



BOTTLED WATER BEHIND BARS

By Arthur von Wiesenberger

Summary: When people think of “bars,” one of the last things envisioned is bottled water served to us in a relaxed, quiet atmosphere. Yet that seems to be the trend in Western Europe. After some “water bars” tried planting roots unsuccessfully in the United States, consumer thirst for the ever-popular product has created a rise in these establishments.

Imagine you’re walking up Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, Calif. It’s a hot, sunny southern California day and the only thing soaring higher than the store prices is your thirst. There’s a champagne bar, a martini bar, a coffee bar—but all your body is crying out for is good, clean water. This happened to a Japanese visitor to Beverly Hills in the early 1980s. He kept entering stores for a glass of water. He couldn’t even buy a glass of water.

This was the inspiration that launched his company, d’Urban, into the challenging waters of retail bottled water bar sales. In 1985, his solution to Southern California’s lack of *l’eau*, was the world’s first water bar, simply called The Water Bar. With 77 waters available by the glass, only bottled water reigned at this very hip spot. A glass of imported bottled water was under \$3, and T-shirts with the Water Bar’s logo, H2O-, was considerably more. The media went wild and stories about this unique concept splashed onto the covers of newspapers across the nation. But the bottled waters and T-shirts weren’t hot (or cool) enough to pay Rodeo Drive’s celestial rents and The Water Bar sadly sank.

More early efforts

Other attempts to ride the popular-

ity wave of bottled water and bars floated for awhile in other cities. In San Francisco, a water bar combined with souvenirs surfaced at a second-story location on well-traveled Union Street. A kindly old lady was happy to serve her few customers bottled water along with stories about the brands. But her store didn’t succeed. Near Chicago, a water bar opened with a water store and retail outlet for water treatment equipment. But sales dried up and the store disappeared.

All was quiet along the bottled waterfront—at least bar-wise—until 1997, when Colette, a very hip and handsome store on the fashionable Rue St. Honore in Paris, opened with the largest and most successful water bar to date.

Wait to be seated

Situated in the basement of Colette, the water bar is a place where one can relax and take a break from shopping in the store’s upstairs galleries. Breakfast, lunch or snacks are available at any time of the day. The menu changes daily, and is invariably simple, light, vegetarian and international. A long, sleek wooden bar with overtones of a sushi bar design is where over 90 different brands are sipped, swirled and swallowed. The staff are outfitted in black T-shirts emblazoned with “eau-yeah” across the chest.

To the left of the bar is a display of some of the brands with predominance toward Evian. Evian’s 33 cl (centiliters) bottle goes to great lengths to stand out with personalized labels for the water bar by Work in Progress, illustrators Eiko Maekawa and Jean-Philippe Delhomme and the Winney company with a limited edition of 2,000 each. Norway’s Voss (the

water bar’s current bestseller) and unusual brands like Himalaya capture the imagination. The attractive list of water selections at Colette is like reading a map of exotic and distant lands.

For the past four years, the water bar has been the watering hole of the curious as well as the connoisseur. Although there are other beverages available, bottled water sales represent 80 percent of them. In a country where wine is “de rigueur” with a meal, the water bar is making waves.

Victoire de Taillac of Colette said the water bar was launched, in part, because of the “evolution of bottled water packages, which began in 1985 with Ty Nant.” The water bar’s stable of brands has expanded from 30 in 1997 because the owners keep seeking out new and interesting brands and bottlers have been searching out Colette.

Ms. de Taillac’s personal favorite is St. Georges from Corsica in a bottled designed by Philippe Starck. I tried it in one of the water bar’s fine blue crystal glasses and found it a light, elegant and fine non-carbonated water similar to Volvic. Colette’s success over its predecessors could be the result of combining healthy food with the water bar. It’s also got business savvy and even rents the water bar for professional breakfasts, press conferences and parties. But the water bar wars may be brewing with competition down the road.

When in Rome...

Rome’s Aqua Store is the first of many planned watering holes, which opened last year at the city’s Termini railroad station (see *International Focus*,

FYI—More on Designer Bottled Water

See the following for additional information on this topic:

- www.vosswater.com/voss.html
- www.himalayaspringwater.com/quality/
- <http://restaurantresults.com/beverages/009e1.html>
- www.extraordinarydairy.com/pdfs/Supplements/Milk_Pkg.pdf

pp. 24, *WC&P*, July 2001). It's backed by BASE Lombardini Food Group, an Italian chain of fast food restaurants. According to Aqua Store's Shelia Armon, the water bar is "the biggest store in Italy about specialization and commercialization (of) mineral water."

According to Michael Libotte, who visited Aqua Store, "Aqua is nice, modern with lots of light. The store windows feature bottles of different famous mineral water brands." There are also panels with the description of well-known Italian brands such as Rocchetta. On the panel is information about the source, the percentage of CO₂ and more technical data. Plus, over 50 brands of bottled water are available. Aside from selling water, the Aqua Store also gives advice to customers as to which mineral waters are healthy. In addition, the water store incorporates a touch-screen developed by Dr. Alexander Zanasi of the International Association Water Academy in Oslo for additional customer information.

Aqua's manager said it plans to open other stores soon. With over 1,500 customers daily, Aqua Store could lead the second wave of water bars to come.

Conclusion

It's not certain when or where this phenomenon will strike next or whether it ever will make a go of it in the United States. But historic European sensitivities to bottled spring waters make such chichi endeavors more prone to success on the Continent.

About the author

Arthur von Wiesenberger is a consultant and author of magazine articles and four books on bottled water. He's developed several websites and has consulted for such beverage companies as Arrowhead, Crystal Geyser, Evian, Perrier, Poland, San Pellegrino and Trinity. He graduated from Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, Calif., and is a managing partner at Best Cellars L.L.C., developers of BottledWaterWeb.com. He can be reached at (805) 564-8005, ext 1564, (805) 879-1565 (fax) or email: avw@bottledwaterweb.com