

Latest Gourmet Offering: Tap Water

To burnish their green image, chefs ditch bottles and spiff up faucet

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At Incanto restaurant in San Francisco, every meal begins with a free gift from the restaurant's kitchen. It's a local ingredient that has been filtered, chilled, and, if desired, carbonated. It's tap water.

Restaurants are in a bind these days as "green" pressure mounts to cut down on the plastic and glass waste from the bottled waters that have become popular in recent years. Yet many feel tap water isn't fancy enough. So they're dressing up plain old spigot water by installing expensive triple-filters and "reverse osmosis" systems. They're filling carafes with Japanese charcoal, running water through special stones to add minerals, and serving house-made seltzer.

Grace in Los Angeles, a high-end contemporary American-food restaurant in Los Angeles, and BLD, a casual joint by the same owners, both serve water that has been treated by reverse osmosis, a high-tech filtering process. Poggio in Sausalito triple-filters its own water with a system that cost \$12,000 to install. The restaurant, which sells no bottled water, offers water free, either "naturale" (flat) or "frizzante."

Some places are charging for it. Last October, San Domenico, an upscale Italian spot in New York, began selling \$8 liter bottles of flat and sparkling water. In Beverly Hills, Enoteca Drago now sells similar stuff for \$5. Both use a machine from Italy called Natura, which filters the water with carbon and then subjects it to UV rays to eliminate impurities. To flag its tap water to diners, Restaurant Nora, a Washington organic restaurant, says on the menu that it "filters the water three different ways" to make it "better than any bottled water brand."

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See a sampling of restaurants that are gussying up tap water, along with tasters' comments.



Gabriel Amaya
Melendez (photographer);
Amaryll Schwertner (stylist)

A Sink Special: Tap water at Boulettes Larder in San Francisco is filtered through Japanese bamboo charcoal.

While banning bottles can be good for restaurateurs' green credentials, it isn't always good for the bottom line. Beverages are a profit center for restaurants in general and the markup on water can be particularly generous: Imported brands like San Pellegrino typically wholesale for about \$2 a liter, while restaurants turn around and sell them to customers for \$6 and up.

Mark Pastori, owner of Incanto in San Francisco, says he spent about \$5,000 to install his filter and carbonation systems and another \$1,000 annually for upkeep. He estimates the money he loses from not selling bottled water to be somewhere between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year. But the payoff, he says, comes in the form of customer loyalty and the fact that people feel free to spend their water dollars on more expensive food or wine.

Recent visits by reporters to restaurants in Los Angeles, Washington, the San Francisco Bay Area and New York found that overall, luxe tap water is better-tasting than what comes directly out of the faucet, but not quite as unique as some of our favorite brands of imported mineral water. At Incanto, the carbonated water had fewer bubbles than we're used to, which the owner says is on purpose: He prefers a subtle fizz that doesn't distract from the food.

Of course, taste isn't the only reason people order bottled water: Americans drank 8.3 billion gallons of the stuff in 2006, up nearly 10% from the prior year. This is in part because many believe it to be healthier than tap, according to studies conducted by the American Water Works Association Research Foundation, a Denver-based organization that studies public water systems.

But that isn't the case, some experts say. "A common misconception is that bottled water is better than tap water. All drinking water has to meet the same standard," says Dale Kemery, a spokesman for the Environmental Protection Agency.



Nancy Bundt

Fresh From the Faucet: Pitchers of filtered tap water at Chez Pansise in Berkeley, Calif., where owner Alice Waters recently banned bottled water.

"Bottled water is about providing a choice," says Stephen Kay, spokesman for the International Bottled Water Association, a trade group.

Upscale faucet water is particularly popular in the San Francisco Bay Area, arguably the cradle of the sustainable-food movement. In addition to Incanto and Poggio, specialty food store Boulettes Larder serves tap water poured over pieces of Japanese charcoal, which act as a filter. Coi in San Francisco filters its own water and uses it for \$6 "Hydrosols" drinks made of water and aromatics that taste like cucumber or rose. Replacing expensive bottled water with free tap water is a fairly small movement, for the obvious reason that most restaurants don't want to lose a revenue

source. Nonetheless, in recent weeks advocacy groups have begun latching on to the restaurant industry's interest in tap water.

On March 22, the United Nation's World Water Day, about 300 New York restaurants, including Aquavit and Babbo, participated in a fund-raising event for Unicef in which they sold tap water for \$1 a pitcher. The purpose, says Stevan Miller of the U.S. Fund for Unicef, was to both raise money and awareness of the importance of clean and accessible water.

One big promoter of the movement is Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley. Last summer, she stopped selling \$4.75 bottles of Fiuggi flat water from central Italy and instead poured customers fresh glasses of filtered municipal H₂O. Three weeks ago, she declared the restaurant would go completely bottled-water free. Now, a carbonation machine is being installed and soon, homemade fizzy water will be served in imported French glass carafes.

But it might take some time before diners catch on. Incanto trains waiters to begin each meal by telling customers about the free sparkling or flat tap water -- but patrons don't always believe it's free. Mr. Pastori says about 5% of customers "are so conditioned that they are having something sold to them that they snap, 'I'll just have the tap.' "

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