



Bottled water is trendy, but is it worth the price?

Words Louise Tickle

SPENDING MONEY LIKE WATER

“A bottle of Evian must travel over 750 petrol-guzzling miles until it lands on a supermarket shelf in the Northwest.”

The British palate is not renowned for its discernment and our national cuisine has never had much of a reputation for delicacy or sophistication. A smaller proportion of our disposable income is spent on grocery shopping than is the case in much of the rest of Europe and we are roundly derided by our continental cousins for requiring food to be cheap, fast and microwavable.

In one area of consumption, however, we are fast becoming a nation of decadents, connoisseurs, gourmets even, demonstrating an astonishing level of profligacy in pursuit of the perfect glass of... water.

Supermarket shelves are stacked high with bottled waters from across the country and around the world; water that has been filtered through ancient rocks into groundwater aquifers, water that has burbled its way down mountain springs and water bottled straight from a tap, in much the same way as anybody could at home. Any product claiming to be ‘mineral water’ is highly regulated, but ‘natural spring water’ is subject to less stringent testing. Tap water that is sold on in bottles as ‘table water’ will already conform to strict, frequently monitored EU and UK standards.

What all these types of bottled water have in common is the fact that they cost vastly more than standard tap water. Their other similarity is that all have benefited from canny marketing campaigns that have seen their UK market value reach £1.2 billion in 2003 with an increase in consumption of nearly 20% by volume on 2002.

The bottled water companies do not make overt claims that their water has health benefits that tap water does not. Indeed they are careful not to draw comparisons. Instead they promote the ‘purity’ of the source and the health and lifestyle benefits of drinking more water. With advertising campaigns showing shiny happy people bouncing up mountains, zooming down ski slopes, and swigging the stuff down in the company of their improbably beautiful metropolitan friends, it becomes difficult to see ordinary tap water hitting quite the same spot.

But consider that tap water is available across the Northwest at less than a tenth of a penny per litre. Buy even Sainsbury’s plainest table water and it will cost 288 times as much. Choose a fancier brand, say the elegant frosted glass bottle containing Royal Deeside Natural Spring Water and you will pay 1,466 times more. Royal Deeside is drawn from the springs of the Balmoral Estate and from an aesthetic viewpoint, it certainly comes in a classier bottle than Sainsbury’s own-brand.

Aesthetics and royal connections aside, the question remains; for a nation that prioritises cheapness in its foodstuffs and buys from supermarkets that trumpet good value, why are we drinking bottled water in such vast quantities and why are we prepared to pay so much for it?

Part of the answer appears to be lifestyle. In a straw poll of bottled water enthusiasts, the fact that this product is easily available, healthy and calorie free means it is a popular choice for people managing busy lives on the run. Aspirational factors were also cited, with it now being seen as unfashionable and even a bit stingy to offer tap water rather than handing a stylishly designed - and clearly expensive - bottle of mineral water to guests who are over for dinner. Finally, there is a taste argument. In rare cases tap water can taste chlorinated, and in certain areas, has been rumoured to contain traces of the contraceptive pill and other pharmaceutical nasties.

But consumers are accustomed to seeing past the marketing spin they are fed by big business and do not generally appreciate being taken for a mug at the same time as being stung for their cash. Do we think sucking on a ‘sport-nipple’ will make us fitter? Or that our friends will like us more if we give them water in a good looking bottle?

Until the recent ‘Dasani’ fiasco, it could have been argued that bottled water had bucked the cynicism of increasingly savvy consumers and had somehow added collective good sense, but now it seems that the tide may be turning.

Unsurprisingly, customers took exception when Coca Cola took potable water straight from the tap, ‘purified’ it and in the process contaminated the renamed (and re-priced) Dasani with excess levels of a carcinogen. Coca Cola had to remove Dasani from the shelf, bottled water producers went into crisis mode and there was much talk of the gloss having come off the industry. Mass media coverage of the scandal appears to have been a wake up call to the bottled water buying public.

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Vital as they are to public health and promoting higher consumption of water, however, the taste and safety arguments are not the only ones to consider. The environmental impacts of our consumption of bottled water are significant. The more of it we want, the more plastic bottles must be driven around the world until they get to where we buy them.

Anna Watson, a recycling expert at Friends of the Earth (FoE), points out that globally 1.5 millions tonnes of plastic is used by the bottled water industry. Most of this will never be recycled.

“Ninety billion litres of bottled water are drunk each year and a quarter of that is consumed outside its country of origin,” she explains. “Clearly that has to be transported and that will burn fossil fuels.” No data currently exists for ‘water miles’ travelled by brands sold in the UK, but take any brand in the soft drinks aisle of a central Manchester supermarket and it’s easy enough to work it out.

A bottle of Evian will travel 754 land miles from its source until it lands on that supermarket shelf. Closer to home, water from Armathwaite in Cumbria which goes into several different brands including Aqua Pura, Eden Falls and Cumbrian Natural Mineral Water, will complete a journey of 106 miles from the Lake District to arrive next to its better travelled neighbours from Badoit, San Pellegrino and Perrier.

Each journey is taken on petrol-guzzling lorries along traffic-clogged motorways and water is not a light product to transport, meaning that

“Everyone has a choice and what you drink is a matter of personal choice - and of course you can spend

fuel requirements are relatively high. By contrast, United Utilities’ finest H₂O generally travels by gravity along aqueducts and through pipe networks with little fuel required to get it from source to tap.

Water miles aside, manufacturing and disposal of plastic bottles has a hefty environmental footprint. Plastics take a long time to degrade naturally and the current disposal options are mainly burning or burial.

“Burning plastics is essentially the same thing as burning fossil fuels,” Anna Watson at FoE points out, “and there is another problem with that because plastic bottles often have chemicals added in their manufacture to give them rigidity and flexibility - when those are burned,

they can give off dioxins which are known to be dangerous.”

The other option is to bury bottles in landfill sites. But according to Claire Visco of Sustainability Northwest, the region has enough landfill sites to last only about another five years. Despite the European Landfill Directive that requires local authorities to move away from landfill, environmental groups say that the current landfill tax of just £15 per tonne is not a sufficient incentive to persuade councils to develop better recycling facilities. Around 80% of our waste still ends up on the dump. As consumption of bottled water continues to rise, a growing number of plastic empties will continue to make their way to the local tip.

Encouraging people to sort their waste and lobby the council for better recycling services is the message from campaign group Wastewatch, whose marketing officer Richard Newson explains that the broken triangle displayed on the bottom of a plastic bottle only indicates that it is potentially recyclable - action has to be taken to make that happen.

“In the hierarchy of waste, reusing something is far more efficient than recycling it,” he says. “The good news is that environmental impact assessments have shown that recycling plastic bottles is a good idea. So any contribution

EU and UK law means that United Utilities in the Northwest does 360,000 separate tests of the water supply across the region every year. Testing is audited by the Drinking Water Inspectorate and all results are publicly available. If any sample fails to meet stringent statutory standards, water companies must investigate the cause, provide an explanation and address the problem. Investment in the quality of the Northwest’s drinking water runs into billions of pounds since privatisation and compliance with quality standards has risen from 95% in 1991 to 99.81% in 2003.

The professionals in charge of supplying and regulating the public water supply are careful not to criticise the principle of consumer choice. But it is clear from their collectively incredulous response that they are utterly bewildered by the fact that so many people pay so much more for a product that is essentially the same as tap water.

Frank White, head of drinking water quality at United Utilities, acknowledges that matters of taste are up to each individual. “Everyone has a choice and what you drink is a matter of personal choice - and of course you can spend a thousand times the price of a glass of water from the tap if you want to,” he says with a chuckle.

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the public can make is a good one and will save the resources used in making plastic from virgin fossil fuels.”

There are, however, only so many ways to reuse a plastic water bottle. So until ordinary consumers of bottled water suddenly transform en masse into a vociferous lobby for recycling plastic bottles - which seems unlikely - the only good environmental option seems to be that we must drink less of the water that goes into them.

Making the decision to choose tap water is underpinned by rigorous regulation of the water industry that supplies it.

The chlorine added to water might occasionally give off a slight whiff, he explains, but this is easy to remove. “If people don’t like it, they can just draw some water off, leave it standing overnight and any chlorine traces will evaporate, or more modern perhaps is to use a water filter.”

It doesn’t seem an onerous undertaking, so unless image and status matter more than price and the planet, it might just be time to turn the tap back on. **S**

The tap water challenge

To find out whether people could tell the difference between bottled water and what comes out of the tap, we convened a panel of testers eager to live it up at a water tasting session held at the Lowry Hotel in Salford.

On the panel were David Ward, The Guardian’s north of England correspondent; Claire Ebury of issues-led consultancy Creative Concern; Iain Taylor and Caroline Riley of the Mersey Basin Campaign; and Source editor, Matthew Sutcliffe.

The tap water, costing 0.095p/litre (Cumbria) was up against Sainsbury’s Still Spring Water, 26p/litre, (Pennines), Wasdale Springs, 69p/litre (Cumbria), Willow Natural Spring Water, 86p/litre (Cumbria), Royal Deeside Natural Spring Water, £1.32/litre (Aberdeenshire), and Hildon Natural Mineral Water £1.32/litre (Hampshire).

Panellists were asked to state which sample tasted best, which tasted worst, and which was tap water.

After much swirling of glasses and expert sniffing, results were split. Only two testers correctly identified the tap water, but one of these said it was the best tasting of all the samples.

Another person felt that the tap water tasted worst, but three other mineral waters also got the thumbs down. The most expensive, Royal Deeside, fared worst when two testers said it was their least favourite.



The tasters (L-R): Iain Taylor, David Ward, Louise Tickle and Clare Ebury.

The winning water was mid-priced Wasdale Springs with three votes in the ‘best tasting’ category and none in the ‘worst tasting’. Even so, one panellist thought he could detect a rough aftertaste of river water, and preferred Willow with its perky, fresh and invigorating nose. All testers agreed that they were stretching to the utmost their tastebuds’ capacities to distinguish any difference whatsoever and there was general consensus that one sample tasted remarkably similar to another.

	Best tasting	Worst tasting	Tap water?
Wasdale Springs	3		2
Willow	1	1	
Sainsbury’s Still Spring Water		1	1
United Utilities tap water	1	1	2
Royal Deeside Spring Water		2	
Hildon Natural Mineral Water			

60-second expert

- The value of the UK bottled water market was £1.2 billion in 2003 and the volume of water consumed was up by 18% on 2002.

- Drink a litre of United Utilities tap water and you will pay less than a tenth of a penny for the pleasure; buy a bottle of Royal Deeside Spring Water, and at a cost of £1.32 per litre, you will pay 1,466 times as much.

- Ninety billion litres of bottled water are consumed globally each year and a quarter of that is bought outside its country of origin.

- A bottle of Evian will travel a minimum of 754 land-miles on a gas-guzzling lorry to reach the soft drinks aisle of a supermarket in central Manchester; closer to home, Cumbrian Natural Mineral Water will travel 106 miles, again by lorry, to sit on the same supermarket shelf. Tap water will generally travel by gravity alone to reach your kitchen.

- Plastic water bottles, even though they are recyclable, will usually end up in landfill, or will be burnt, emitting dangerous dioxins into the atmosphere.

- Tap water is stringently regulated by EU directives and UK legislation and is subject to rigorous testing, with United Utilities alone carrying out 360,000 random tests per year on tap water throughout the region.

- The compliance levels of tap water in the Northwest have risen from 95% in 1991 to 99.81% in 2003.

