical Indication, or in the Italian, it's IGP, it's Indicazione Geografica Protetta. So that means it comes from Modena, and it has to meet these specific criteria to get that seal.

Matt: It's like a blend of wine.

Chris: Yeah. It's the grapes from Modena, there's a 0% chance that any of those are going to be pronounced correctly by me.

Tara: Lambrusco, Trebbiano, Sauvignon, Ancellotta, Orchio di Gatta, Berzamino, Scavetta.

Matt: Sounds great, correct.

Tara: In Modena, Chris and Niko and Cesare, they were very clear about the requirements.

[Music transition. Transition to conversation with Cesare, Chris, and Niko.]

Chris: Balsamic vinegar is controlled by the consortium, and the consortium have a disciplinari, which is a set of rules, and one of those rules is it can only be produced using seven grapes. So the seven grapes are historically from this region.

Cesare: Only these type of grapes.

Niko: Two are very difficult, Ancellotta and Fortana are very rare.

Tara: Oh.

Niko: Mostly it's Lambrusco, Trebbiano and Sauvignon. No, sorry, Sangiovese. I said Sauvignon, sorry. I should be fired.

Tara: (laughs)

[Music transition. End of conversation.]

Tara: They take it very seriously because it's an important piece of their economy and of their culture and of their history, and they don't want you to mess with it because they want people to be able to trust it.

Chris: Yes, the product is completely regulated.

Tara: Then if you try to pass off adulterated product as legitimate product, it's punishable by jail time in Italy.

Chris: I pity the person doing jail time over adulterating balsamic vinegar.

Tara: But I think there are probably people out there thinking what's the big deal about vinegar? What do you do with it, right?

Matt: Is it only for salad?

Chris: Well, if you lived at the house of Chris, you would use it for many things. There isn't a time that I cook up vegetables, like I'll often grill zucchini, or I'll pan fry it sometimes, or other vegetables, sometimes mix in peppers, whatever. But when I'm done, I'll grab our Glaze and I will squirt that all over the vegetables, and it's magic. Or if I cook up a steak, I will often top it with the Glaze. So my wife, Helen, loves the Organic. She will make a salad dressing out of that. You mentioned salads. It's not just for salads, but it's great on salads. Let's not discount the salads. Little olive oil, little of the Organic Balsamic Vinegar, maybe a drop of soy sauce, touch of mustard, maybe a tiny bit of garlic. Shake it all up, put it on your...

Matt: That's a favorite.

Chris: Dress your salad, it's fantastic.

Tara: Yeah. The soy sauce is an interesting addition.

Matt: Yeah, and salt.

Chris: A little bit of salt.

Matt: It's like a richer saltier taste.

Tara: It's like that umami.

Chris: It's the salt, umami. Yeah. Anyway, that's us. It's fantastic.

Tara: Help us understand what Glaze is for people who haven't purchased it before.

Chris: Oh. Well, I will say the Glaze is the most popular form because it's thicker, it sticks on whatever you put it on. It's a little bit sweeter, that balance of sweet and acid, it's quite delicious. It makes everything taste a little better. The Glaze is more useful if you're topping something that you've already made and just want to add that little hit of acidity, depth and a touch of sweetness.

Tara: It's always in my fridge. Do I have to refrigerate it? I don't know. I always do.

Chris: I've made it to this particular podcast, I've never refrigerated mine, so, so far so good.

Tara: I don't know why I put it fridge.

Matt: I think it's just a force of habit for condiments, but I think its level of acidity is such that you don't need to.

Chris: And vinegars are interesting because when products go bad, when they turn into vinegar, these have already done it for you. They're already bad.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Yes. In the best way.

Tara: And by that we mean good.

Matt: They'll actually only get better.

Chris: Right.

Tara: A couple of years ago on the podcast we used balsamic vinegar to make what's commonly referred to as a shrub. We blended it with some sparkling water. And it tastes like a soda, which is so fascinating to me that you could take vinegar, which is not a pleasant thing to just drink, and combine it with sparkling water and suddenly it becomes pleasant to drink.

Matt: I think that acidity is a really underappreciated thing in foods, in drinks. A lot of regular "sodas", they have a lot of acid, and I think that the richer, older, more unctuous balsamic vinegars, I mean, they're almost like if you think of soda syrup that you mix with bubble water to make a soda, they're not too different.

Tara: Interesting. Do you have any favorite uses for balsamic vinegar?

Matt: A little bit over ice cream is interesting. I think a little bit with a perfectly ripened melon, and maybe some prosciutto, and you have the intense salty, the fat of the prosciutto, the sweetness of the melon that gets amplified and then countered with the acidity. I love the idea of finishing grilled things, especially a steak, I think that sounds fantastic for that Glaze. I don't know if I've found a situation that's not made better with a little Glaze.

Chris: It's the chocolate syrup for grownups.

[Music transition.]

Tara: So speaking of the Glaze, when we were at the facility in Modena we sampled a couple of proposed new Glaze items, if you remember.

Matt: I do.

Tara: I think that there was a raspberry and there was a peach, I think.

Chris: Oh, you got the sneak peek.

Tara: Yes, we did. And if memory serves, we've since approved one of those for sale.

Chris: Yes. The peach will be coming to a Trader Joe's near you in a few months.

Tara: When do you think that'll show up?

Chris: Late summer.

Tara: Late summer this year?

Matt: Sounds great.

Tara: Late summer this year?

Chris: That's the plan.

Tara: That timing sounds perfect because summer salads, if you had fresh tomatoes from your garden and some greens maybe like arugula, something with a little bit of bite to it, oh, the peach goes perfectly.

Matt: I'm thinking like Halloumi, like a grilled cheese kind of thing. Maybe just a grilled cheese sandwich, that fruity blast would be nice with that.

Tara: Okay, that's exciting.

Matt: Watermelon would be fun. I mean, peaches, you could just go peach on the peach. Eyebrows are raising. You hear that?

Tara: (laughs) Yeah. The peach, they served us those two proposed, they were really sneaky about it in a good way, I think it was served on panna cotta maybe?

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: I think we had it on panna cotta.

Matt: We happened to be recording when we tried this panna cotta. Let's take a listen.

[Music transition. Transition to conversation with Cesare, Chris, and Niko.]

Cesare: That's it, did you start eating?

Tara: We have, yes.

Cesare: So this is Mascarpone and this is panna cotta, low calories. We are recommending to try with a Peach Glaze, the panna cotta and the Raspberry Glaze. Those are two new products that we developed for Trader Joe's.

Niko: You want to try?

Tara: I have to try.

Matt: How are you getting those flavors?

Niko: Those products are made by 60% balsamic vinegar of Modena. Then in this case, there are natural ingredients, such in this case, peach puree.

Matt: Puree.

Niko: Yeah. Then we have some the corn starch to create the density of the product.

Matt: How did you decide on the fruits for the flavor?

Niko: We tend to look the IRI data. Those are the best-selling items in the U.S., so we wanted to present to Trader Joe's and see how it goes.

Tara: The flavor of the balsamic is so strong that I was afraid I wouldn't get the fruit. It's very good actually, but you really get the fruit. The peach is very prominent.

Niko: Yeah, it's lovely. Now try the peach. We have five different lab inside our company. One of these is the R&D laboratory and they are really, really good in developing new recipes.

Tara: The fruit flavors are very strong. The fruit flavors really come forward.

Matt: But it's interesting because on the peach...

Cesare: This is smoother than this, I would say.

Matt: The peach has acidity that's different from the vinegar's acidity, but that's really neat because it has that juicy mouth-watering kind of thing going on.

[Music transition. End of conversation.]

Matt: It might sound like we were just being polite with our hosts, and we certainly were, but this stuff was amazing. We really liked it.

Chris: Yeah. So the peach is fantastic on everything. You've got a salad, you've got bread, you've got grilled veggies, you've got whatever, add a little bit of peach and Glaze, fantastic. Or if you're traveling in Italy, apparently they serve you something like panna cotta, and it's fantastic.

Tara: Yeah, exactly. It might be a good time to actually talk about what the Glaze is. Full disclosure, it used to say Balsamic Glaze on the bottle.

Chris: Yes, it did used to say balsamic, it's the same as it always was but the regulations are trying to differentiate. I believe the idea is trying to differentiate the straight balsamic vinegar versus the sweeter, more concentrated syrupy glaze.

[Music transition.]

Tara: To be balsamic vinegar you don't need to come from Modena.

Chris: That's true.

Tara: But Balsamic Vinegar of Modena is like, I hate to say it, the OG of balsamic vinegar.

Chris: That is a perfect way of putting it. If you want Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, you can only buy Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, and that's what we carry.

Tara: All of it.

Chris: All of it.

Matt: So, I guess, it's similar to Parmigiano Reggiano has a place, it's got to come from that place.

Tara: Right.

Matt: You can make Parmesan cheese in Wisconsin and it's great. It's not Parmigiano Reggiano.

Tara: Right. It is not Parmigiano Reggiano, right?

Matt: That one, too.

Tara: It's because it is special, and I think that similar sentiment stands for the Balsamic Vinegar of Modena.

Chris: Well, the proof is in the bottle. I would say 2000 years of trial and error and experience has led to Modena being the place to be from if you're balsamic vinegar.

Matt: And it's not enough for us, it's not enough at Trader Joe's just to have a box checked and have the thing on the shelf, that thing has to be great. And customers have to agree with that assessment over and over. And so, I guess, it does make sense, we've got to go to the source.

Tara: Somebody went there, tasted it, said, "Wow, this is great." Brought it back here. A larger group of us tasted it. Decided, "Wow, that's great, and that's a really great price to offer our customers." Then it wound up in the store. Then our customers decided, "Wow, that's great, and I love that price," and kept buying it.

Matt: Absolutely.

[Music transition.]

Matt: And going to that source that is the there, there. We are going to the producer of this balsamic vinegar. There are lots of people who are happy to sell you things that they don't make. We want to work with the producers of the things we offer. That's so important to us, that direct line of communication, that hands reached to be able to get to them and understand what they do, how they do it, and the removal of all those layers and all that cost that can come between you and the maker of the product.

Chris: I'm so glad you guys went there. I mean, we have a whole section of balsamic vinegar. We sell it.

Tara: We don't just have it, we sell it.

Chris: Exactly.

Tara: And I think that's the thing, our customers get that this is good stuff.

Matt: And this is a perfect expression of the Trader Joe's business model, because often specialty foods are low volume businesses. And we broke that model to work directly with

the producer to handle the importation, the freight, to have control throughout the process, to break that cost down, get an amazing price for customers, and it's just so cool to see this play out that customers appreciate that.

Chris: It's so fun to work for Trader Joe's.

Matt: When you think about the access that a Trader Joe's in your neighborhood creates to really amazing finds from around the world, I mean, that is a goose bump moment for me.

Chris: I know it sounds stupid, every time I go in there and I try something new, and I've had it before maybe 20 years ago or whatever it is, it's so good.

Tara: Chris, really, thank you. Appreciate your coming in to talk to us and the work that you and your team do every day to make sure that our customers have Balsamic Vinegar of Modena at Trader Joe's.

Chris: Thank you.

[Music ends.]

Matt: It sure was fun being vinegar tourists in Modena, Italy.

[Transition to closing music.]

Tara: There are so many cool places people visit now for food tourism.

Matt: I mean, maybe we should go to New Zealand for Sauvignon Blanc.

Tara: How about Brazil, for Brazil nut body butter?

Matt: I mean, if we're there, we might as well eat Brazil nuts.

Tara: Oh, of course. And we have food-related tourist destinations right here in Southern California.

Matt: Exactly. MacArthur Park, where someone left the cake out in the rain.

Tara: (laughs) Matt, I don't think I can take it. No, I was thinking of the first Trader Joe's store in Pasadena.

Matt: I mean, it's still there.

Tara: We'll still be here with new episodes of *Inside Trader Joe's*. Check on that free subscribe or follow button to make sure you get them.

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

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.