

You've Heard of Fine Wine. Now Meet Fine Water.

Bottled waters from small, pristine sources are attracting a lot of buzz, with tastings, sommeliers and even water cellars.



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Fernando Cobelo



By **Kim Severson**
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I recently spent 90 minutes watching six very serious people taste 107 varieties of mineral water.

Each container was hidden under a cloth bag, its contents dispensed by small pours into wine glasses. The judges swished and gazed thoughtfully into the middle distance. They dumped the excess into buckets at their feet and joked about needing a bathroom. They gave each water a score between 90 and 100, in a modified [Robert Parker style](#).

The comparison to paint drying might seem obvious. But like a [Magic Eye](#) poster, the nuances of fine water become clear if you spend enough time with it.

Fine water — the preferred term of its growing cadre of enthusiasts — is as much like that plastic bottle of water in your car-cup holder as Château d'Yquem is to Gatorade. The taste is distinct to a place, rich with minerals it picked up as it traveled to the surface of the earth. The fine-water crowd shuns giants like [Perrier](#) and Acqua Panna, both owned by Nestlé. Fine water has a better story.



At a tasting event in Atlanta this spring, water sommeliers rated waters from around the globe. *Art Skin for The New York Times*



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Winners at the April tasting, part of the ninth annual [Fine Waters](#) taste and design awards in Atlanta, included melted snow that had been filtered through Peruvian volcanic rock, and deep-sea water that had been pumped up 80 miles off the coast of South Korea. There was water gathered from nets hung in a misty [Tasmanian pine forest](#), and a Texas brand laced with lithium called [Crazy Water](#).

Like coffee and beer, natural water is enjoying a third wave, especially among [the alcohol-shunning Generation Z](#), which has [primed its palate](#) on seltzers like LaCroix and is looking to level up. It's also gaining traction among the wellness crowd, which has grown increasingly skeptical of [municipal tap water](#) and purified water in plastic bottles.

Hotels are adding precisely designed water bars. Home wine cellars have become [water cellars](#), where children are encouraged to select bottles with their parents. [Water sommelier programs](#) continue to grow. And of course, water influencers gather more and more followers.

"It's elevating water away from hydration and turning water into an experience similar to wine or other alcohol," said Michael Mascha, 67, who formed [Fine Waters](#) in 2002. The organization has grown to include a coalition of smaller producers, and is considered the global standard setter for judging fine water. "If you pay attention, the world opens up to you. If you think water's just water, you are missing out."

America's modern embrace of fine water started later than most other countries'. The first wave began in the 19th century, when people "took the waters" in places like [Saratoga Springs, N.Y.](#) The second might be pinned to the 1970s, when the chic and the famous took up drinking Perrier.

In the latest wave, the attraction is as much about terroir and narrative as it is about taste and health.



Michael Mascha, 67, founded the organization Fine Waters, which set the global standard for judging fine water. via Michael Mascha

Mr. Mascha, who discovered fine water after his doctor told him to stop drinking wine, said it deserves as much respect as anything else on the table.

“It drives me nuts that the chef cares about the food and the wine, but when it comes to water, I’m drinking the same water I can buy at the gas station for \$1 across the street,” he said.

We’ve heard some of this before. In 2001, the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Lower Manhattan introduced a water sommelier, and publicists began using phrases like “luxury hydration options” without irony. Shortly afterward, the comedy duo Penn & Teller [spoofed the water menu](#) in their Showtime series by tricking unwitting diners. (One \$7 bottle called “Eau du Robinet” — French for tap water — was filled from a garden hose on the restaurant patio.)

Today there are more than 4,000 brands of natural water globally. The cost for some bottles is a few dollars or less. Others, like [ROI](#), from a Slovenian well with a magnesium content higher than any other fine water, cost more than \$30. Bottles of Fillico “jewelry water” can command thousands of dollars. (The water itself comes from a well deep under Mount Rokko in Kobe, Japan. The handmade bottles are encrusted with Swarovski crystals and topped with a crown.)

In the United States, about 15 percent of the [\\$47.4 billion bottled-water market](#) is what the industry categorizes as “premium.” More than half of that is water bottled at the source with no interventions. It’s not clear how much of that slice is from big players like [Topo Chico](#), whose extra-bubbly natural carbonation comes from a dormant volcano in Monterrey, Mexico, or smaller brands like [Tahoe Artesian Water](#).

Influencers play a pivotal role. The most ubiquitous is Martin Riese — “your personal water sommelier!” — an energetic German who spreads the gospel of fine water from [National Geographic](#) to [Instagram](#).



The Four Seasons hotel in Prague commissioned Cellart, a designer of artistic wine cellars, to create a water space. Cellart



Some bottles of water can command hundreds of dollars. Cellart

Doran Binder, who calls himself [the Bearded Water Sommelier](#), sells water from a [natural spring](#) he discovered in an English national park, and draws millions of social-media hits. He recently teamed up with Ashley Epperson, the owner of [Salacious Drinks](#) in Springfield, Va., to sell a six-bottle, \$29 “Beardy’s tasting box” that includes [Mountain Valley Spring Water](#) from Hot Springs, Ark., and [Three Bays](#), which comes from an ancient Australian aquifer and contains a whopping 23 different minerals.

At this point, a quick lesson in water terminology might help.

The water you buy falls into one of two broad categories: purified and natural. Purified water is essentially tap water stripped of minerals and impurities. Sometimes, a company like Coca-Cola, which owns Dasani, will add minerals back in.

Natural water, which includes brands like San Pellegrino and Deer Park, goes from the earth to the bottle with little intervention, and is microbiologically safe. Although regulations vary from country to country, the water must have specific, measurable amounts of dissolved minerals like calcium, magnesium, bicarbonates and silica. Look for the words spring, artesian or mineral on the label.

The term fine water is more descriptive than regulatory. It's used to distinguish unprocessed water that reflects a region's geology from more uniform, commodity mineral waters.



The mist enrobing the mountains near the Huon River in Tasmania is gathered from nets and bottled.
Pure Mist Water

Whether natural or purified, bottled water has its detractors. [Communities have complained](#) that big bottlers are robbing local water supplies. [Critics say](#) that selling purified tap water implies that municipal water isn't safe and charges consumers a premium for water they could easily obtain from their kitchen sink. Plastic bottles clog the environment, and shipping water adds to the planet's carbon load.

As pollution and urbanization encroach on natural water sources and large corporations seek more market share, local bottling businesses matter more than ever, said Elena Berg, an environmental science professor at the American University of Paris who moonlights as a water sommelier. She was a judge in the Atlanta tasting.

“Small, independently owned sources are important because they are often run by families and others who know and care about the source and the community that surrounds it,” Dr. Berg said.

For her and other fans of fine water, part of the fun of travel is drinking the local mineral water, which is a natural companion to local food.

She recently took some students to Portugal and discovered that [Pedras](#) — minerally, gently effervescent water that filters through layers of granite — was a great foil for the country’s heavier dishes.



Mr. Mascha sampling Theoni water from the source in Greece, via Michael Mascha

In the United States, local mineral water should become part of the farm-to-table ethos, said Simona Celante, who grew up in Italy drinking artesian water — that is, water that is not fed by gravity or mechanically pumped but instead rises naturally from pressure in an aquifer. A beverage industry veteran, she helped introduce [Smartwater](#) in California before it was bought by Coca-Cola, and has worked for Red Bull and Jack Daniels.

Now she has turned attention to the mineral water that bubbles up on land she and others bought near Lake Tahoe. Her Tahoe Artesian Water is sold in California, Washington and Oregon.

Ms. Celante considers herself a water farmer.

“We are so hyperlocal these days, so let’s take the next step,” she said. “People talk about where the wine and the butter and the vegetables come from, but never the journey of the water.”

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Kim Severson is an Atlanta-based reporter who covers the nation's food culture and contributes to [NYT Cooking](#).