

Bottled Water Is Silly — But So Is Banning It

By Charles Fishman

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To Ban or Not to Ban?

I remember the moment when the silliness of bottled water became vividly clear to me. I was standing in the factory in San Pellegrino, Italy, at the foot of the Italian Alps, where San Pellegrino water is sealed in those shapely green bottles.

Leave aside that the glass bottles weigh more than the water they contain, or the journey those bottles of water have to make, by truck and ship and truck again, to land on a grocery shelf or café table in Manhattan or St. Louis.

The bottles themselves have to be washed before being filled. And as Pellegrino's wizened factory operations manager explained, they wash the bottles with...Pellegrino water. Before filling them with Pellegrino water.

Of course they do.

But then the silliness took a leap. Where, I asked, do the bubbles in Pellegrino come from? The plant manager's eyes lit up. Pellegrino water comes out of the ground uncarbonated, in fact. Pellegrino has another spring to the south in central Italy that is naturally carbonated. The company harvests the carbon dioxide from that spring, purifies it, compresses it, trucks it north to Pellegrino, and injects it into the water as part of the bottling process.

No matter how far your Pellegrino water has traveled to get to you, the dancing Italian bubbles that make it so delightful have traveled just a little farther.

San Pellegrino, which is now owned by the conglomerate Nestlé, has a storied history — as a town, as a spring, as a water — but let's be clear: It's a product no one needs. It's refreshing, it's appealing, but it is a pure indulgence. Whether you live in Milan, just down the road, or Mexico City, where Pellegrino is on the shelves at Wal-Mart. And I say that as someone whose wife and 13-year-old son both love San Pellegrino.

In fact, unless you're struggling in the aftermath of a natural disaster, unless you live in a developing world nation without safe tap water, all bottled water really falls into that category: luxury, indulgence, convenience. That's okay, of course, lots of things I like are indulgences: Oreos, "The Good Wife," Italian Merlot, even the ice cubes I all-but-require in the glass of water that sits on my desk through the work day.

There is a fresh burst of controversy about bottled water on college campuses, specifically, around whether bottled water should be sold in the dining halls of U.S. and Canadian universities. Last week, the University of Vermont became the latest of 15 campuses in the U.S. and Canada to ban the sale of bottled water, according to figures from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE).

Dozens more campuses have active campaigns to discourage bottled water purchases — including giving out free reusable water bottles to students, and providing elegant, easy-to-use bottle filling stations. (Try to fill a water bottle from a water fountain sometime — you'll be lucky to get halfway full.)

Over the weekend, NPR's food blog had a story about college students squaring off against the bottled water industry which drew more than 100 comments. Columbia University's Water Center posted an essay last week asking, "Should Universities Ban Bottled Water?" which is getting a little of Twitter attention.

The essay doesn't answer the question, but I will: Of course bottled water shouldn't be banned.

Virtually all the bans are the result of well-intentioned student activism on campus.

But I don't understand how campuses can ban sale of bottled water while continuing to sell Coke, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Vitamin Water, and Red Bull.

What do the fired-up campus environmentalists think Coke is, anyway? Regular Coke is about 95 percent water; Diet Coke is 99 percent water.

The reasoning runs something like this: Water is available on campus — from taps, from spigots, from filtered water-filling stations. Students and staff don't need it delivered in plastic bottles. Coke and Red Bull aren't available the same way. (Although sodas, of course, are often delivered on tap in dining halls.)

The environmental contrail from bottled water (which I wrote about in a magazine story that took me to both Fiji and Poland Spring, Maine) is astonishing. It takes a fleet equivalent to 40,000 18-wheelers just to deliver the bottled water Americans buy every week.

But how is the fleet of trucks delivering water in bottles any different than the fleets delivering caramel-colored, caffeinated water in bottles? It takes 2.5 liters of water to produce every liter of Coke products.

I can understand cities banning the purchase of bottled water with city funds for city offices — as San Francisco, Seattle, and New York have done. That's about both money and symbolism. Those cities run tap water systems — why would their employees need bottled water paid for by taxpayers?

I can understand vigorous on-campus awareness efforts to create a culture where carrying a bottle of Evian or Deer Park or SmartWater into class causes raised eyebrows. (No college student appears to be able to make it through a class these days without a drink of some kind — coffee, soda, water — as if scholarship had become seriously dehydrating. Not so long ago, students wouldn't have thought of stepping into a lecture hall with a cup of coffee or a can of soda.)

Indeed, you can start with the fact that buying water in a bottle makes absolutely no economic sense. The water in a half-liter bottle typically costs 3,000 times what the same amount of water from a spigot costs. Buy a single bottle of Poland Spring for \$1.29 at the college store, and you can refill the bottle every day for 8 years — college plus medical school! — before the tap water costs what the original Poland Spring cost.

The very university food service systems that proudly announce bottled water bans offer products with at least as much environmental impact that also have all kinds of dietary impact. Froot Loops at breakfast? Chocolate chip cookies at dinner? Frozen yogurt on tap 16 hours a day?

Bottled water bans are not just oddly hypocritical — taking bottled water out of campus vending machines while leaving soda in those machines — they seem oddly misplaced in a setting where people are supposed to be thinking for themselves.

I love seeing college students leading an imaginative revival of the drinking fountain — and it would be great if the revival spilled beyond campuses into cities. Why do people buy bottled water? Because cities don't have public water fountains that are easy to use, clean and safe.

The bottled water debates is a great way of waking people up to the big water issues almost every community faces — scarcity, purity, reuse, sustainability. But the conversation has to move on from bottled water to the water supply itself.

Banning bottled water doesn't really teach anyone anything.

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