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A fifth question this Passover: what makes Trader Joe's matzah different from all other matzah?

BY JACKIE HAJDENBERG MARCH 22, 2023



Boxes of Trader Joe's matzah for sale. (Isabella Armus)

(JTA) — For millennia, Jews have eaten matzah. And for years, Jewish patrons of Trader Joe's have been able to purchase matzah off the shelves of the tiki-themed grocery chain — which has gained its own quasi-religious following.

Now, for the first time ever, Trader Joe's will be selling matzah under its own famous private label.

The question, even among the store's diehard Jewish fans, is what makes Trader Joe's-branded matzah different from all other matzah.

The grocery chain with more than 500 stores nationwide, and known for characteristically friendly, Hawaiian shirt-clad employees and a limited selection and high turnover of products, has gained a cult-like following in its 56 years of operation. An Instagram fan account boasts nearly 2 million followers; the internet is abound with memes about falling in love with Trader Joe's cashiers; and dozens of Facebook groups with thousands of members each exist to cater toward the specific dietary needs of loyal shoppers.

Those loyalists include no small number of Jews who keep kosher. The store stocks a number of Jewish, Israeli and Middle Eastern foods — from an “everything but the bagel” spice mix to spicy zhoug sauce to kosher-certified turkeys ahead of Thanksgiving, and frozen latkes. Trader Joe's caused a small uproar in 2012 when it stopped stocking kosher pareve semi-sweet chocolate chips. After a campaign by Jewish customers, the chain brought the product back to its shelves in 2021.

But whether that loyalty will extend to the store's matzah is unclear. Some shoppers said they were excited about the new offering, while others wondered whether it would be any different from the matzah Trader Joe's has sold in previous years. Still others said that by putting its name on one of the most quintessential Jewish foods, Trader Joe's “signals that Pesach products have gone mainstream,” in the words of Susan Robinson, a member of Kosher Trader Joe's, a Facebook group with more than 63,000 members.

The decision also demonstrates that Trader Joe's takes its kosher-observant customers seriously, said Rachel B. Gross, a professor at San Francisco State University who teaches a course on U.S. Jews and the history of food.

“My understanding is that they've never wanted to do everything,” Gross said. “But they have had a really strong kosher game because that worked really well with the way they approached the niche markets in general.”

For years, Trader Joe's sold matzah made by a brand called Holyland, and it's unclear whether the chain's new boxes hold the same old

product. The company — which is secretive about who produces its private-label foods — told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency only that the new private label matzah is made by “one of the largest and oldest matzo-making bakeries in Israel.”

Whether the Holyland once sold by Trader Joe’s is made by the same company as Holyland Shmura Matzo — a circular handmade variety — is similarly unclear. But there are hints, beyond the name, that they come from the same company, which is based in Israel. Both share the same distributor, and both include a logo on the front bearing the web address NaturallyBetterWithYouInMind.com, a site that boasts “high quality, all natural, kosher foods.”

A representative of the distributor of both Holyland products, a New Jersey company called Kayco, did not know whether the current Trader Joe’s product is the same as the Holyland matzah. The new Trader Joe’s matzah box says only that it is distributed and sold by Trader Joe’s, which is headquartered outside of Los Angeles.

That confusion has led to an ambivalent reaction among some members of Kosher Trader Joe’s. Multiple members of the group shared photos of the new boxes at their local stores, encouraging each other to buy the matzah in order to press the company to produce it again next year.

Some commented on the new box design, while others remarked on the price — \$2.69 per box, a slight increase over the \$2.49 Trader Joe’s charged for the Holyland boxes last year, according to an Instagram fan page. (Name-brand boxes of matzah at the same weight cost slightly more at other retailers, ranging from about \$3.22 for a 16 ounce box of Yehuda Matzos to \$4.49 for Manischewitz’s version of the unleavened bread.)

“Trader Joe’s has sold Holyland Matzah for at least a decade, if not longer,” wrote one member. “I’m surprised that it has taken them this long to put it under the Trader Joe’s private label.”

Others were just happy to have access to matzah at all. Another member recalled that supply chain delays and restrictions related to

COVID-19 led to shortages of Passover products, and that in Manhattan's East Village, where he lives, "TJ – and the Holyland Matzo – became a Pesach saver. That's what the commotion is all about."

(Members of the group who adhere to strict kosher laws may not have tried the new matzah yet due to a tradition of not eating matzah between Purim and Passover, although a few customers remarked that it feels thinner than Holyland matzah.)

In addition to matzah, Trader Joe's will sell Teva Glatt kosher-for-Passover Angus beef brisket and a few kosher-for-Passover wines including Sara Bee Moscato and Baron Herzog chardonnay and cabernet. The company will publish a complete list of its kosher-for-Passover offerings closer to the holiday, which begins the night of April 5.

Gross said the conversation over Trader Joe's matzah fits in with the way Americans celebrate Passover, which she said is intimately tied to brands. She cited the proliferation of well-known Passover products like the haggadah published by Maxwell House coffee, which was first printed more than 90 years ago, or Manischewitz's many Passover foods. The way the holiday has been shaped by brands, she said, is "in some sense, a traditional American Jewish experience."

"Jews have really learned over the last 110, 120 years how to trust brands, and trust brands around kashrut, especially around Passover," Gross told JTA.

"We know that the people who keep kosher are such a small minority," she added. "And we know that the number of people who look for heckshers are not primarily Jews, which makes me wonder how many non-Jews buy matzah, or [how many] they expect to buy matzah."

But for at least one member of Kosher Trader Joe's, brand loyalty was not enough to make the new matzahs stand out.

"Most articles written about this Matza as well as online comments make it out to be something earth-shattering and revolutionary, and

fail to mention that Trader Joe's has carried matza around this time, in every single store, for years and years under the Holyland Brand," wrote Yoseph Goldstein. "Have folks easily forgotten this? Is it really the 'coolness' of the box?"