

Hollywodd Etc.: Rich man, pour man - Bling H2O sells $tatus by the bottle

by Norma Meyer

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. - Put down the Crystal Geyser, loser. The hydrating hip, including Oscar-winning actor Jamie Foxx and reportedly Paris Hilton's dog, drink couture water that costs up to \$90 a bottle.

Yep, the day has arrived when natural spring water - bottled at the source in of all places Dandridge, Tenn. - is more expensive than some fine wines. That's because it's Bling H2O, which comes in limited-edition, wine-sized corked frosted bottles embedded with Swarovski crystals spelling out its name. A round or rectangular charm denoting the genuine Swarovski adornments hangs from a bottleneck chain.

"Either you bling or you don't bling," says Bling H2O founder Kevin Boyd, a Hollywood writer-producer whose credits include "The Jamie Foxx Show."

HEAVY WATER - Kevin Boyd is the founder of Bling H2O, a company that sells expensive bottles of water decorated with crystals. CNS Photo by Carol Kron.

HIP HYDRATION - Bling H2O comes in limited-edition, wine-sized corked frosted bottles embedded with Swarovski crystals spelling out its name. CNS Photo by Carol Kron.

The personable 43-year-old aquaman is in his tiny retro-mod Bling retail store and showroom, surrounded by bottles of the liquid gold and spinoff apparel such as Bling boy shorts. A 750-milliliter bottle of water sells here for \$40. If you chug the same bottle at the ubertrendy Tao nightclub at The Venetian in Las Vegas, it'll set you back \$90.

The half-size Baby Bling can cost \$55 at hot spots, but it's \$25 at the store. Even then, it's pricier and far less filling than the New York steak lunch at the famed Milton Berle-founded Friars club just down the street.

"This is pop culture in a bottle," Boyd says.

Since launching last year, Bling has turned up at an after-party for the MTV Video Music Awards, in the dressing rooms of the 48th annual Grammy Awards, and at a style lounge for the Emmys, where it was used to give stars facials because of its good 7.3 pH balance. Bling also made the scene at Super Bowl festivities in Miami and at NBA All-Star game happenings in Las Vegas.

Ben Stiller recently had 10 cases flown to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, where he was filming a Farrelly brothers comedy. Foxx, who quaffs Bling onstage while performing concerts, had the splashy splish-splash delivered to the Los Angeles set of "Dreamgirls" and to Dubai, where he was shooting the upcoming thriller "The Kingdom."

It was while working on Foxx's now-defunct TV show years ago that Boyd says he noticed people carrying bottled water on the studio lot like a fashion accessory. For instance, there were the Fiji sippers who thought it was cool that an exotic island quenched their thirst.

"Anytime we'd have guest stars come to the show, they'd always request a certain water," Boyd says, adding some also requested certain bottles of booze. "Evian water was very popular back then. That was the buzz water."

After Boyd noticed patrons at ritzy nightspots ordering bottles of water with their Cristal, he tapped into the noncarbonated rich niche.

"We wanted to have the most exquisite, the most luxurious, lavish bottle of water in the world, with premium water with premium packaging that merits a premium price tag," Boyd says. "As far as I know, this is the most expensive bottled water in the world."

Diane Felicissimo says that's true, and she ought to know. A "water connoisseur," she owns and runs Via Genova, a five-table water bar/cafe far from the glitz of Hollywood in Chappaqua, N.Y. She added Bling to her menu of nearly 40 still and sparkling waters about three months ago.

"It's so popular," enthuses Felicissimo, who sells the large Bling for \$55 and the small one for \$30. "The little ones are flying off the shelves."

By far, Bling is the big-ticket of her wet fare. Other large, glass bottles cost from \$5.50 for Speyside Glenlivet, drawn from a 500-million-year-old rock formation in Scotland, to \$28.50 for 10 Thousand BC, which is melted glacier ice from British Columbia, supposedly bottled to inspirational music.

Bling comes from a "crystal clear spring" in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, says Boyd, noting the source won a gold medal in an international water taste test.

The pimped-up bottles, of course, are the bait. They come in several color schemes, including one of cobalt blue glass and one with canary yellow crystals.

Apparently, image-makers overseas also are nuts enough to pay \$4 a gulp. "Our No. 1 market is France. They're selling it at the Louis Vuitton store on the Champs Elysees in Paris," Boyd says. A shop in Italy is supposedly getting, gulp, \$200 a bottle.

"There's people who simply want the best of everything," says Lou Abin, managing partner of the star-trodden Tao nightclub in Las Vegas. A slew of celebs have partied at the extravagant Asian-themed in-spot - from Pamela Anderson to Christina Aguilera to Madonna - but Abin won't say which VIPs had the \$90 "water experience" at their table. He did reveal Bling imbibers "request the bottle all the time" as a take-home souvenir.

Boyd says Bling also is served at the posh Beverly Wilshire Four Seasons hotel and the new chic L.A. club Tatou, where Michael Ray, the first winner of TV's "Hell's Kitchen" is the celebrity chef.

Foxx, rapper Lil Jon and party-girl heiress Nicky Hilton all get regular home or office deliveries of Bling, Boyd says. Sometimes the shipments include basic Blings, which are sans-crystals 16.9-ounce plastic screw-top bottles that resemble your ordinary Arrowhead. The plastic logo version, convenient for status-seekers at the gym or pool, cost \$2 each at the Bling store.

When caseloads of Bling were dispatched to the Hiltons' Beverly Hills estate for a party for Paris, Boyd says he included as a gift a custom-made bottle of Bling for Tinkerbell inscribed "Muttini" with a paw print. He says a British tabloid later reported seeing the celebutante offer the gourmet beverage to the Chihuahua.

Boyd's storefront, on busy Santa Monica Boulevard with impossible parking, has no water-wanting walk-ins this morning. But his employee takes phone and Internet orders, some from average schmos wanting a bottle or two. Boyd says he's shipped Bling to as far away as South Africa and Taiwan. He's heard of people refilling the bottles with alcohol, displaying them unopened on their home bar, and using them for vases.

"Someone from Australia bought a \$40 bottle and then paid \$120 for shipping," he says.

For Valentine's Day, a New Jersey man contacted the store and asked a bottle be sent to his sweetheart in Scottsdale, Ariz., with a message referring to a cheaper, vogue water. "Because you're way too classy to be drinking Voss, baby," the love note read.

Obviously, it's a strange water world.

"I understand to a lot of people it's outrageous, the price of the water," Boyd concedes. "And often time people say that water is such a premium in other countries and things of that nature. This is just an option. You

can buy a Bentley or you can buy a Honda."

Or you can buy a Rolls-Royce for your cotton-mouth. But what's it taste like? At her watering hole, Felicissimo pours a selection from Italy rumored to be the choice of the Vatican, another mined from below a 1,000-year-old volcanic belt in Japan, and 1 Litre, an Oprah fav from a pristine Canadian forest.

"Bling is a beautiful light crisp water," says Felicissimo, who houses and presents her clear liquids like fine wines. "It's not the lightest and crispest I've ever tasted. But the bottles are beautiful - and it's definitely the flashiest."

At least those shelling out for the odorless fluid won't be dead in the water when Boyd asks his signature question: "Do you bling?"

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