

## Transcript — Episode 6: Quality

Tara: Ready for Season 2? From the Trader Joe's mother ship in Monrovia California...

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

*[Store bells & theme music]*

Tara: I'm Tara Miller. I'm the director of words and phrases and clauses.

Matt: and I'm Matt Sloan. I work with a great bunch of Crew Members on product-related projects.

Tara: Thanks to you, we are back with another season of Inside Trader Joe's.

Matt: We're as surprised as anyone by the response to Season 1. Thank you.

Tara: We didn't know it was Season 1 at the time. We just thought it was a five part podcast series. But now that we're doing more...

Matt: You know, Trader Joe's is a store of stories and if you'll be so generous as to share more of your time with us, we'll share more stories with you. And so that we can tell our stories in a timely fashion, like for example, talking about what happens at Trader Joe's during the holidays, during the holidays, we'll send you a new Season 2 episode every few weeks instead of all of them at once. Just hit that free subscribe button for Inside Trader Joe's. It's free and worth every penny, and that way we'll be sure to keep in touch.

Tara: Season 2, Episode 6 is about the Q word, because Trader Joe's stands for quality. We put our name on our products.

Matt: So when you serve Trader Joe's food to your family or use the Trader Joe's product in your home...

Matt: you've made a very personal decision to trust that name. And we want to live up to that.

Tara: We serve those products to our families, too.

Matt: Of course you really shouldn't take our word for it. Try it yourself. Let us know how we do.

Tara: So in this episode, we'll talk about what's in the food, what's not in the food, what should never be in the food, and how we make sure that everything from Trader Joe's lives up to your expectations.

Sabrina: So I'm Sabrina.

Matt: She's a Director of Nutrition here at Trader Joe's and she leads a crack team made up of food technologists-type people looking at the guts, if you will, of our products, making sure that what's in the package is accurately reflected by the words on the outside of the package.

Sabrina: So normal day would encompass everything from, you know, answering questions from our crew members and customers about label questions or nutrition-related questions, you know – why does something have this many carbohydrates in it versus this much fat in it.

Matt: You're working on nutrition-related things that wind up on the food, on the packages.

Sabrina: Making sure it's compliant with FDA regulations. So the federal regulations... There's also other things that we're checking for that we don't have in Trader Joe's products, GMO ingredients or artificial flavors, things like that.

Tara: Can you give us a, a quick rundown of some things that are not allowed in Trader Joe's products?

Sabrina: Some of the hot topic ingredients that a lot of people especially, you know, having kids and having a kid myself want to make sure to stay away from like high fructose corn syrup or um, colors are a big one because you know, some different people try to save it for their kids specifically, you know, red color and yellow color, things like that. Also, MSG. We don't have any monosodium glutamate, chemical preservatives... Use different, other things to preserve our products... citric acid, ascorbic acid.

Matt: You know, Sabrina, a lot of times we hear from customers that are curious about GMO - genetically modified organisms - or GE - genetically engineered ingredients. I know in the larger world, in the real world, I sometimes see things labeled as non-GMO and I think I don't think that that crop has even ever been genetically engineered in the first place. So it's a little confusing for me.

Sabrina: You know, you look at broccoli, you're not going to say, "Okay, hey that broccoli, it's non-GMO, I have to get non-GMO Broccoli," and there isn't any broccoli that *is* GMO. So... We get enough documents as it is. We don't need to get GMO free documentation from (um, you know,) random fruits and vegetables that we know aren't GMO.

Matt: I need a fact checked right now. Is it true that you have a ruler that you use to measure how tall letters are on packages? Is that really happening?

Sabrina: It is true. Um, I have a special ruler that is clear, and every single line on a nutrition facts panel has a different type size requirement depending on what it is.

Tara: The one that really surprised me is when I found out that there were specific regulations about what something needed to contain to say it was a "good source" of that thing versus what it needed to contain to say it was an "excellent source" of that thing. And those are words that are regulated on packaging.

Matt: It's kind of like, if I say a cheeseburger is an excellent source of cheese, it has two slices of cheese. Kind of like that, ok.

Matt: So it seems like recently lots of people are talking about avoiding sugar and yet we still sell a lot of things that are very sweet. And we've also learned from tinkering with existing products, if we're going to... "Let's reduce the sugar, this is great, this is what everyone's talking about," and then it's a flop. It doesn't sell as well because it doesn't taste as sweet, and I think that that's interesting. There's almost a need for people to recalibrate their palettes.

Sabrina: Definitely. And I think what'll be really interesting to see is as we roll out this new nutrition facts that's requiring added sugar count on the nutrition facts label, more and more people are going to be aware of what added sugars are in their product. And with that it'll be easier for someone to pick a product with less added sugars.

Matt: What about some fun stuff?

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: So you were in Spain. It's late at night. You just got in from Ibiza. I know that's was happening.

Sabrina: I did go on a bachelorette trip there...

Mat: Wow, ok.

Tara: Don't tell that story. That could get everybody in trouble.

Matt: You could have a whole show. I think you need a show.

Tara: "Ingredient Talk with Sabrina"

*[Spooky music begins. Witch cackle in the distance.]*

Matt: We're getting ready for the spooky season, that time of year where things come out of nowhere. I'm not talking about...

Tara: Election season?

*[Patriotic music up and fade]*

Matt: No, I'm not talking even about your favorite product being discontinued, as frightening as that can be.

Matt: Halloween is coming, and we've been preparing for it since last Halloween. On this episode we'll listen in as our team considers what to put in the stores for the season. But right now let's head over to the test kitchen where Ross Willy is preparing some existing Trader Joe's products exactly how the instructions on the packaging say to do it.

*[Sizzling in a frying pan, clanking kitchen noises]*

Ross: My name is Ross Willy. I am a QA specialist. I deal with cooking instructions, quality testing on food products. Do three tastings a week, just general product, to find out if cooking instructions are still good, if a product has changed over time, if it's still the same product as far as quality.

Tara: When you are doing these QA tastings three times a week in here, what kind of feedback do you hear?

Ross: It's pretty varied. It's pretty all over the place, but it's, you do get, "This wasn't what we tested originally," or "This wasn't the same breadings," or you do get some of that kind of feedback. Or like, "The packaging was kind of messed up," and so it's a different way of looking at our products that I didn't have beforehand.

Matt: Ross, I'd like to commend you on your cracker placement. That's impressive. Did you do your ringy-ding of the bell?

Ross: No.

Matt: I'll do that.

*[Bell rings]*

Matt: Ok, thank you.

Dan: Hey TJU folks! C'mon in! C'mon in. Stop what you're doing.

Tara: So what just happened is Dan Bane, our CEO, opened the door and called in a TJU Mate Class. What that is, is a training class for our assistant managers... who we call mates.

*[People shuffle in.]*

Matt: Squeeze in, squeeze in, squeeze in. Come on in. So it's Wednesday, it's just a little bit after 1:30. This is a QA tasting. We do this Monday, Wednesday, Friday in Monrovia and in Boston. It's a quality assurance or quality assessment tasting of things that we're selling. So Ross helps us do this every week. So we buy these products from the store. It's important to get things that are actually on our shelves. If you ask the vendor to send you the toaster pastries, they're going to make sure it's the best toaster pastry they've ever made. So we get what's from our store, actual product that customers will experience themselves. It's 1:30. You might say, "I've already eaten lunch. I'm way too full to do this." That's on purpose. You do this... After... It is... Come on, roll with it, roll with it. Benjamin Franklin said,

*[Fife begins playing "Yankee Doodle"]*

"Hunger is the best pickle." What the heck did he mean by that? When you're hungry, everything tastes good, right? If you're full from lunch, you'll be more critical than if you were starving. So you do it after lunch on purpose.

Random Mate #1: Did Ben Franklin really say that?

Matt: Ben Franklin did say that. Yes, he was the father of 13 children, so his mind was scattershot. So we'll take a sampling about usually 10 products or so, and we'll look at them from a customer's perspective. I talked about toaster pastries. That package sets up your expectations. So does the product that came out of that box look like the photo on the box? What does it do to set up what you're going to expect? 1 through 5... 1 being awful, 5 being great. How do these products rank on taste, on the value that they present, what you get for the price, and on the appearance? And there's some space for some comments. So what we do is we go through from the perspective of customers, how do these products hold up? You might start with the ice cream before it melts, but what I'd like for you to do, pass out some of those sheets and work through tasting these products. I have been known to give some things some zeroes in some categories. Operating with integrity is not the same thing with being nice. So if you need to deliver some really important but maybe potentially critical feedback, that's okay. And sometimes it's like, "Hey, turkey jerky crew, great job. It's still really good." Or... "Turkey jerky crew... This needs help. It's dryer than expected," et cetera.

Matt: So we would absolutely forego immediate sales, immediate business, rather than put something out that we didn't think is great.

*[Small crowd indecipherable conversation]*

Matt: Okay. I think we should probably call that a wrap. Thanks for coming in. You can drop your sheets,

Matt: You can drop them on top of the microwave. Thank you.

*[Busy office noise...]*

Tara: So let's head over to customer relations and talk to Nikki.

Nikki: Tara, I have calls. I have emails. I have what you need.

Tara: It wouldn't occur to me as a shopper, as someone who buys food, to call a grocery store, but it might occur to me to call Trader Joe's and I, I can't really put my finger on why that is.

Nikki: Many of our customers have been with us since the very beginning and so oftentimes when you're communicating with a customer, they'll, they'll start the conversation by saying, "Hey, I've been shopping with you for 20 years, 40 years, 30 years." So there's this investment. Speaking with younger customers, they mention, "I remember shopping with my parents at Trader Joe's, I grew up in this store... and so I have this ownership of, of the store, of the prices, of the products." And so things feel very, very personal.

Tara: So Nikki, we get a lot of emails from customers as well as phone calls.

Nikki: We heard from Hadley who shops in our Millburn, New Jersey, store.

Tara: Shout out to Millburn!

Nikki: Hadley says, "If there was one product that I would go to Trader Joe's for, even if I didn't like a single other product in the store, that product would be the Greek Feta in Brine. It is fantastic. However, I'm very disappointed with the recent change in the packaging. The lid now no longer stays firmly in place causing the brine to leak all over the place. The brine is the entire reason the feta stays so fresh and firm.

Tara: Okay. That's not a very happy customer.

Nikki: And we had actually heard from several customers lamenting the same thing.

Tara: Okay. So what happened?

Nikki: Our merchandising team, they saw it for themselves, they heard it from the customers, and they changed the plastic packaging back!

Tara: I like that.

Nikki: Me, too.

Tara: We're going to take you into one of our top secret tasting panels where we consider new products. Of course, some products aren't meant to be tasted, so we might use them or rub them on our skin or just look at them.

*[Walking down long hallway. Large metal door opens. People mulling about. Undecipherable comments.]*

Matt: So who's on first? I think, is everyone here?

Off mic: Yes.

Matt: Maggie...

Maggie: First we have the witch sticks. Ok... You may be asking yourself, "Why do we need a branch that is covered in an all natural moss that looks kind of like the Blair Witch Project?"

Matt: Or cat hair.

Maggie: It does kinda look like cat hair. Well, Halloween is a 9.1 billion dollar industry and people are crazy about it. They're saying that for home décor, Halloween is almost on par with Christmas now for

what people pay and spend for decorating purposes. We have a supplier that we buy a lot of our Christmas greens from, and this particular branch comes off the bottom of a Douglas Fir tree. And what happens is it naturally grows this kind of a moss when it's not exposed to sunlight or air. I think it's just different. It's unusual, it's unique. Nobody has it, and it's completely something that would just end up on the bottom of the forest floor, if you weren't able to get it at your local Trader Joe's.

Matt: So this should cost like next to nothing.

Maggie: Well...

Matt: Because it is like, trash. Sorry, branches. I mean, seriously. It should be pretty inexpensive.

Maggie: It's, it's the labor of basically going out and foraging it off the side of the mountains. We'd be looking at this for 4.99 retail. You got to look at like our pumpkin trees, if anyone's familiar with our pumpkin trees...

Matt: That people grow on purpose.

Maggie: Yes, that's true. That particular item we do for 7.99 retail, and it sells out.

Male voice: I mean I see a total connection with this, the way that people go crazy at Halloween.

Maggie: What would you guys think of a branch that doesn't have the moss? Like a black birch, like just an all natural black birch branch. Is it the, the hair? The hair was like kind of what sold me on it.

Tara: Hairy and moldy looking, and which is creepy.

Matt: It's spooky. It's, it's interesting. It's, it's out there. For me, I just don't know if that's, if we need to be selling it. But please do not take away from this that you shouldn't bring totally weird stuff.

*[Ambient store noises... Products scanning, people milling about...]*

Tara: So speaking of Halloween, let's head over to the new product shelf.

Matt: Now we are not a one-stop shop. We don't have everything, but weirdly enough right now we have some masks. And it turns out that while you're costuming with this mask, you could also be hydrating. These are like moisturizing masks, and it's pretty interesting stuff.

Tara: Yeah. They're actually called Rich Hydrating Face Sheet Masks.

Tara: It's a sheet inside a package. You put it on your face and you go out trick or treating. You know, you put on a house coat, and your costume becomes Mrs. Roper. Moo moos are making a comeback. I got to say, they're everywhere right now. But this one, it has all kinds of really cool hydrating ingredients.

Matt: That is name of the episode: "Moo moos. They're everywhere."

*[Tara laughs.]*

Tara: We don't want you to be disappointed in a Trader Joe's product. And of course the last thing we ever want is to have a product recall.

Erin: I have been on the Trader Joe's recall committee for over a decade.

Tara: This is Erin Baker. Erin is the vice president of marketing communication, which basically means that she heads up the group that tells everybody all there is to know about Trader Joe's products.

Erin: Our decision making process is very simple. "What's the best thing to do for the safety and well-being of our customers?"

Tara: That's it.

Erin: It's not our bottom line and it's also not about our reputation. It's really about our customer safety and well-being.

Tara: You just brought up a really interesting point. It's not about our reputation. Even if it's a nationwide recall that involves lots of different companies, we're the ones who are communicating the most. So our name is at the top of those press releases from news agencies.

Erin: A recent example with a worldwide recall of a very popular, very well known beer. We immediately pulled the product from sale, which is what we do. We sent a notice to our stores so that they were aware, and asked them to post signs. We posted that information also on our website and we blast it out to our list of email subscribers. And within days the world wide, very popular, well-known brand became the "Trader Joe's recall" for this beer.

Matt: "No good deed goes unpunished." But that's, that's the wrong perspective on it.

Matt: While there are aspects of our product supply chain that are beyond our direct control, we will never let... Okay, I need to learn how to read, too. ... Alright. It's so hot in here.

Tara: It is. Prima donna! (laughs)

Matt: I just got an email last week. P-R-E-M-A...

Others: No, oh no, no.

Matt: "I don't mean to be a pre-Madonna." I'm like... Who is that? Chaka Khan? She's pre-Madonna.

Tara: Donna Summer?



Matt: Exactly, there was so many. So while there are aspects of our product supply chain that are beyond our direct control, we will never leave to chance the safety of the products we offer. We stop selling them if there's any doubt about the safety or the quality of those products in question, and this can lead us into a leading edge position or an advanced position, maybe ahead of the curve. And I think that that's why oftentimes these situations end up being branded or framed up as a Trader Joe's recall, even if it is of a type of beer that you can buy almost everywhere.

Tara: How do we deal with a recall when it's a product that is specifically our product with our name on it? Is there any difference?

Erin: We deal with any product recall the same way. This is years and years ago now, but there was a recall related to glass found in a jar of pear sauce and...

Tara: So like applesauce, but with pears, right?

Erin: Exactly. And we discovered it because a customer informed us that the glass was found after feeding the product to her child. We immediately pulled that product from sale, and we recalled all of it. The customer had actually broken a glass in her dishwasher, and there had been nothing wrong with the product.

Tara: We take action immediately, even if we don't have full answers immediately.

Erin: We treat others as we would expect to be treated, and... There were no regrets!

Matt: Trader Joe's does stand for quality, and if you found this to be a quality podcast, please rate it on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts and maybe even subscribe. You can also ask Alexa to play the Trader Joe's podcast, too.

Tara: We'd like that. Here's a taste of what's on the next Inside Trader Joe's.

Tara: We sell a lot of cheese.

Marcy: We do sell a lot of cheese... from Italy, from France, from Spain, from Holland, from Germany...

Chris: It's a small price under \$10 for what we think are wonderful wines. So we find a, a beautiful chardonnay out of Lodi or we find a great Zinfandel out of Sonoma Valley or, or whatever it is.

Marcy: We sell incredible amounts of nuts.

Tara: I mean we sell millions of pounds of nuts.

Marcy: If you add salt or you don't add salt, if you put it in pieces...

Matt: So going to Napa now, I think for a lot of people can feel overwhelming because it's this intense place.

Pat: It's a grownup's Disneyland.

Tara: Thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.