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**BOTTLED
WATER
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WATER ARE YOU
WILLING TO
DRINK TO SAVE
THE PLANET?**
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IT'S SO NOT COOL

Chi-chi restaurants are now banning bottled water. How did the ubiquitous accessory become the latest environmental sin?

BY ANNE KINGSTON

When Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., in 1971, it was at the vanguard of a “think globally, eat locally” gastronomic uprising. Now, in banning bottled water, the restaurant is at the forefront of another insurgency. Finally cluing in to the fact that importing bottled water from Italy is a flagrant violation of its mantra, Chez Panisse stopped serving Fiuggi still water last summer. It now serves free, filtered tap water. When it gets a carbonator up and running in the next week that will add fizz to tap water, the restaurant will stop selling sparkling Acqua Minerale San Benedetto.

The culinary mecca joins a growing number of restaurants willing to forgo 300 percent-plus markups on bottled water in return for increased customer loyalty. Mike Kossarienzi, Chez Panisse’s general manager, says the ecological damage associated with bottling water spurred them to action. “It’s some-

TOTING A NATURAL RESOURCE THAT

thing we wanted to do for a while,” he says. “Finally I thought, ‘This is silly: we have this great water that comes out of our tap.’ This is something we really think we need to do. We feel it is the right thing to do.”

Increasingly, it’s the fashionable thing to do. For years, David Suzuki and his brethren have railed against the environmental evils of bottled water—the pollution generated and energy expended in its production and shipping, the recyclable plastic bottles that rarely get recycled. More recently, church groups, including the United Church of Canada, have advocated members boycott the product on the moral grounds that water is a basic human right, not a commodity to be sold for profit. The edict was met by the wider public with much eye-rolling. After all, bottled water is entrenched as an icon of vitality, health, mobility and safety. No amount of righteous talk was about to wean people away.

Recently, however, the return-to-the-tap crusade has acquired momentum from the gourmands who once extolled bottled water’s “volcanic temperament” and “mouth feel.” Even the French, who introduced portable Vittel water in plastic bottles in 1968, are saying “non” to Evian, with bottled water sales in decline since 2003.

The notion that a bottled-water backlash could gain velocity might seem absurd given worldwide consumption of 167.8 billion litres in 2005. Canadians spent \$652.7 million on bottled water that year, consuming 1.9 bil-

lion litres, 60 litres per capita, with sales up 20 per cent last year. Bottled water became a status signifier—Cameron Diaz favoured Penta, Madonna preferred Voss Artesian Water. Still, we've seen a prop made glamorous by movie stars losing cachet and acquiring stigma before—the cigarette, for one, the Hummer for another. If early indications of backlash are any sign, what was once a fashion accessory is becoming a fashion crime.

The obvious driving force is green's new vogue. Now that we're shopping to save The Planet, toting a natural resource that costs more than gasoline in a plastic bottle destined to clog a landfill for a thousand years doesn't exactly telegraph eco-cred. Once-stylish water bars with "water sommeliers," like the one at Epic in Toronto's Royal York Hotel offering 25 international brands, suddenly seem passé, out of touch. Earlier this year, *Times* of London food critic Giles Coren announced his new zero-tolerance toward bottled water on his blog. Drinking it, he wrote, signals a gauche lack of global awareness: "The vanity of it! While half the world

Kennedy Restaurant, says he sources locally bottled water in glass bottles. "Why are we bringing in water from Fiji in a nation that's got more water than any other nation in the world?" he asks. "It's air freight, it's contributing carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, it's all those things that if you're environmentally conscious in the year 2007 you totally question." He sells Gaia water bottled in Cal-

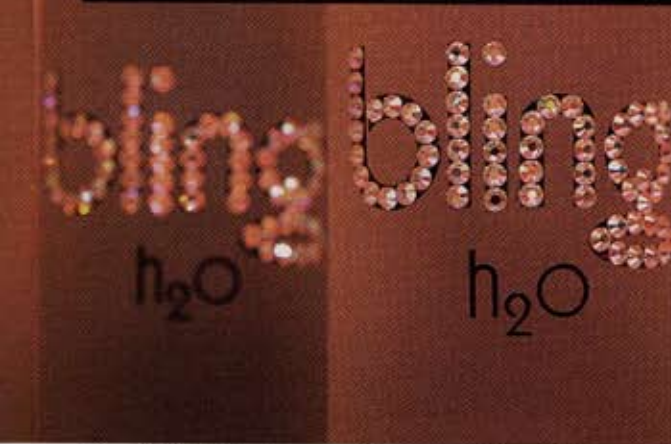
Even self-proclaimed "water connoisseurs" are extolling the virtues of tap water. The noted Boston-based food writer Corby Kummer, known for his appreciation of aquatic nuances (he has proclaimed a preference for "water from the volcanic region between Rome and Naples"), says "it's time to rediscover municipal water." Unless he wants sparkling water, Kummer always asks for tap in restaura-



STAYS MORE THAN GASOLINE IN A BOTTLE DESTINED

TO CLOG A LANDFILL DOESN'T EXACTLY TELEGRAPH ECO-CRED

BLING H₂O (left), complete with Swarovski crystals; Gwen Stefani totes her bottle



dies of thirst or puts up with water you wouldn't piss in, or already have, we have invested years and years, and vast amounts of money, into an ingenious system which cleanses water of all of the nasties that most other humans and animals have always had to put up with, and delivers it, dirt cheap, to our homes and workplaces in pipes, which we can access with a tap."

A tap-water snobbery is emerging. Even restaurateurs unwilling to forfeit bottled-water revenue boast of drinking from the tap at home. "On the domestic front I refuse to buy it," says Toronto chef Mark McEwan, who operates the popular North 44 and Bymark. "The waste factor with these plastic bottles just makes me crazy." Jamie Kennedy, who runs several Toronto hot spots including Jamie

edon, Ont. The company delivers and picks up the bottles for recycling, he says. "We're not creating any bottle waste, which is fantastic. And it's delicious." Yet Kennedy drinks unfiltered tap water. "I'm cool with it," he says. "It's pretty darn good."

Indeed, born-again tap-water aficionados argue it tastes better than many bottled offerings. Kossa-Rienzi says Chez Panisse explored serving locally produced bottled waters but found none more palatable than tap. Last year, officials in Cleveland took offence when Fiji Water crowed in ads that its product was free of pollutants and "purified by island trade winds" with the punchline: "The label says Fiji because it's not bottled in Cleveland." A local TV show conducted blind taste tests to find the subjects preferred local tap water.

rants. "I've long made it a point of pride as a sort of a counter-snobbish order," he says. "Now I'm noticing other people coming to the same conclusion."

Tap-water filtration regimes are a new bragging point. Poggio in Sausalito, Calif., triple-filters its tap water with a system that cost US\$12,000. Five-month-old Susanna Foo Gourmet Kitchen in Radnor, Pa., spent US\$50,000 on its high-tech filtration device. Then there are the purists. At organic Restaurant Nora in Washington, they use salt, then carbon, then paper to excise impurities. In an arresting development signalling tap water's new value, the Beverly Hills restaurant Entoteca has started charging US\$8 for a litre of flat or sparkling water that flows straight from the filtered spigot. Kummer hints at the next direction tap-water snootiness will take with talk of his goal to "build a memory bank of municipal water tastes from around the country and around the world." He admits the taste of tap water isn't always pleasing. "Sometimes, because of the way it's treated, it will taste either neutral, slightly chlorinated, and chemically or flat and bitter." But he finds it superior to bottled water sourced from municipal supplies. "That's not just filtered tap water," he says, "it's filtered tap water that they add proprietary minerals to. It tastes completely artificial."

Filtered tap water accounts for more than one-quarter of bottled water consumed by

Canadians, according to the Bottled Water Association of Canada, an industry trade group. Coca-Cola uses municipal water from Calgary and Brampton, Ont., for its Dasani brand. The company filters the water five times to remove chemicals, odours and bacteria, and adds minerals for water billed "pure as water can get." Pepsi trucks in municipal water from Vancouver or Mississauga, Ont., for its Aquafina, which is marketed as "the purest of waters." Such claims justify massive markups. A litre (33.8 ounces) of tap water in Canada costs taxpayers an average of less than one-tenth of a cent, according to Toronto's city government. The markup on a litre of bottled water selling for \$2.50, then, is 3,000 times. Small wonder Donald Trump entered the market with his "no-sodium" Trump Ice. As has Sylvester Stallone, as an investor in a bottler that produces Sly Pure Glacier Water purportedly from a 10,000-year-old carbon glacier at Mount Rainier, Wash. The industry, always ripe for Evian-is-naive-spelled-backwards satire, provides continual fodder with K9, the "first flavoured, vitamin fortified water for dogs," and the 2006 launch of US\$38 Bling H₂O, bottled in Tennessee and marketed as the "Cristal of bottled water" in "limited edition, corked, 750 ml recyclable frosted glass bottles, exquisitely handcrafted with Swarovski crystals." Equally preposterous are water's vaunted magical properties: Propel Fitness Water promises to pump up energy, eVamor to "restore equilibrium," and Jana Skinny Water to help shed excess pounds.

Rejection of the industry's grandiose promises—and high prices—has fuelled the return to the tap in France, the world's second largest consumer of bottled water after Italy. That has been attributed to the efficacy of advertising campaigns launched by municipal water companies that extol the benefits, lower cost and environmental virtues of tap water. (In Paris, tap water costs less than a third of a European cent per litre. Groupe Neptune's Cristaline, a popular brand, sells for 15 European cents a litre, while Danone's Evian costs about 60 European cents a litre.) Earlier this year, Groupe Neptune fought back with billboards featuring a photograph of a white toilet marked with a big red "X." "I don't drink the water I use to flush," the posters read. "I drink Cristaline."

Such gross-out imagery—abetted by reports of ecological contamination and corrupt filtration like that in Walkerton, Ont., that caused 2,300 to fall ill and seven to die in 2000—transformed bottle water from a luxury only the rich could afford to a perceived necessity the mass market couldn't afford not to buy. As a

result, bottled water's chic is diminishing. No longer does it offer the comfort of belonging to a private club drinking from an exclusive water supply. Indeed, Edmonton-based Earth Water, a national bottler of spring and osmosis water, forges an explicit connection between bottled-water consumption in affluent nations and the fragility of water supply in developing nations: it donates net profits to the United Nations Refugee Agency, which

tracks the exposure of Canadians to pollutants, doesn't buy industry claims. "There's a misconception that bottled water is safer, which is complete nonsense," he says. "Toronto's tap water has to meet standards for 160 contaminants; bottled water has standards for less than a half-dozen. And 650 bacterial tests are done monthly of Toronto water. The extent to which bottled water is tested for bacteria is barely known."

THE WASTE factor is huge: An estimated 88 per cent of water bottles are not recycled



'THERE'S MOUNTING EVIDENCE THAT THESE CONTAINERS ARE LEAKING'

runs water-aid programs.

The alleged health and beauty benefits that made bottled water the preferred constant-hydration libation of celebrities (who can forget that widely circulated photo of Princess Di exiting the gym with her Evian?) are under new scrutiny. The industry remains steadfast in its claims that bottled water is cleaner and more rigorously tested than tap water. Elizabeth Griswald, a spokesperson for the Canadian Bottled Water Association, says bottled water is subject to three tiers of regulation—Ottawa monitors it under the Food and Drug Act; the provinces approve the sourcing of water; the industry also regulates itself. Tap water, she points out, is regulated only as a utility by the provinces with no consistent national standards. Unlike tap water that can flow through antiquated pipes, bottled water is produced in clean facilities and packaged in sterile bottles, she says. Still, the manufacturing process itself can contaminate. In 2004, Coca-Cola Co. recalled its entire Dasani line of bottled water from the British market after levels of bromate, a potentially harmful chemical, were found to exceed legal standards. In March, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency warned the public not to consume imported Jermuk Classic brand Natural Sparkling Mineral Water because it contained excessive levels of arsenic.

Rick Smith, executive director of Toronto-based Environmental Defence, an agency

Smith foresees a looming crisis. "Bottled water is a not only a complete disaster for the environment but potentially for human health," he says. His greatest criticism lies with the polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottle, the industry's real product. "The production of one kilogram of PET requires 17.5 kilograms of water and results in air pollution emissions of over half a dozen significant pollutants," Smith says. "In other words, the water required to create one plastic water bottle is significantly more than that bottle will contain." Then there is the waste factor. An estimated 88 per cent of water bottles are not recycled. According to the Environment and Plastics Industry Council, Canadians sent 65,000 tonnes of PET beverage containers, many of them water bottles, to landfill or incineration in 2002.

The volatility of PET bottles, which should never be refilled due to risks of leaching and bacterial growth, remains uncertain. Last year, William Shotyk, a Canadian scientist working at the University of Heidelberg, released a study of 132 brands of bottled water in PET bottles stored for six months, and found that significant levels of antimony, a toxic chemical used in the bottle's production, had leached into the water. Shotyk, who has vowed never to drink bottled water again, is now studying the bottles over a longer term, given the lag times that can occur between bottling, shipping, purchase and consump-

tion. The Canadian Bottled Water Association counters that the levels don't pose a risk to humans. "Technically bottled water will not go bad if you properly store it," Griswald says, though she admits algae will build up if it's left in sunlight in high heat.

Smith predicts concern about internal pollution will increase as more people are tested for chemical contamination. "There's mounting evidence that these containers are leaching toxins into the beverages we're drinking

Smith predicts. On March 12, a billion-dollar class action suit was filed in Los Angeles against five leading manufacturers of baby bottles containing Bisphenol-A, a toxin found in hard plastic and linked to early-onset puberty, declining sperm counts and the huge increase in breast and prostate cancer. It is the first such suit to be brought against the industry. "What we are witnessing is the beginning of a tobacco-style fight," says Smith.

Already signs point to water awareness becoming the next trendy topic. The recently published *Thirst: Fighting the Corporate Theft of our Water* by Alan Snitow, Deborah Kaufman and Michael Fox, chronicles the upsurge of international grassroots protest against groundwater depletion and the privatization of water by multinational bottlers. The community of Wisconsin Dells, Wis., for instance, waged a successful battle against Swiss-based Nestlé after the conglomerate announced plans to set up a Perrier bottling plant in the area.

Thirst's authors see a bottled-water backlash as crucial to preserving a public water supply. The campaign to wean North America from the bottle to the tap has been "a driving force in shifting cultural attitudes," they write, noting widespread bottled-water con-



ING TOXINS INTO THE BEVERAGES

WE'RE DRINKING AND OUR CHILDREN ARE DRINKING'



Je ne bois pas
l'eau que j'utilise.



Je choisis Cristalaine.

and our children are drinking and there are easy substitutes available," he says. The Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S. commenced a massive study in 2000. This year, Statistics Canada begins testing 5,000 Canadians for a wide range of contaminants. Early data from the U.S. is troubling, Smith says. "There's empirical evidence that these plastic ingredients are now in the bodies of every citizen," he says. "I am quite sure that a few years from now we will look back at these toxins and shake our heads and wonder, 'What the heck were we thinking?'"

Litigation against plastic manufacturers will rival that against cigarette companies,

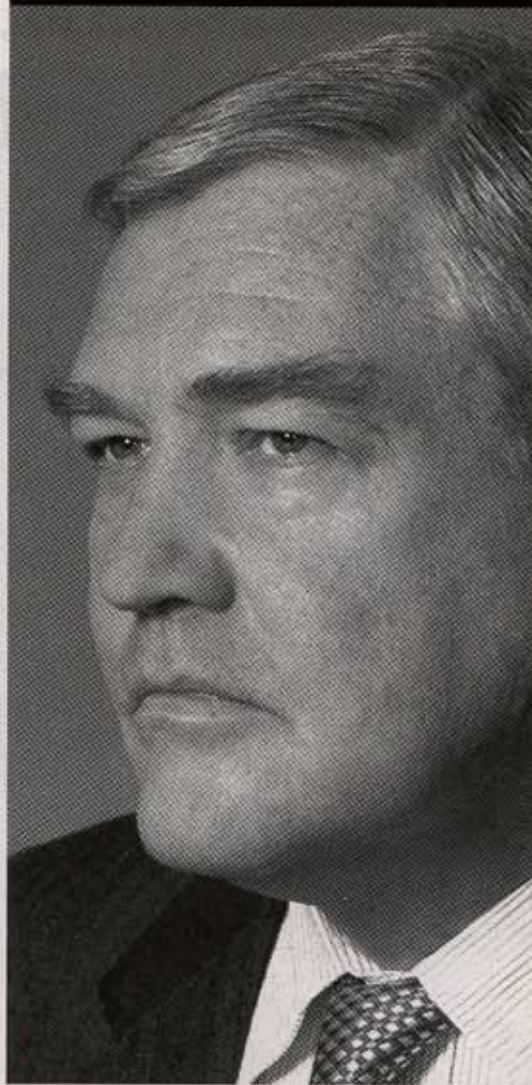
sumption reinforces the perception that water is a grab-and-go consumer product and that the water supply is not safe or well managed: "Local critics are beginning to see the industry as a harbinger of wider threats, including the commodification of water, the export of water in bulk, and the end of the keystone idea of affordable water as a public trust and human right." Paying grossly inflated prices for the natural resource, they contend, paves the way: "If we as individuals get used to paying whatever price the market will bear for bottled water as a product, will we slowly give up the collective commitment to clean, affordable water as a public service that must be guaranteed by government?"

Already, though, there are signs government wants in on the trend. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom has just announced plans to copy *Chez Panisse* and provide carbonated filtered tap water at City Hall. *Chez Panisse's* patrons are now asking where they can buy their own carbonators, says Kossa-Rienzi. "It's definitely sparked a new consciousness." M



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