

# Americans hit the bottle (of water)

By Rene A. Guzman  
San Antonio Express-News

Some carry it as a talisman to good health. Others have to have it because they are thirsty.

Whatever the reason, more consumers are putting a water bottle where their mouth is.

The International Bottled Water Association estimates Americans chugged 5 billion gallons of bottled water last year. The association predicts that in four years bottled water will be second only to pop as America's beverage of choice.

Once the luxury item of pampered celebrities and professional gym rats, bottled water has spilled into the mainstream, bringing with it a flood of choices — artesian water, mineral water, purified water, sparkling water, spring water, even fluoridated water.

So how do you know what you are really buying?

Arthur von Wiesenberger, founder of BottledWaterWeb.com, says the truth is in the labeling.

The Food and Drug Administration regulates labeling laws and has very specific parameters as to what distillers can and cannot claim on their packaging. That means natural spring water must come from a natural spring, mineral water must have its natural minerals, sparkling water must contain the same amount of carbon dioxide it had at its source, etc.

But "if you see 'purified' or 'drinking water' on the label, then it's a good indicator that the water is from a municipal [or city] water source," von Wiesenberger said in a telephone interview from Santa Barbara, Calif.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental organization based in New York, estimates that only 1 percent of bottled water is actually just tap water in a bottle.

Frank Borden, assistant director of the manufactured foods division for the Texas Department of Health in Austin, says most bottled water does in-

deed come from a city water supply.

"I don't drink it myself," he says, noting that he prefers tap water.

## Bottling means big bucks

There is a huge profit potential for domestic bottled water makers — especially if they are getting that water from their own back yard.

"If you're selling water from a processed municipal source it costs less than imported water like Perrier or where water has to be bottled at the source," Von Wiesenberger said. "Transportation of water is one of the most expensive elements [for distributors]. Getting water from different plants is not, yet they charge the same price as spring water."

Jan Gerston, science writer for the Texas Water Resources Institute at Texas A&M University, estimates that bottled water costs about 10,000 times as much as tap water.

"Consumers are willing to pay a high premium for bottled water," Gerston said, "often-times due to the perception that bottled water is safer or of higher quality."

While the Environmental Protection Agency regulates public water supplies, the FDA considers bottled water a food product. That means the FDA requires all bottled water products be fully tested for any microbiological, chemical, physical and radiological contaminants.

According to the National Sanitation Foundation, municipalities and private water utilities most often use chlorine to disinfect tap water, which can leave an aftertaste and lead to the development of chlorination byproducts. In contrast, many bottled water producers use ozone or ultraviolet disinfection, both of which leave no taste or chemical trace.

The National Sanitation Foundation says that while bottled water products do not

have to be 100 percent free of contaminants, any contaminants that may be present in the product must be below the maximum level established by the FDA or state regulators.

Of all the bottled waters on the market, French water importer Evian arguably leads the stream with its chic ads featuring pouting models and other stylish jet-setters surrounded by walls of Evian bottles.

Not to be outdone, the big soda pop conglomerates have also jumped into the bottled water pool. Coca-Cola's campaign for its Dasani water has various young consumers humming '80s tunes with their tiny bottles in tow. And the actor Michael J. Fox recently lent his vocal talents to an animated ad for Aquafina, Pepsi's bottled water. It's hip slogan

sounds like a perfect nod to "Seinfeld" — it's literally about "nothing."

Actually, such ado about bottled nothing goes back some years. The Europeans have considered bottled water as a way of life since the 1700s, Von Wiesenberger says, while the United States didn't catch onto the idea until the 1970s with Perrier.

What is the best water to buy today? Taste is subjective, but Von Wiesenberger believes an import is a nice indulgence every so often. Otherwise, you can get the best bottled water

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