Bottled water can be a poor environmental choice

by Maureen Clancy

If you could rack up frequent-flyer miles on ships, trains and trucks, a little square plastic bottle of Fiji water would be eligible for some big-time rewards.

POUR CHOICE - Designer drinking water comes to you from afar. Fiji water travels 5,600 miles from Viti Levu, South Pacific to the port of Los Angeles; Voss comes 5,400 miles from Aust-Agderin, Norway; Pelligrino comes 10,000 miles from Italy; and Ty Nant water comes 5,300 miles from Wales, U. K. CNS Photo. Fiji hails from the island of Viti Levu in the South Pacific. That's about 5,600 miles, as the crow flies, to the port of Los Angeles and another 3,000 or so to East Coast restaurant tables and home fridges.

Voss water is equally peripatetic, journeying from a place called Aust-Agderin, Norway, just south of the North Pole. A bird flying from there to New York would travel about 2,400 miles. The ships that cart the stuff to our shores travel farther.

San Pellegrino (also called Pellegrino) travels some 6,000 miles to New York from Italy. And Ty Nant water, in the flashy cobalt blue bottle, covers more than 2,300 miles to New York from the middle of Wales in the U.K. However, the bottles, which according to a West Coast importer have been made in Germany, voyage some 600 miles before they even get to Wales to be filled.

Though it's hard to calculate the exact environmental costs of bottled water moving around the globe, the Natural Resources Defense Council, or NRDC, has taken a crack at a number: The amount of carbon dioxide emitted annually during the transportation to California of bottled water from France, Italy and Fiji accounts for an estimated 9,700 tons of carbon dioxide, the equivalent of the yearly emissions from 1,700 cars on the road.

To borrow from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," there is indeed water, water everywhere. But a staggering number of Americans aren't content with the stuff under their noses and in their taps. In 2006, thirsty Americans, or at least those seeking to look hip, shelled out more than $10 billion on bottled water and drank about 28 gallons of the stuff per person.

Why bottled? Millions of consumers go with it because of the portability and convenience. Others, such as fans of Bling H2O in Swarovski crystal-covered bottles, go for the cachet. The folks who cite taste are probably kidding themselves, in view of the fact that more than 40 percent of all bottled water is tap water (including Aquafina, which will henceforth be labeled Public Water Source instead of the cryptic P.W.S., according to a recent Pepsico announcement).

And only the clueless claim they're buying bottled because it's better for them than tap. Dr. Gina Solomon, senior scientist at NRDC in San Francisco, says, in fact, that the public water supply is more stringently regulated (by the Environmental Protection Agency) than bottled water (by the Food and Drug Administration).

"These companies are marketing an illusion of environmental purity," Solomon said.

DELUGE OR DRIBBLE

Upscale restaurants do a booming business in imported bottled water. Southern California eateries such as Pamplemousse, Jack's La Jolla, George's California Modern, Market and The Marine Room report that at least 50 percent of diners order sparkling or still bottled water. Since the markup on bottled water is enormous - a bottle costing the restaurant $2 is typically sold for about $7 - most restaurateurs haven't been interested in rocking this boat.

But now concerns over the environmental costs of bottling and transporting water are fueling a fledgling movement in the restaurant industry to stem the tide.

Alice Waters made waves with her April announcement that Chez Panisse would no longer serve bottled

water. (The Berkeley, Calif., restaurant now serves only filtered municipal water.) Super-chef Mario Batali and his colleagues at trendy Del Posto in New York City quickly followed suit. Nopa, a San Francisco venue for organic wood-fired cuisine, recently joined the parade.

"Filling cargo ships with water and sending it hundreds and thousands of miles to get it around the world seems ridiculous," said Joe Bastianich, Batali's partner in Del Posto.

The Earth Policy Institute put some numbers on that silliness.

For a year of consumption in the U.S., the institute, a nonprofit working for an environmentally sustainable economy, estimated that just making the plastic for water bottles burns up approximately 1.5 million barrels of oil, enough to power 100,000 cars for a year. Transportation costs up the ante.

According to Peter Gleick, an Oakland, Calif.-based expert on water policy, there's a simple way to visualize the average energy cost to make and fill the bottle, transport it to market (internationally) and then deal with the waste: "It would be like filling up a quarter of every bottle with oil."

But giving up the bottle in the name of conservation doesn't appear to be an easy sell. Many chefs point to the fact that bottled waters that sell for up to $7.50 a bottle go a long way toward raising the bottom line.

PART OF THE SOLUTION

Some Southern California chefs and restaurateurs are already addressing the problem. Pacifica Del Mar's Kipp Downing, who recently started phasing out Voss water in favor of a local sparkling water in a reusable bottle, confronted the problem inadvertently.

"I didn't know there was a bandwagon to jump on," he said with a laugh. "I didn't hear about Alice Waters. We were just looking at options here."

Downing now uses So-Clear, a company that produces the bottles, collects the empties, double washes (including once by hand), triple rinses with spring water, refills and delivers them back to the restaurants.

Downing said he made the jump to local water partly for financial reasons - "Yes, we do make more money on it" - and partly because it just seemed a smart option. "When the guy told us they'd pick up the carafes each week, sterilize them and return them filled, it made so much sense to us. And people really liked it from the get-go."

Moreover, Downing says, diners are attracted to the carafes with the restaurant's red fish logo and old-fashioned wire-plug top.

According to the owner of Jack's La Jolla in San Diego, Bill Berkley, his team was considering alternatives to the Fiji and Pellegrino on the menu and did a taste-test. The So-Clear option won them over.

"We didn't do it as a cost-cutting measure," said Jack's chef Tony DiSalvo. "It's about having a better product and saving the plastic bottles. It's a good alternative because it's local, it's something with our name on it, and it tastes good."

Some San Diego restaurateurs are switching to local spring water and Alice Waters is carbonating Oakland's best and giving it away free, but some restaurants continue to float blissfully in the bottled stuff.

At Addison in The Grand Del Mar, seven waters are listed on a separate Water Menu that includes Antipodes from New Zealand and Lauquen from Patagonia ... both from sources more than 6,700 miles away.

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