



Why LaCroix sparkling water is suddenly everywhere

In the 1990s, LaCroix was the favorite drink of Midwestern moms.

How did it get so cool?

by Libby Nelson and Javier Zarracina on June 20, 2016

For the first few decades that LaCroix sparkling water existed, the Midwestern moms who drank it had it all to themselves.

Long before the girls wearing "[LaCroixs Over Boys](#)" T-shirts this summer were even born, LaCroix was beloved by health-conscious, budget-wise women in middle America. They knew a good thing when they found it, and they were a loyal audience. But most trends trickle inward from the coasts to the Midwest, not the other way around, and so LaCroix's first 30 years were spent under the radar.

Then sometime in 2015, LaCroix — lightly flavored, sugar-free carbonated water wrapped in a garish can — became an unlikely breakout hit. [The New York Times](#) published an essay raving about it. [The Awl](#) and [Time Out New York](#) ranked its flavors. If you say "LaCroix" to a youngish urban professional, be ready for a possible explosion of enthusiasm, as if you'd shaken up a can of carbonated water.

I was baffled: Who turned this humble Midwestern seltzer into a status symbol?

"I always say if I could ever have a fridge where all I had to do was fill it with my favorite beverage, it would be lime LaCroix," said [Samantha Weiss-Hills](#), partnerships editor at the food website [Food52](#). When Weiss-Hills's co-workers sampled [17 different water brands](#) for a taste test, they challenged her to pick LaCroix out of the lineup — and she did.

Weiss-Hills describes her relationship with the water as "kind of an addiction," and she's not the only one. National Beverage, the company that makes LaCroix, has seen its stock soar. You can buy [needlepoint](#) depicting its neon cans. On Instagram, the word "obsessed" turns up again and again.

I remember LaCroix from my Kansas City childhood as the pastel cases of tasteless soda that my Girl Scout leader packed into her minivan for a weekend trip in the 1990s. A decade later, when I worked at a summer camp in a small northern Minnesota town, it was a rare treat we could easily find at the local Walmart.

So a few months ago, when friends and co-workers started enthusing about LaCroix and its cans appeared, to great fanfare, in our work refrigerator, I was baffled: Who turned this humble Midwestern seltzer into a status symbol?

I started playing hashtag archaeologist, sifting through thousands of #LiveLaCroix Instagrams. Somewhere, I was certain, there was a patient zero, a super-influencer who singlehandedly revived LaCroix, making its pastel cases proliferate at Whole Foods, in [my sister's kitchen](#), even on my own desk.

But I was thinking about it backward. It turns out LaCroix isn't everywhere because it was trendy. LaCroix became trendy because it was easy for it to be everywhere.

LaCroix is succeeding as methadone for the soda addict

Over the past decade, Americans have done something that would have once seemed downright un-American: [They've given up](#)

Unlike a countertop SodaStream, it's cheap, readily available, and portable. Close your eyes, wrap your hand around the perspiring aluminum can, and you could be holding a Coca-Cola. LaCroix is succeeding as methadone for the soda addict.

LaCroix [isn't the only brand](#) to benefit from the sparkling water boom. But it's the one that's risen to the coveted status of lifestyle brand, not just generating loyalty but becoming part of how we define ourselves. The secret behind LaCroix's rise is a mix of old-fashioned business strategy and cutting-edge social marketing. When Americans wanted carbonated water, LaCroix was positioned to give them them fizzy water. Then, sometimes by accident, LaCroix developed fans among mommy bloggers, Paleo eaters, and Los Angeles writers who together pushed LaCroix into the zeitgeist.

Don't be fooled by the name — LaCroix is from Wisconsin, and it's pronounced "la croy"

If you want to go to the source to unravel the mysteries of LaCroix, don't look for a remote European spring bubbling with natural minerals. Just head to Wisconsin.

LaCroix is Midwestern through and through, down to its [pronunciation](#) ("la croy"). Its name comes from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, where a beer company started producing it in the early 1980s; you pronounce that name like the St. Croix River, which forms Wisconsin's western border.

These days, though, LaCroix comes from just about everywhere. National Beverage, which bought the LaCroix brand in 1996, fills its cans with carbonated water in [12 plants](#) nationwide — an unglamorous origin story compared to [San Pellegrino flowing from an Alpine spring](#) or Perrier [bubbling up in the South of France](#), but a key factor in LaCroix's success.

The downfall of soda was creating a craving for sparkling water

"The company itself had the kind of infrastructure that could allow to scale it up very quickly," says Jeffrey Klineman, the editor of the beverage industry publication [BevNET](#). "When you get a little bit of momentum, if you can execute behind that momentum, it can really drive a brand forward."

About five years ago, LaCroix spotted an opportunity. The downfall of soda was creating a craving for sparkling water.

Americans historically wanted their carbonated water syrupy and sweet — bubbles belonged in soda, not plain water. Even during a brief Perrier craze in the [late 1980s and early 1990s](#), sparkling water was a European drink, served in snooty restaurants. Most water Americans drank came out of the tap. The average person drank less than four gallons of bottled water, still and sparkling, per year in 1988.

Then bottled water began to boom. By 2015, the average American was drinking [37 gallons of bottled water per year](#). At the same time, [they were losing their taste for sugary soda](#). Public health crusaders preached about the evils of sugar and yanked vending machines from schools and offices.

And, slowly, they made a difference. In 2015, people in the US drank 12.4 gallons less soda per person than they did in 2005, the equivalent of cutting out just over two 16-ounce sodas per week.

Bottled water dominates the market, but sparkling water is growing faster. The amount of domestically produced sparkling water Americans consume increased 58 percent between 2010 and 2014, according to the International Bottled Water Association. Between 2013 and 2014 alone, it grew 17 percent.

LaCroix went from seven flavors to 20, and they're still adding more

When Americans decided they wanted fizzy water, National Beverage and its 12 bottling plants were ready. They shipped the product to more stores nationally than ever before, including Whole Foods. But they had another a secret weapon: flavor.

National Beverage's leading brand, in the pre-LaCroix days, was Shasta sodas, whose distinguishing features are being cheaper than Coca-Cola and offering, currently, a dizzying array of 36 flavors. National Beverage created demand for Shasta by constantly creating new flavors, many of them manufactured in house, and retiring old ones.

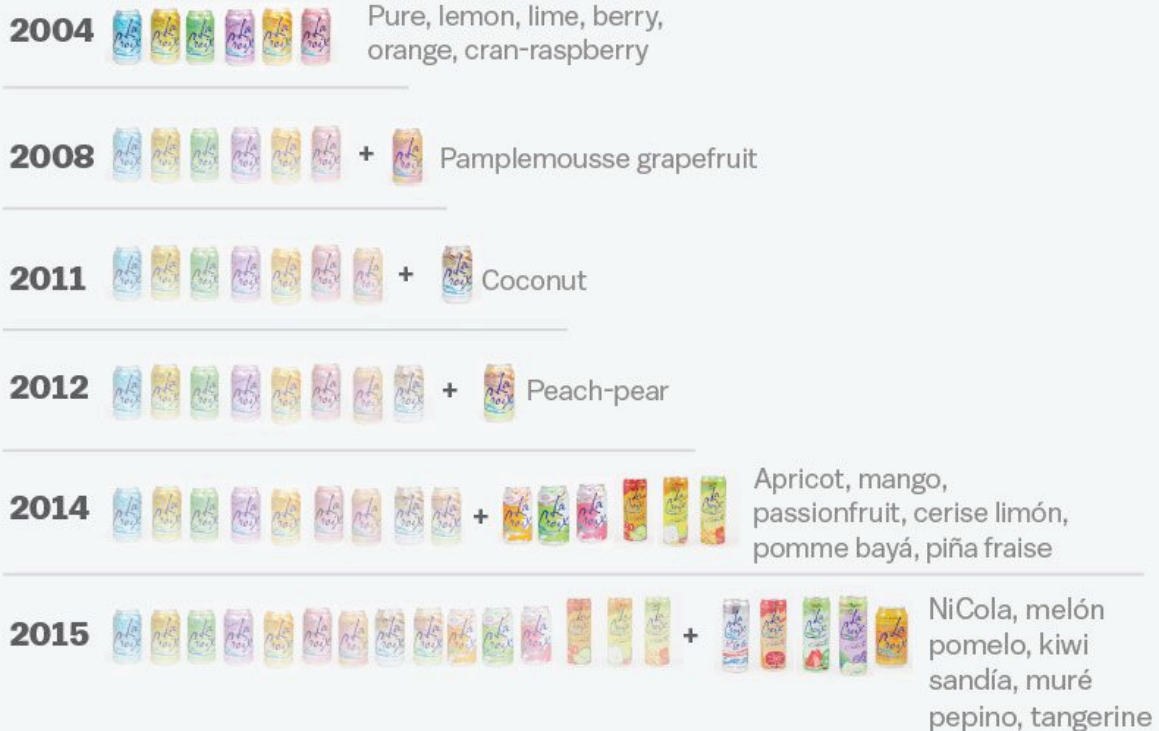
As seltzer sales started to creep up, the company bet that a similar approach could turn sparkling water from a sophisticated but tasteless European drink into an American hit.

Their bet was right. Dieters kicking soda and alcohol were among the first LaCroix devotees, happy to find something with a little more flavor. Louise Hendon, who wrote about the drink in 2012 on her [Paleo diet blog](#), told me she was thrilled to find a healthy option that was readily available at Walmart and Target: "It was so rare to find something in those types of stores that's not that bad for you to drink."

By 2015, LaCroix was on the [approved list for the Whole 30 diet](#), a restrictive eating plan that, like Paleo, requires participants to give up sugar and alcohol.

LaCroix flavor timeline

When new flavors were introduced



SOURCE: National Beverage annual reports and press releases, news reports

Vox

Javier Zarracina/Vox

Meanwhile, LaCroix's flavor choices, which numbered just six in 2004, started to balloon. First came coconut, followed by apricot, mango, and tangerine. Next, the bottling plants churned out a new line of water called Cúrate, packed into taller cans festooned with bright illustrations of fruit and labeled with fruit blends in Spanish and French: "cérise limón" for cherry-lime, for example.

Offering 20 flavors gives LaCroix the ability to profit from ubiquity while keeping the cachet of scarcity. Most stores don't carry every flavor, so stocking up on a favorite can require some persistence.

The proliferating flavor list also keeps loyal LaCroix drinkers from getting bored. Anjali Prasertong, [who wrote about LaCroix for the cooking website the Kitchn](#), told me she and her husband go to Target and check out new flavors just for fun.

While National Beverage doesn't break out sales figures for individual brands, together LaCroix, Everfresh juices, and Rip It energy drinks grew 35 percent year over year in winter 2015, according to a recent financial disclosure with the Securities and Exchange Commission. (And that's in the winter. Given that LaCroix is really a summer drink, the biggest sales gains may be yet to come.)

National Beverage Corp. stock price



SOURCE: Google Finance

Vox

LaCroix's stock — ticker symbol FIZZ — has soared from \$12 per share in summer 2010 to \$55 per share today. Its 80-year-old founder, [Nick Caporella](#), is now a late-in-life billionaire. And he's not done yet. Caporella [promised shareholders](#) that 2016 will be the company's "break-out year":

Each and every month, *momentum* is fueled through magnifying distribution, controlled launching of theme extensions, healthier beverages and the luring into our fold . . . 'cola converts' — an immeasurable segment of the soft-drink industry.

For Caporella, whose writing reads like it's ripped from the discursive labels of Dr. Bronner's soap, that's a fairly lucid sentence. But behind the eccentric, press-shy founder is a nimble marketing machine.

How TV writers' sparkling water preferences fueled LaCroix mania

LaCroix's early sales pitch focused on the kinds of women who had long been loyal to the drink. The brand sponsored [Susan G. Komen for the Cure](#) walks to fight breast cancer and paid the authors of [fitness-oriented motherhood blogs](#) to write [posts proclaiming their love for](#) LaCroix. They offered Tory Burch bags as a giveaway.

Being approved by the Whole 30 program, whose dieters are encouraged to share their meals on social media, nudged more cans of LaCroix into Instagram feeds.

But it was another group of LaCroix drinkers, ones the company doesn't seem to have courted at all, who gave it prime cultural real estate.

The forces that shape our cultural references, deciding what will be a shorthand for trendiness on blogs and painstakingly documented in the New York Times style section, can seem mysterious. But the answer is stupidly obvious: If you want to be written about, win over a bunch of writers.

And starting in 2014, writers in Los Angeles began drinking LaCroix in droves.

"It's something I suddenly noticed at a job when I was a script coordinator and all the writers were going through it like crazy each day," Cynthia Kao, an actress and writer who's worked in production on several TV shows, told me over email.

At the time, Kao was working for a short-lived NBC comedy, but the LaCroix obsession was much broader. Joe Mande, a writer on *Parks and Rec*, promoted LaCroix so relentlessly in 2013 and 2014 that he begged the brand to make him their official spokesperson. ([LaCroix not only declined but issued a cease-and-desist letter.](#)) The CW's *Vampire Diaries* [tweeted a photo of a fridge stacked high with LaCroix boxes](#). Stephen Falk, the creator of FX comedy *You're the Worst*, said its creation [was fueled by a constant supply of LaCroix](#).

If you want to be written about, win over a bunch of writers

TV writers drank LaCroix because they'd always liked sparkling water, long before the rest of America caught on. Sparkling water "was like a HUGE part of my job at every place I've ever worked at," Ryan Rosenberg, who worked as an assistant in TV writers' rooms in the early 2010s, told me over email.

Rosenberg could detail the specific water preferences of every group of writers where he worked. Most drank bottled Perrier, an annoying task because the bottles were heavy and because when supplies ran low, assistants were expected to drop everything to order more.

Then in 2012, LaCroix made Rosenberg's life a lot easier: National Beverage expanded its West Coast distribution and [got onto the websites of office supply stores](#) for easy ordering. That was a decisive moment. From then on, "we ordered LaCroix from OfficeMax and it saved my life," said Rosenberg, now a performer and writer for the comedy troupe Upright Citizens Brigade.

I like to imagine that once LaCroix was easily available, some starry-eyed Midwestern transplants working low-level jobs jumped at the chance to stock a taste of home. But it's possible that, like Rosenberg, they were just grateful to stop lugging around heavy boxes of Perrier bottles.

Either way, LaCroix quickly became the drink of choice for Los Angeles writers. And in March 2015, one of them gave LaCroix its highest-profile endorsement yet. "I was introduced to them at work, the same place where most of us worry about contracting respiratory viruses," [Mary H.K. Choi wrote in the New York Times Magazine](#). Her Los Angeles office stocked LaCroix: "The first time I cracked one open and took a swig, I understood. LaCroix sparkling water is absolutely delicious."

How LaCroix became a lifestyle brand

LaCroix has become more than just a popular sparkling water. It's become part of the story people tell about who they are.

The internet bursts with ways for LaCroix devotees, like sports fans or SoulCycle converts, to declare their loyalty. You can buy a T-shirt for \$25 that says in bold white letters on a black background [LACROIXS OVER BOYS](#). If you want something a little more grown-up, artist Kate Bingaman-Burt sells [a whimsical watercolor of a berry LaCroix can with "Can't Stop Won't Stop"](#) written beneath it, for \$18.

Prasertong, the food blogger, ran across a website selling enamel LaCroix pins after she wrote that the seltzer was "taking over the world." She promptly bought them for herself and her friends.

This is the crux of LaCroix's success: People will spend far more than what a case of its cans cost to tell the world how much they love LaCroix.

For those not quite ready to shell out for a piece of LaCroix-themed art, there's Instagram. LaCroix feels made for the social network, and not just because a filter smooths out the cans' shine into a pop of bright color. A filtered photo of LaCroix can show that you're the kind of person who's both in touch with trends and a little ironic about them, or brag that you're healthily forsaking booze for bubbly water, or simply invite heart-eye-emoji comments from your equally LaCroix-dependent friends.

This is a tiny part of who I am, we're saying every time we share what we're eating or drinking or reading, and hope that someone nods back with a double-tapped heart.

All trends are, in a sense, bubbles

LaCroix has populated its own Instagram with photos taken by its followers — a cascade of pretty, laughing people; stacks of pastel LaCroix cases; and gorgeous, minimalist still lifes with artfully placed seltzer cans.

This creates a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. LaCroix highlights its fashionable users, who make it clear that it's popular to both drink LaCroix and talk about it. And so more fashionable people talk about and Instagram their cans of LaCroix, and more people find out about it, and the cycle continues.

It helps that to most of the country, LaCroix still seems like a recent discovery, and that the low profile of National Beverage makes it feel like they're not endorsing something corporate.

"People know NOTHING about the company that owns it so they don't feel beholden to a big brand like Coke or Pepsi," Aminatou Sow, a digital strategist who described herself as "obsessed" with LaCroix's marketing, told me over Slack. "But National Beverage Co. ... is still the man."

Of course, the love of trendsetters burns hot and fast. The small, self-involved circle of people — many of whom write for a living, or work at startups, or both — who tweet about snacks and then favorite each other's jokes about the snacks, are fickle. All trends are, in a sense, bubbles: We collectively decide to bestow social value on something until we're tired of it and move on.

And the sparkling water industry should know that bubbles pop.

National Beverage's competitors, including Spindrift, which makes seltzer with fruit juice, and Celsius, which makes energy drinks, [have hired away the LaCroix marketing team](#). My sister, a journalist in Los Angeles who was onto LaCroix long before I was, swears that the trend there has already peaked. Prasertong mentioned that while LaCroix is going strong, she's hearing more about Polar sparkling water, which seems to be trying to out-flavor LaCroix with offerings that include orange-vanilla and cranberry-lime.

But at least for the summer, LaCroix is steadily fizzing on. Until we started buying LaCroix this spring, Vox was loyal to another brand of canned seltzer in a few different flavors. I liked that sparkling water just fine, well enough to guzzle at least a can a day, every day, for more than two years. I stared at the empties as they accumulated. It didn't occur to me that anything might be missing from my life, sparkling water-wise.

I like LaCroix just fine, too, but I certainly couldn't pick it out blindfolded on taste alone. Still, as I wrote and edited this article, a small mountain of LaCroix cans — mostly berry and lime — began to accumulate on my desk. I would swear up and down that LaCroix doesn't taste much different from the sparkling water we used to stock, but we're two months into our workplace LaCroix era, and I can't even remember what the old seltzer was called.

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Read the full article here: <http://www.vox.com/2016/6/20/11666314/lacroix-sparkling-water-seltzer>