

Tap water: It's what you drink

Tali Arbel

Tap water is making a comeback.

With bottled water - a recommended 64 ounces, or 1.9 liters per day - costing hundreds to thousands of dollars a year, depending on the brand, more Americans are choosing to drink water straight from the faucet.

The sour economy may be accomplishing what environmentalists have been trying to do for years - wean people off the disposable plastic bottles of water that have been sold as stylish, portable, healthier and safer than water from the tap.

Heather Kennedy, 33, an office administrator from Austin, Texas, said she used to drink a lot of bottled water but now tries to drink only tap water.

"It is not a better or healthier product than the water that comes out of my tap," she said in an e-mail message. "It is absurd to pay so much extra for it."

Measured in 700-milliliter, or 24-ounce, bottles of Poland Spring, a daily intake of water would cost \$4.41, based on prices at a CVS drugstore in New York. Or \$6.36 in 20-ounce bottles of Dasani. In half-liters of Evian, it would be \$6.76.

Even a 24-pack of half-liter bottles at Costco Wholesale, a bargain at \$6.97, would be consumed by one person in six days. That is more than \$400 a year.

But water from the tap? A little more than 0.001 cent for a one-day supply of water, based on averages from an American Water Works Association survey - just about 51 cents a year.

U.S. consumers spent \$16.8 billion on bottled water in 2007, according to the trade publication Beverage Digest. That's up 12 percent from the year before - but it's the slowest growth rate since the early 1990s, said the publisher, John Sicher.

Coca-Cola Enterprises, which bottles Dasani, recently cut its business outlook for the current quarter, saying the weak North American economy was hurting sales of bottled water and soda - especially the 20-ounce single-serving sizes sold at gasoline stations.

"They're not walking in and spending a dollar plus for a 20-ounce bottle of water," said William Pecoriello, a beverage analyst at Morgan Stanley. Flavored and "enhanced" waters like vitamin drinks are also eating into the market share for plain bottled water.

Pecoriello said environmental concerns were also a factor, driven by campaigns against the use of oil in making and transporting the bottles, the waste they create and the notion of paying for what is essentially free.

The Tappening project, which promotes U.S. tap water as clean, safe and more environmentally friendly than bottled water, began a new ad campaign in May. The group has also sold more than 200,000 reusable bottles made of hard plastic and stainless steel since last November.

Linda Schiffman, 56, a recent retiree from Lexington, Massachusetts, bought two metal bottles at \$14.50 each for herself and her daughter from Corporate Accountability, a consumer advocacy group, after she swore off buying cases of bottled water from Costco.

"I've been doing a lot of cost-cutting since I retired," said Schiffman, a former school guidance counselor. "Additionally, I started feeling like this was a big waste environmentally."

Aware of those concerns, some bottled water makers are trying to address the issue.

Nestlé says all its half-liter bottles now come in an "eco-shape" that contains 30 percent less plastic than the average bottle, and it has pared back other packaging. PepsiCo and Coca-Cola have also cut down on the amount of plastic used in their bottles.

While it is difficult to track rates of tap water use, sales of faucet accessories are booming.

Brita tap water purification products made by Clorox reported double-digit growth in volume and sales in May and have had three straight quarters of strong growth.

Robin Jaeger of Needham, Massachusetts, fills the reusable bottles of her children with water from the home's faucet. But she does not use water straight from the tap.

"My kids have come to the conclusion that any water that's not filtered doesn't taste good," she said.

Maintaining her reverse-osmosis filter system costs about \$200 every 18 months - still less expensive than buying by the bottle.

Kennedy, the tap convert from Texas, has a filter built into her refrigerator. She also recently bought a reusable aluminum bottle made by Sigg, a Swiss company that has stopped selling its \$19.99 metal bottles from its Web site, saying demand has swamped its supply.

While Brita is the dominant player in water filtration, according to a Deutsche Bank analyst, Bill Schmitz, sales of Proctor and Gamble's Pur water filtration systems are also growing. Sales from the Pur line have increased almost every month since mid-2007, said Bruce Letz, the brand manager. He declined to give sales figures but said "the water filtration category is expanding very rapidly."

Schmitz said, "There's a backlash against the plastic water bottle."

Cities and businesses, big to small, have also gotten in on the action.

Marriott International distributed free refillable water bottles and coffee mugs to the 3,500 employees at its corporate offices in Bethesda, Maryland, and installed multiple water filters on every floor. The Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, California, got rid of bottled still water in the summer of 2006 and started carbonating its own water in early 2007.

"Does it make sense to bottle water in Italy, trek it to a port, ship it all the way over here, then trek it to our restaurant?" said the general manager of Chez Panisse, Mike Kossa-Rienzi.

"We were going through 25,000 bottles a year," he said, adding, "Someone has to end up recycling them."

Many cities, including New York, have enacted pro-tap campaigns, and some have stopped providing disposable water bottles for government employees.

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 19/6/2008.