

Water, Water, Everywhere

Tap or capped? When it comes to health, it boils down to which one's close at hand.

BY MARGARET LOFTUS

We keep one within reach at our desks, tuck them into our kids' lunch boxes, guzzle a couple post-workout, and wouldn't think of leaving the house without at least a 16-ouncer. Bottled water has become entrenched in our life, a healthy soda alternative, a status symbol – even the foodies are getting in on it. As Michael Mascha, publisher of FineWaters.com, the “voice for bottled water connoisseurs,” points out: “People are starting to care about where their water comes from. Sea salt, chocolate, and olive oil have all gone through that transition. Bottled water is the next wine.”

Evian first introduced water in sleek plastic bottles (and has recently rolled out elegant glass ones to compete with Voss and others) to the United States in 1984.

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Fitness-conscious Americans – thirsty for a healthy alternative to coffee, alcohol, and soda – have been lapping it up ever since. Over the past 20 years, consumption of single-serving bottled water grew a thousandfold. Last year, we spent some \$11 billion on mineral, spring, artesian well,

sparkling, and glorified tap waters from far-flung locales; water fortified with oxygen, vitamins, and electrolytes; pomegranate-blackberry and kiwi-strawberry-flavored

Taster's choice: From your body's standpoint, the best bottle is the one most pleasing to your palate.

WELL TRAVELED



We now drink more bottled water than beer or coffee, and at this rate it will likely surpass soda in the next decade.

waters; waters sourced from rain, glaciers, and icebergs; and the latest trend, designer waters such as Bling H₂O, a \$40 “couture” bottled water encrusted with Swarovski crystals and popular with Hollywood starlets. Socially conscious bottled waters are

popping up, such as the Robert Kennedy Jr.-backed Keeper Springs – all profits are donated to environmental causes – and Starbucks’ Ethos Water, which donates a percentage of its proceeds to help ensure children around the world access to clean

drinking water. We now drink more bottled water than beer or coffee, and at this rate it will likely surpass soda in the next decade.

Grab-and-go convenience is undoubtedly a factor, but nearly 60 percent of consumers say they buy bottled water because of perceived health benefits, according to a recent International Bottled Water Association survey. Eschewing tap water doesn’t come cheaply. Besides the environmental toll of producing, transporting, and disposing of 1 billion plastic bottles a week (just in the U.S. alone), the cost per individual in New York City, for example, is estimated by officials to be \$1,400 a year, compared to a mere



49 cents per year for tap water. Can it possibly be worth it?

In terms of health, not so much. The Environmental Protection Agency monitors municipal sources to ensure safety. Bottled water, on the other hand, falls to the Food and Drug Administration, whose guidelines for testing are much less strict, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). “There’s no assurance that water that comes out of a bottle is any cleaner or safer than water that comes out of your tap,” says NRDC spokeswoman Jenny Powers.

Ironically, some 40 percent of bottled water sold in the U.S. comes straight out of taps, albeit through various filtering processes. PepsiCo’s Aquafina, Coca-Cola’s Dasani, and Nestlé’s Pure Life, which together account for 25 percent of the domestic market, come from municipal sources.

Hands-down, bottled water is better for you than sugar-packed sodas. But given the option of tap or bottle, “water is water,” according to Marion Nestle, professor of

nutrition at New York University and author of *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. The perception that bottled water is somehow better for you is marketing hype, she says. While some waters do contain small amounts of minerals that are good for us, Nestle notes that other foods are much better sources.

As for the next generation of bottled waters, which are laced with everything from supplemental minerals to oxygen to a dose

PLAY IT SAFE ABROAD

Choosing between bottled water and what comes out of the tap is a whole other story outside of the U.S. and the rest of the industrialized world, where water purity may be questionable. The World Health Organization estimates that 60 percent of travelers to developing countries become ill abroad thanks to microbes found in drinking water and food. Find out in which countries it’s safe to drink from the tap at the Centers for Disease Control website, www.cdc.gov/travel.

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of vitamins, a study by the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse found that athletes who drank "super-oxygenated" water – touted as providing an extra boost during a workout – received no such advantage. Other so-called enhanced waters, such as Propel Fitness Water, rehydrate athletes and may taste refreshing, but they're no replacement for nutrients.

"Just isolating the vitamins and adding them to sugar water does not make up for the dozens of phytochemicals in a fruit or a vegetable," says Margery Lawrence, chair of the nutrition department at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Connecticut. "They can hydrate and replace some salts, but most of us do fine with water and real food."

Nonetheless, there are two areas in which bottlers' claims do, well, hold water: travel abroad and taste. The U.S. Centers

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TALL DRINKS OF WATER

LOOKING TO SEND A MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE?

HERE ARE MASCHA'S SEVEN NAMES TO WATCH FOR.

- 1. Aquadeco** (Canada) Impressive art deco bottle with a very favorable pH factor.
 - 2. Berg** (Canada) Very soft water sourced from melted icebergs; perfect for ice cubes with spirits.
 - 3. Delicious H2O** (Patagonia) Soft artesian water from ice and rain in a formal glass presentation. Perfect for subtle dishes, especially fish.
 - 4. Malmberg** (Sweden) A 5,300-year-old artesian water from an ancient source on the southeast coast of Sweden. Malmberg has a stunning presence on the table.
 - 5. Solé** (Italy) Clean, crisp, almost sweet water that has been known since Roman times. The sparkling version has medium-sized bubbles. Widely available and versatile with all foods.
 - 6. Veen** (Northern Finland) Spring water with a super-low mineral content in a minimalist bottle. The effervescent version has especially small bubbles.
 - 7. Walnut Grove** (Idaho) Medium-mineral-content, 15,000-year-old water in a glass bottle with a retro-swing top. Great for picnics and other stylish outdoor events.
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for Disease Control recommends drinking bottled water in countries without modernized infrastructures (see inset on page 177). And while water in much of the U.S. tastes fine, taps in some cities have stronger notes of certain minerals or additives, such as sulfur or chlorine.

For his part, Mascha delights in the nuances of specific sources and aquifers – not filtered tap water, but water from the sky, from glaciers, or from deep within the earth. He claims that even the most uneducated palate can distinguish rainwater, a very soft light water, from mineral water that has been buried beneath the earth for the last 10,000 years. He even pairs them with foods, much like a fine wine.

The next time you're serving a Rodney Strong cabernet alongside a grilled rib eye, find a bottle of Vichy Catalan – Mascha's pick for steaks because of its high mineral content (about 2,900 milligrams per liter, compared to 100 to 200 milligrams per liter for the most commonly known waters). Oh, and it tastes good, too. **VL**

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