

These Young Entrepreneurs Are Shaking Up The Food Industry With A Celebrity-Favorite Vegan Smoothie

There's a plant-based replacement for just about everything these days: milk, cheese, even burgers. But until [Maya French](#) developed her line of almond- and coconut-milk-based smoothies called [Koia](#), there wasn't much in the way of a tasty, vegan protein drink. "There were different vitamin blends that weren't easy to digest, so I'd always feel bloated after drinking those, or have an upset stomach," says French, 28. "And there were other plant-based milks, but they didn't have exactly what we were looking for."

Two years after Koia's launch, the drink company makes 11 varieties, flavors like coconut almond and caramel creme. The bottles are brightly colored, [styled perfectly for the Instagram generation](#). Koia is already a popular refreshment for pop stars—it's been spotted recently in the hands of such superstars as Arianna Grande and Charlie Puth—and has expanded nationwide distribution, including to shelves at [Whole Foods](#), [Publix](#) and [Walmart](#).

From this has come a \$8 million-in-sales business, a spot for French on Forbes [30 Under 30 list](#) and \$10 million in funding. "When you invest in early-stage companies, things happen along the way. There are bumps in the road and things fall short. In this case, things never fell short," says Jordan Gaspar, a managing partner at AccelFoods, a venture capital firm that's been one of Koia's investors since 2017. "Koia is considered to be a shining star in the industry."

French started out in 2013 with cofounder Dustin Baker, who is now 37, cold-pressing fruits and vegetables into a juice and selling it at \$5.99 a pop in grocery stores in Chicago, her hometown. They sold the drinks under the brand Raw Nature 5 (each had just five ingredients). But they were costly and time-consuming to make.

Their next idea: Koia, the name a nod to Nicoya, Costa Rica, a town known for its long-lived people. French had been hunting for alternative post-workout shakes after becoming lactose intolerant—and wasn't impressed with what she had found.

Koia's drinks were an immediate improvement over Raw Nature 5. "It was something that was so much easier to produce," French says. "We took everything we knew from juice, like putting the ingredients on the front of the label because it's a quicker decision for the consumer. We just applied it to protein drinks." The drinks contained 18 grams of protein and 4 grams of sugar, and importantly, did not have the mealy taste found in competing beverages. That 5-to-1 ratio of proteins to sugars particularly made Koia stand out. "Ninety percent of protein drinks on the market are over 10 grams of sugar," French says. "And

protein is on-trend. It's not going anywhere anytime soon."

Koia took off thanks to Whole Foods. Convenient access to the grocery giant's Midwest regional office led to a two-store test to see how Koia would sell. The results were so good that, in 2016, the grocer signed Koia to a nationwide distribution deal. That year, Koia relocated its headquarters to Los Angeles so the team could be closer to its contract manufacturer to the south. It's paid off: Koia drove more than \$25,000 in weekly retail sales this summer, becoming Whole Foods' most profitable protein product during the period, according to Nielsen data.

Koia expects retail sales to increase 150% in 2019 with the addition of two new lines. It'll be the first full year of selling the [Fruit Infusions](#) brand, which was launched with three flavors (mango creme, strawberry crème and chocolate banana) in September 2018. (Koia declined to provide sales figures.) And earlier this month, Koia launched a much-anticipated series of drinks that fit into the high-fat, low-carb [keto diet](#) and are sold exclusively at Whole Foods.

"Koia was already a high-performing brand at Whole Foods Market that saw triple-digit growth within our stores," says Amy Moncrief, a global grocery category manager at Whole Foods. "Our customers were looking for high-protein, low-sugar, plant-based options, and their core line of products delivered. When Koia approached our team about a keto-friendly option that was filling a gap in the market, we worked together to create three unique flavor profiles."

Those are caramel creme, cake batter and chocolate fudge brownie. All of which contain 20 grams of saturated fat, 100% of the Food and Drug Administration's suggested daily amount. Not surprisingly, they are marketed as dessert replacements, and Koia is targeting them at women, who struggle to find keto snacks they want. "We anticipate that [the keto] line could account for as much as 25% of our overall sales," says CEO Chris Hunter, who joined Baker and French at Koia in 2015.

Beyond new products, Koia is looking at new places to sell its beverages. It recently started testing how the drinks sell in convenience stores, and early sales were "encouraging," French says.

"Our next plan is to expand our distribution into more conventional chains and eventually convenience chains, because those are where the mass consumers are," French says. Lower-income consumers who tend to shop more often in convenience stores are looking for healthier options too, she says, and Koia is looking for a key partner to test the concept on a larger scale.

"I love reading customer reviews and just knowing we're helping so many people whether they have health problems or they just need a better option," French says. "The fact that I'm here today is just very surprising, but it's been a long journey. We've worked really hard and it's very rare for any brand, so quickly, to grow so large."

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