

Up front

Bottled doesn't mean better

Blame it on convenience, laziness, or marketing brilliance (Jennifer Aniston does look good holding that Smartwater bottle), but U.S. sales of bottled water are on the rise, inching up 3.5 percent in 2010 after having dropped in recent years, to \$6.4 billion a year, according to industry figures. That despite some increasingly unflattering revelations—chief among them that many brands don't even reveal where the water comes from.

Wanted: Clearer labeling

In a report released earlier this year, the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization, analyzed the labels and company websites of 173 bottled waters and found that about one-fifth, including big brands Aquafina and Crystal Geyser, didn't list their source. Another one-third didn't say how the water was treated. Many popular brands, such as Poland Spring, list multiple sources (in its case, springs in Maine), leaving consumers to guess which one produced their H₂O. Only three brands—

Gerber Pure Purified Water, Nestlé Pure Life Purified Water, and Penta Ultra-Purified Water—got the group's highest marks for disclosing source and treatment information and using the most advanced treatment methods.

Some brands might not disclose their source because they don't have to. The Environmental Protection Agency requires community water systems to divulge the source of their drinking water in an annual Consumer Confidence Report. But bottled-water makers aren't required to disclose where their water comes from, how it was treated, or what contaminants it might contain. Disclosure is purely voluntary (except in California). And the bottled stuff is subject to a less stringent safety standard than tap water.

Bottom line. Don't be misled by crisp blue labels and mountain vistas. Purified tap water is the source of 49 percent of bottled water produced in the U.S., according to industry data. Many consumers could cut out the middleman (and produce far less plastic waste) by investing in a water filter and reusable water bottle to tote when they're on the go.

What to do

- Drink tap water. If you're concerned about its purity, get a filter. Carafe or faucet-mounted models are the least expensive (we've found excellent ones for \$30 or less) and remove many common con-

taminants. A reverse-osmosis filter removes more contaminants. Most cost hundreds of dollars, but we found an excellent model from Whirlpool for \$150.

- Give everyone in the household a reusable water bottle that doesn't have bisphenol A, a chemical linked to reproductive problems.
- If you must buy bottled water, choose a brand that discloses its source and lists an advanced purification method on its label or website. Check EWG's brand analysis at www.ewg.org/bottled-water-2011-home.
- To learn about your water, read the Consumer Confidence Report. If you pay a water bill, you should be mailed one annually. It can help you determine whether you need a water filter, and if so, what kind.

▶ CLOSE-UP

Can the average sipper tell cheap water from the pricey stuff?

Three staffers who aren't expert tasters tried four waters (with identities hidden): a pricey "ultra-purified" water (\$2.99 per liter); a national brand of purified water (\$1 per liter); a store-brand spring water (89 cents per gallon); and tap water from our Yonkers, N.Y., office filtered through a Brita carafe (\$22.49 for the carafe and one filter; replacement filters, about \$40 per year).

One staffer correctly guessed all the waters; one got half; and the third got one out of four. Try it yourself at home. Your humble tap might make the grade.

Registered trademark of Société des Produits Nestlé S.A. Sources: Deep Protected Well, Breinigsville, PA and/or Public Water Supply, Allentown, PA Nestlé Pure Life Purified Water is purified using reverse osmosis or distillation and enhanced with a balance of minerals for taste. Contains: Purified Water, Calcium Chloride, Sodium Bicarbonate, Magnesium Sulfate.

TRANSPARENT
Nestlé Pure Life is one of a few bottled waters to list source and treatment info.