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# Forget everything you know about water — sommeliers will teach you

Water experts are pushing premium stills and sparklings to American diners who want a luxury experience. But will they swallow the hype?




Cameron Smith, a certified water sommelier, prepares a flight of fine H2O offerings for Will Pavia at The Inn at Little Washington in Virginia

JOCELYN AUGUSTINO FOR THE TIMES

[Will Pavia](#), Little Washington

Tuesday June 24 2025, 4.35pm BST, The Times



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Did he drink any good waters, I ask.

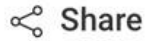
“I wasn’t actually able to go to that table,” he says, with an air of sadness.



Smith is also a “certified cheese professional”, a wine sommelier and a tea master

JOCELYN AUGUSTINO FOR THE TIMES

He could have given [JD Vance](#) the full waterworks: his list of seven stills and seven sparklings, their story, their mouth-feel, their finish. Vance probably does not know about the Vellamo, which is the run-off of a



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Finnish glacier (\$42), or the Three Bays — water that fell as rain 2,000 years ago on mountains in New Zealand, then seeped through an undersea aquifer and emerged thick as olive oil on a hillside near Melbourne (\$45).

• [JD Vance's Irish ancestry claim hits a genealogical dead end](#)

Like most of us, the poor old vice-president probably still thinks of water as a clear, tasteless substance that comes out of a tap. He probably thinks that if you can taste something in the water, you should ask for a cleaner glass.

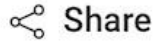
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“I was just, like, itching for him to be able to see it,” said Smith of Vance and his new water menu. “Because, you know, I want this to spread.”

Smith, 49, who is also a “certified cheese professional”, a wine sommelier and a tea master, first heard of fine water a few years ago on a podcast about Japanese tea and became convinced that the Inn needed a water menu.

His boss, the chef Patrick O’Connell who founded the Inn in 1978, was hesitant. O’Connell worried “that it could be potentially misinterpreted by a jaded journalist”, he says, eyeing me carefully as we sit down together. “Or a guest who thought we were trying to upsell something.”

O’Connell decided to greenlight the water menu as long as the Inn’s tap water (price: free; source: local wells) was listed at the top. The menu was introduced in December, and so far diners have been fascinated, Smith says.

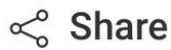


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Recently, the ex-wife of a certain tech mogul, a multibillionaire in her own right, summoned him to the table. “She and ... her new partner ... travel around the world, they go to all these three Michelin star restaurants,” he says. “They said, ‘We’ve seen great wine. We’ve seen great food. But ... the water menu! We’ve never seen that anywhere.’ So I think this is a really new thing for fine dining.”



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Another European transplant, a wine sommelier named Martin Riese, 48, arrived in America from Germany a few years after Mascha, and became an ally in the cause, conducting water tastings and designing some of the first water menus. Riese says he struggled against “a big culture difference” in America at first. In Europe, there is a long tradition of taking the waters in spa towns, but in the US it was “always about hydration”, he says.




The two men faced endless mockery. In 2013, Riese was invited onto *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* to conduct a water tasting. “Doesn’t it just taste like water?” O’Brien asked, to laughter. “I hate to sound ignorant.” And at a televised blind water-tasting in Las Vegas, the organisers placed toilet water in front of Mascha. He was about to drink it when a friendly producer warned him not to touch the glass. “This was hostile, hand-to-hand combat,” he says. “They said, ‘It’s funny, it’s fraud, it’s stupid, ... water is just water’.”

Later came charges that, by pushing bottled water, Mascha was helping to despoil the planet. “Bottled water has the smallest carbon footprint of any bottled beverage,” he tells me. “It doesn’t have to be produced. Wine has to be produced, so does soda and beer.”

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But attitudes in America began to shift with the growing popularity of the farm-to-table movement and as a younger generation started to eschew alcohol.



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There are now at least three water sommelier training colleges, in Germany, in South Korea and in the US, that together have turned out about eight hundred graduates. At the same time, “water farmers” bottling straight from springs or glaciers have popped up all over the world. Three Bays Mineral Water was discovered by Olaf Lyche and his wife when they bought a little place in the hills outside Melbourne as a weekend getaway just over a decade ago. There was a spring on the property and, in 2014, a friend sampled it. “He’s a health nut,” says Lyche, 58. “He said, ‘This isn’t ground water. This is the most beautiful mineral water I have ever tasted.’”


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
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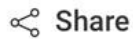
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[became a water farmer](#) after a divorce, when he bought “a failing pub” called The Crag Inn to be near his children. In 2017 someone came to test his water supply and declared that it was fabulous. Behind the bar now, there are men bottling it up to be sold as Crag Spring. Now, “no one comes here for beer, mate,” Binder tells me. “Everyone comes here for water.”

He pulls a bottle of Chateldon 1650, drawn from an ancient spring in the Auvergne Region of France, from his shelf of fine waters behind the bar. “Roman soldiers would fill their vessels up on the way to battle at the source because they knew that minerals were electrolytes,” Binder says. “That’s basically a natural repair and a Red Bull that will help you fight.”



The Inn at Little Washington sets itself apart with the curated water menu



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If you're after something lighter, there is Pure Mist, harvested in nets from the winter mists of Tasmania's Huon Valley. The wind blowing the mist comes from the south, from the pristine swells of the Antarctic Ocean.


Elena Berg, a professor of evolutionary biology as well as a water sommelier, was at a tasting event recently where she and her fellow judges were served Pure Mist. "It tastes like pine needles," she tells me. "We all looked at each other like, whoa!"

- [Are you a fizz snob? And we don't mean champagne](#)

And what about the Berg, (no relation to Elena), the most expensive water on the menu at the Inn at Little Washington? The water farmer sets out from Newfoundland in a boat with a hardened hull, seeking icebergs that are at least 15,000 years old, Smith tells me.

"The way they know this is because of the bubble size, the colour of the actual iceberg and the sound of the crackle," he says.



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Smith is one of life's enthusiasts — effervescent and persistent. He is like a good bottle of Tahoe Artesian from California. He takes a sip now, of the Berg, and swirls it around his mouth.

“It has those ancient trapped bubbles of air inside it,” he says. “It’s almost like the texture of air, and when you swallow, it’s like swallowing cotton candy. It just kind of goes away.”

I take a sip, and try to taste the ancient air. There’s a slight minerality that makes me think of underground caverns. It’s very subtle, if it is there at all. Then it is gone.

Just as wine is classified by region, grape and colour, waters are arranged at tastings according to their mineral content — their “total dissolved solids” (TDS).

Distilled water has a TDS of zero; seawater has a TDS of 30,000. Three Bays, the award-winning Australian water with a TDS of 1,300, is regarded as a heavy-hitter that pairs well with steak. It looks almost treacly when you roll it around your glass. The Vichy Catelan, from Spain, (TDS 2,900, \$42 a bottle) tastes almost like an energy drink. Sampling it, I almost wonder if there’s fruit in there. Also, quite possibly,





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almost like an energy drink. Sampling it, I almost wonder if there's fruit in there. Also, quite possibly, an Alka Seltzer. It's the bicarbonates, Smith says.




Pavia discovers a "dry" water

JOCELYN AUGUSTINO FOR THE TIMES

"That's actually what makes it feel less acidic as well, so it's more creamy, but it has that saltiness." He recommends pairing it with ceviche.

I must admit that I struggle, with the lighter waters, to describe whatever it is I am supposed to be tasting. Flinty? I say, looking at Smith, hoping that I am in the right subsoil. Rocky?



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“I can see what you’re saying,” he says, generously.

Then, we try the Smeraldina from Sardinia (\$10 a bottle).

“It doesn’t have the complexity of the aroma that you’re getting from the Berg, but it has more of a mouth-drying effect,” Smith says, due to the calcium. “When you rub your tongue against the roof of your mouth, you can feel that it grips.”

It sounds absurd, but when I take a sip I find myself nodding along with him. As Sherlock Holmes said: “When you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

And, against everything I thought I knew, apparently a glass of water can be dry.

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