

## Starbucks Stories\_The Origin of the PSL\_Audio Transcript

**Heidi Peiper:** Ahhh, can you feel it? Crunching leaves? Hayrides? That chill in the air? Fall is here. And this year, it brings us the 20th anniversary of the Pumpkin Spice Latte. <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

I'm Heidi Peiper, writer and historian for Starbucks Stories. And today, to celebrate two decades of the PSL, I'm joined by Storyteller Jen Warnick, who will leave no gourd unturned in her quest to tell us the unlikely origin story of fall's favorite beverage.

Enjoy!

**Ben Sledge:** It tastes great. Like what's wrong with loving pumpkin?

**Chevaughn Graham:** Many super fans do many crazy things from setting up their lawns in anticipation of PSL season to getting fully decked out.

**Fall Fan 3:** You always see leggings and then sweaters, scarves. And then the iconic PSL.

**Fall Fan 4:** I went to my manager, Carl, at the time and said, you know, "Hey, what would you think about me donning this pumpkin suit?"

**Fall Fan 3:** I love fall so much that I have a pumpkin tattooed on my finger. My tattoo is a Starbucks cup modified so that instead of having the green circle, it's a green banner that says "basic."

**Ben Sledge:** I have literally marketed myself as the "pump-king."

**Fall Fan 3:** Like feeling of pumpkin and here come the leaves. And like

**Chevaughn Graham:** People like to do pumpkin baby showers, pet names, license plates.

**Ben Sledge:** I bet you love pumpkin. This, this, this and this. And I'm like, you're, you're damn Skippy. <laugh>

**Jen Warnick:** Hey everyone. My name is Jen Warnick and I am on a mission to understand the phenomenon that is the Pumpkin Spice Latte. It's led me to some pretty surprising people. People like Ben Sledge.

**Ben Sledge:** My background is, is I spent 11 years in the military. I served in Afghanistan and Iraq. So I am tattooed to the nines. I have a, a three quarter sleeve and now I got like a, a lion in space on my chest. And then on top of that, you know, I, I listen to metal pretty much all day long.

**Jen Warnick:** When you meet Ben and you hear him describe himself, you may not expect this next part.

**Ben Sledge:** And I, I wrote this essay called "On Being the Guy Who Loves Pumpkin Spice." And, uh, you know, I used to think it was gross. I used to think people were ridiculous and, and I would share the memes where, you know, you dump it down the drain. And then I, you know, that's the thing. You kind of jump on the bandwagon of hate, and then you actually try one. And I was like, dear Lord, please give me these for the rest of my life and everything that goes along

with fall, I will take. So like let's light some candles and put pumpkin spice all around and just enjoy ourselves.

**Jen Warnick:** To really unpack the Pumpkin Spice Latte, probably the best place to start is the Leaf Rakers Society. It's this Facebook group celebrating all things Pumpkin Spice Latte and fall. It has more than 40,000 members and some of them even call it the happiest place on the internet.

**Chevaughn Graham:** Hi, my name is Chevaughn. My nickname is Chevy. I live in Brooklyn, New York. I am one of the official moderators for the Leaf Rakers Society. The Leaf Rakers Society is a magical place filled with wonderful human beings that love fall endlessly.

**Jen Warnick:** So I requested to join the Leaf Rakers Society, and it popped up this window. I had to read and accept rules of engagement before they'd let me in. Rule number one, no hatin' on fall. This includes pumpkins, cold breezes, leaf piles, or autumnal themed scarves. So it's that kind of Fight Club. Okay, fair enough. Let's go in.

**Chevaughn Graham):** In my role as moderator, I have seen many super fans do many crazy things from setting up their lawns in anticipation of PSL season, to getting fully decked out, wearing, you know, leggings with maple leaves, getting earrings, shirts, everything, making cozies, just going all out, lighting their, you know, their pumpkin candles getting ready. It's amazing. They, they do so many crazy interesting things. <laugh>

**Jen Warnick:** Moderating this year-round celebration of fall brings Chevaughn a lot of joy both fall and the Leaf Rakers Society have kind of become respites for her.

**Chevaughn Graham:** I'm a nurse. So before I go into work, I usually have a <laugh>. I have a cup of coffee, a Pumpkin Spice Latte. And, um, it prepares me, it, it kind of makes me feel, I don't know. I guess I just want to say it makes me feel happy. I go into work refreshed and you know, we're leaving the summer now we're entering fall and then the holidays, and then a new year. It's just so much more than, oh, you know, just coffee. <laugh>

**Jen Warnick:** Chevaughn and Ben are not alone. Every year all kinds of people lean into Pumpkin Spice Latte season. We used to just call it autumn. But then this beverage came along ... a bit of an underdog. Actually, when you know the story and changed everything, it all started with a man named Peter Dukes.

**Peter Dukes:** It's like clockwork each year when PSL arrives, people know, Hey fall's here.

**Jen Warnick:** He's the guy who led the team of Starbucks, beverage innovators, responsible for inventing the Pumpkin Spice Latte that year. Peter is kind of a low-key guy, which is surprising given he was the one to champion a drink that changed the way people think about an entire season. He is still interviewed about the Pumpkin Spice Latte every year. And I mean, his face is painted on the side of a building in Burlington, Washington. It's part of a mural celebrating the 10th anniversary of the PSL. Peter may be chill, but he's kind of pumpkin famous.

**Peter Dukes:** I'll never forget. One time, this was probably four or five years ago, I was out with kids and somehow one of their friends had found out that I'd worked on PSL. And all of a sudden, "Oh, can we get your picture? We want to take a picture with you." So we're taking selfies and you just have to laugh. Right? Cause it's something that just started with a group of people in a tasting lab, coming up with these ideas and then getting it to market and things took off.

**Jen Warnick:** The story starts like this. Once upon a time in the year 2002, the only seasonal drink Starbucks offered were the eggnog latte and the peppermint mocha. They were popular because they're delicious, but they were only available during the holidays. Winter was having all the fun. What about the other seasons? What about pumpkin patches and leaf raking and sweater weather. This is right about when Peter and his team were asked to come up with beverage ideas to pair to a whole new season – fall.

**Peter Dukes:** We started with a huge brainstorm list and, you know, just filled the wall with those huge white Post-It papers of ideas. So we probably had at least a hundred ideas up on the wall. And once we got those ideas, we started to, to whittle away at them and came down with a list of about 20 chocolate-based beverages, caramel-based beverages, orange-based beverage, cinnamon, nutmeg, walnut, and pumpkin obviously was in there as well. Not surprisingly the beverages that had chocolate and caramel in them scored highest. And so you look at those purchase intent scores and you say, wow, if we make a beverage that has chocolate or caramel in it, people are going to buy it. But the uniqueness of those beverages were what I would call middle of the road. Pumpkin at the time, it was just, I think it was just pumpkin latte. We hadn't really named it. The purchase intense scores on that beverage weren't terribly high. They weren't the lowest, but they were probably lower middle pack.

**Jen Warnick:** These days, you can't throw a decorative gourd without hitting pumpkin flavored something cereal or toaster tarts or cookies or yogurt or candy bars. Hormel even created a limited-edition pumpkin spice flavored Spam. But back in 2003, other than pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving, pumpkin flavor really wasn't a thing ... yet.

**Peter Dukes:** I mean, now it's like obvious, right? There's so there's a huge category, but at the time pumpkin was not a known flavor. And you certainly didn't think of matching that with coffee. So we had to fight a little bit to keep pumpkin, uh, in the mix and, and what, what really caught my attention with pumpkin was its uniqueness score, right? So Starbucks has always been a little bit different, a little bit unique. And from a brand perspective, it's important to take a slightly different approach and differentiate yourself in terms of what you can get at other coffee shops.

**Jen Warnick:** So Peter and his team kept pumpkin in the running. It was unique. It was promising at least on paper, but what would a pumpkin flavor drink look like in real life? The way they answer questions like this at Starbucks is exactly as cool as you might imagine, picture a room that's part science lab and part kitchen. But instead of researchers busting around with beakers and Petri dishes, they're dipping slices of pumpkin pie into cups of espresso.

**Peter Dukes:** And imagine so our R&D folks in the labs, white lab coats, creating these concoctions, using the stove and the oven and to create these different flavors. And with

pumpkin, when somebody had the idea of let's bring in a pumpkin pie and everyone has a favorite pumpkin pie recipe, they use let's bring in some pumpkin pies and just put some shots of espresso on them and taste them and get a sense for the mouth feel. And, and what does that taste what's that – when you combine espresso and pumpkin, does it pass the, the taste test and it tasted quite good, which it gave us some, some more direction. I think the other part that was important with that is when you tasted pumpkin pie with espresso, the mouth feel it wasn't, it wasn't syrupy. It was, it was thicker, right? If we're going to do this idea, that's pumpkin latte, it definitely needs to be a sauce. It can't be a syrup. So that was the next step.

**Jen Warnick:** Peter's team was starting to get pretty excited. But what would people not wearing white lab coats think of a pumpkin flavored coffee beverage? It was finally time to do some taste testing. So they sent out an email to latte, loving partners, all over Starbucks headquarters, inviting them to sample some new flavors. And this part is kind of great too. The taste testers, they came into this room and sat in front of a window and then the window opened and a hand reached through and gave them one of four anonymous drinks to try like some kind of coffee speakeasy.

**Peter Dukes:** And the survey asks now, after you've tasted this beverage, how likely are you to buy the beverage? So this is right. So now they've actually tasted in and the purchase intent scores after they actually tasted the beverage for chocolate and caramel, not surprisingly, it remained pretty high, but what was really striking was that the results of the pumpkin latte, the results after they had tasted, it were extremely high. And that told us, okay, now we got something to work with. We got a unique beverage concept, which differentiates us from the competition and people liked the taste. They really liked the taste.

**Jen Warnick:** They liked it. They really liked it, but now what to call it?

**Peter Dukes:** There was a desire to, to use a really unique name, such as the fall latte, fall harvest latte. And then one of them was pumpkin latte. And we all ultimately ended up on Pumpkin Spice Latte because the spices play a really important role in bringing out the flavors of pumpkin, but also it highlights the espresso in the cup. And, uh, you got cinnamon, you got cloves, nutmeg, all those flavors play an important role in pumpkin latte, thus adding the word spice.

**Jen Warnick:** Starbucks launched a test of this Pumpkin Spice Latte in a hundred stores in Vancouver, British Columbia and Washington, DC, and people were kind of into it. So the following year in 2004, the PSL was rolled out nationwide PSL, by the way, was the original beverage code for the Pumpkin Spice Latte. You know, the one written in Sharpie by barista's on cups. And pretty soon it became the drink's official nickname.

**Peter Dukes:** It just took off. Believe it or not. We launched it very well. The first year we went ahead and came back with it the second year, but then there were discussions about discontinuing it. I mean, it still did well, don't me wrong, but there was this, this idea back then of, Hey, we want to keep things new, keep things fresh. And fortunately we kept coming back with it. And then five, six years later with social media, it just took off on a whole 'nother level.

**Jen Warnick:** In 2012, there was such a run on Pumpkin Spice Lattes that some stores briefly ran out of the flavoring. Fear of a PSL shortage made headlines everywhere from the Atlantic to the Village Voice, to the Wall Street Journal, which dubbed it a “Halloween nightmare.” When the brief scare came to an end, a few days later, ABC News reported, “Phew, Starbucks Pumpkin Spice crisis ends.” The following year, Starbucks celebrated two big pumpkin spice milestones, the drink’s 10th anniversary and the fact that in those first 10 years, baristas made more than 200 million of them ... which is how Peter's face ended up on a mural in Burlington, Washington.

**Peter Dukes:** Uh, I was on a cross country road trip at the time and I got a call from our Creative group saying, “Hey, Peter, we’re going to send you a picture of this caricature that we’re going to put up on this wall and keep in mind, it’s just a caricature.” So I got it. And I opened it and I just, you know, you had to laugh because it was a pretty funny, pretty funny painting or drawing, whatever you want to call it of me. And I, I have some bigger ears on my head and they definitely played up the bigger ears. So I have friends to this day or even crazy PSL fans that somehow found out about this thing and believe it or not still up to this day, probably 10 people a day drive by it. And it probably costs more money to just paint over it than just leave it. So that thing is still up.

**Jen Warnick:** The PSL may have become an institution, but it in no way has rested on its laurels. In 2015, the original recipe was revamped to add pumpkin puree. So actual pumpkins by actual farmers in every cup, which is why I thought I should drive 256 miles to a 2,000-acre farm on the border of Washington and Oregon to meet some of the pumpkins that will one day grow up to be PSLs. When I got there and met up with farmer Jeff Leaver, he hit me with some truth right away.

**Jeff Leaver:** Now don't be shocked. Now, I don't know if you know anything about these Kabochas – they are a smaller pumpkin. Okay. They're very small that like what you're used to most people, when you say pumpkin, they're used to a carving pumpkin, correct? Jack-o-lanterns or whatever. Well, these here, when I started growing, I was like, what's what am I doing wrong? They're not very big. Well then after doing the research and everything realize they're just, they only get so big and they're wonderful. They're fun. We're driving out to the field, out to where I've planted these pumpkins to where my rotation, my crop rotation has taken us this year. And then we go into two varieties of, well, three varieties of pumpkins out there. And then we're going to go down to that patch here. So let's hop out here, take a look.

**Jen Warnick:** I stepped out of the truck and into this leafy green field dotted with bright orange pumpkins stretching all the way out to the horizon. It was 85 degrees and sunny and I was holding my first Pumpkin Cream Cold Brew this season. And well, this is right about the moment I wanted to call every single member of the Leaf Rakers Society. So they could be there too. I had never, before considered that Pumpkin Spice Lattes are farm-to-cup, but there I was standing on the farm, holding a cup. I brought Jeff one too, by the way.

**Jeff Leaver:** So we have a beautiful location. We have the blue mountains to our west here to our east of us here. And we got the, so we got to watch the sunrise every morning out here across the fields and across the, we got to watch the sunset in the evening and the, and the

colors and the skies and, and what we get to see out here. Um, it's pretty magnificent with mother nature of the storms and she brings us the highlights, the stars. It's really incredible to be out here and the landscape, the rolling hills. It's just, it's gorgeous to stand here. It's a very rewarding place to be very fortunate to be here.

**Jen Warnick:** <in field> Here's some cute little guys. Hey pumpkin,

**Jeff Leaver:** They're beautiful. They're just beautiful. And we've experimented with different spacings on how close the spacings, how wide the rows are. So we plant it 44 inches apart and every 17 inches we drop a seed and we've learned most of these plants will produce three pumpkins per plant. So we have a pretty, we're pretty close within a ton per acre. What we'll raise here on these. So I'd just like to look through here, see where we are. They're late bloomers, late pollination. Because some of these vines are 15 foot long.

**Jen Warnick:** Another surprising thing. Jeff told me farmers rent or borrow honey bees to help their crops along the bees come to stay during certain parts of the growing season. Their hives strategically placed around the farm like rows of little Airbnbs.

**Jeff Leaver:** It's all part of the big circle of how it all works and everything, you know, we can get by and just hope for mother nature to kind of take care of it, you know, but if we add to help out and rent some hives and throw some extra hives out there, we can really add to our product. Good healthy bees makes a big difference.

**Jen Warnick:** I was joined on this field trip by Peggy and Bill from SVZ. It's a company that works with farmers to produce fruit and vegetable products like pumpkin puree for businesses like Starbucks. You should probably know that bill is an agronomist and his last name is Orchard. For real, Bill Orchard. <laugh>, it's so great. A team of agronomists and beverage scientists turned over every leaf to find just the right variety of pumpkin to use in the PSL. Now I don't mean to gloss over the importance of this process or the science of it, or how many times Peggy and Bill used words and phrases like ...

**Peggy:** Harvest protocol, viscosity,

**Bill Orchard:** Well-drained soil

**Peggy:** With the starches and the sugars where they start measuring the brix.

**Jen Warnick:** That's brix with an X, which the internet tells me is the food industry's method for measuring the amount of sugar in an aqueous solution, which I guess in this case makes pumpkin innards the aqueous solution. Anyway, after a lot of hard work, they found a winner.

**Jeff Leaver:** What they liked was the Kabocha pumpkin that we grow. I don't know what the exact varietal is Ambermax, right?

**Peggy:** I believe so.

**Jeff Leaver:** Yeah. Ambermax. Yeah, it's a, it's a very unique pumpkin and, and when it's ready to go, ready to be processed, is it?

**Peggy:** And it's normally used in a pie.

**Jen Warnick:** The pumpkins are only a little bigger than a softball when they're fully grown. So when it's time to harvest them, the farm crew pick them up a couple at a time and just toss them into a truck. Jeff said, it's really something when they get going this blizzard of orange. Once the pumpkins are piled in, they're driven to the factory where they'll well, a note to our more sensitive listeners, this is the part of the story where the pumpkins are made into puree. The puree that will be used for the pumpkins by sauce that will combine with the espresso and the steamed milk that will become your Pumpkin Spice Latte. I know, I know it's the way of things, the circle of life, they're gourds, but they're also kind of adorable. You can't spend time with them without getting a little attached and without maybe starting to personify them a little, honestly, I was kind of having a hard time with the whole puree thing until Peggy mentioned something that made everything better.

**Peggy:** And this is the, it's one of my favorite things. So when they arrive and they go on a conveyor belt and they go into this whole washing vat and stuff like that. But when they come off the truck onto the conveyor belt, it, it moves them up a little bit and they bounce and they just look so excited to be there. They're all like "We're going swimming." <laugh> it is so adorable. I mean, and they just look like, "Yes, the PSL is coming!"

**Jen Warnick:** In 2019, Starbucks expanded the Pumpkin Spice family to add a Pumpkin Spice creamer, which you can buy in grocery stores and to add the Pumpkin Cream Cold Brew drink. So eerily delicious. It continues to change the hearts and minds of people who have lived their entire lives thinking they don't like the taste of pumpkin. Okay. So I'm talking about me here, but I know I'm not alone. Here's Peter Dukes again.

**Peter Dukes:** You know, if you asked me or anybody else who worked on this back in 2003, would we envision an entire category? Not only within coffee, but just anything? You know, people would send things along, like, look at this pumpkin spice, this pumpkin spice that it would, I just you'd chuckle because who would've thunk it? And you know, there are times as you get older and you, and you reflect back, and you realize, wow, you know, this touches a lot of people and it's going to be around to stay.

**Jen Warnick:** For so many people, the Pumpkin Spice Latte has become an important ritual of fall. It kind of made me wonder, does Peter Dukes, the guy who invented it have a ritual? The guy who shakes his head and chuckles at the phenomenon it's become? Like when summer turns to fall, does Peter grab a Pumpkin Spice Latte and go somewhere quiet and have a cheers to the little drink that could? Like, "Hey little buddy, we did it." It turns out he kind of does do this.

**Peter Dukes:** Oh yeah. My favorite part over the years as the kids were growing up. So we got four kids and all played soccer. And one of my favorite memories is Saturday mornings on the way to those soccer games in the fall. I always love the crisp autumn days. So when weather starting to turn and you got the dew out on the grass, because we usually play on Saturday mornings, stop by Starbucks, pick up my PSL and sit on the sidelines, watch kids play soccer.

Yeah. And that, that would be my, “We did it, buddy” moments, if you will. <laugh> it's awesome to see. It's been a fun journey to be part of.

**Starbucks Partner:** Hi, welcome to Starbucks. What can I get going for you today?

**Jen Warnick:** Hey, could I get a Pumpkin Spice Latte please? A Grande,

**Starbucks Partner:** A Grande Pumpkin Spice Latte. Absolutely. You got it.