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Water Ways: More Restaurants Favor Filtered

To charge or not to charge for house-filtered water? In a challenging economy, the answer isn't always clear.

By Amelia Levin, Contributing Editor -- Restaurants and Institutions, 10/1/2009

Alice Waters' public announcement two years ago that she was banning bottled water at Berkeley, Calif.'s iconic Chez Panisse and serving tap to her fine-dining guests was a watershed moment for the green restaurant movement. Many fellow Bay Area restaurants followed suit, and so have others across the country.

But operators who want to satisfy both the environment (by not sending plastic bottles to landfills) and guests' desire for clean drinking water face a dilemma. Not only does eliminating bottled water dry up a lucrative profit source for restaurants, offering house-filtered water is hardly free. The vast majority of operators don't charge customers for water filtered in-house, so they must find other ways to recoup the cost of purchasing and installing the filtration equipment (which can run a few thousand dollars or more).

Some restaurateurs are reconsidering their free-water policies as operating costs continue to rise and diners trim check averages by cutting back (or even cutting out) the kinds of beverages they do have to pay for.

"I think every operation will begin to look at this situation differently," says Art Jackson, a general manager at Chicago's Bice Bistro. "There are definite money issues to take into consideration, and operators want to cover their costs."

Asking people to pay for tap water, even if it is filtered, can be a dicey proposition. Here's how several operators are treading carefully around the issue.

Savings on Tap

In Chicago, many restaurants use water-filtration systems out of necessity. The city's hard water can cause damage ranging from limescale buildup to rusting in coffee pots, pasta cookers, steamers and other water-based cooking equipment.

"We filter our water for both environmental and economical reasons," says Pete de Castro, owner of Tavern at the Park, a high-end steakhouse in Chicago. "It helps reduce corrosion keeping repair and maintenance costs down." Serving the filtered water to guests, which Tavern does at no charge, was an easy next step for de Castro. "The bigger reason for serving the water is that we can reduce waste by offering a [carafe] at each table." Avoiding plastic bottles not only reduces landfill waste, he says, but in Chicago, waste-removal fees accrue according to the amount of waste hauled away.

At sustainability-centric restaurant Province in Chicago, chef-owner Randy Zweiban offers house-filtered tap water to guests for free and keeps costs down by serving the chilled drink in iceless carafes. "It just makes more sense to serve water this way because it also is less of a mess when trying to refill glasses at the table, he says.

Trading Down

In hotel foodservice, where water can run customers as much as \$8 to \$10 a bottle, some operators are closing the gap by offering filtered tap as an alternative (an option that happens to serve environment-conscious as well as budget-conscious diners). "People nowadays don't want to spend the money to upgrade to bottled water because of the economy," says Tamas Vago, food and beverage director at the InterContinental Hotel in Chicago. "But they are happy to have something better than tap water."

Instead of putting a price on each glass of filtered water, the hotel built the cost into the menu, Vago says, at an increase of about 25 cents per menu item. At that rate, customers have barely noticed the difference.

At Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village, near Santa Monica, Calif., guests pay \$4 for a carafe of filtered sparkling or still water, which is half the price of bottled water on the menu.

When the hotel first introduced the filtered water as an option about a year ago, guests had a "very positive response," says Thomas Hoffman, food and beverage director for the Southern California property. "Everyone was looking at being green and environmentally friendly so [it] made sense."

Filtered water also provided an intermediary option between pricey bottled water and unfiltered tap. Right away, total water sales increased. But recently sales have dropped for both beverages. "People have returned to drinking regular tap water because of financial issues," says Hoffman. "To help sell more carafes, we have had to train our staff to explain to guests what's special about the water, why we're doing it, and why we're charging for it."

Extra Credit

Another way operators are justifying the price of house-filtered water to consumers is by giving them more for their money. Typically, customers who fork over the \$2 to \$4 for a carafe of house-filtered water get unlimited refills. And most filtration systems dispense sparkling water as an option.

At Chicago's InterContinental, house-filtered sparkling water has been a hit, especially among European customers who are otherwise used to spending \$5 to \$10 for imported bottled sparkling water when they travel to the U.S.



Tavern at the Park delivers filtered water to tables in glass carafes and matching glasses.

Some water-filtration systems also allow operators to add their own natural flavorings, such as lemon or raspberry, to the sparkling water. At present, Hoffman, Vago and de Castro say they don't see much demand for the flavored water, but that could soon change. Flavored water topped the list of water beverages consumers said they would like to see offered more often at restaurants, according to *R&I's* 2008 Beverage Census. Although the survey inquired specifically about flavored bottled waters (with no option for flavored house-filtered water), the finding indicates an opportunity for operators as they develop their beverage menus.

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Filtering Facts

Water-filtration systems vary, but generally they either use pressure to remove salt and impurities from tap water, or they employ UV technology combined with high-carbon filters to blast away impurities. Whatever the method, both systems filter local tap water, which is chilled in the unit and then dispensed as still or sparkling water.

Dispensers typically come in two forms: a simple dispensing system similar to a soda dispenser; or a more aesthetically pleasing system for front-of-the-house display, similar to a draft-beer tower with stainless-steel taps and a ceramic base.

Most operators serve filtered water in glass carafes, which may be etched with the restaurant's name; manufacturer-branded carafes are another option.

At least one manufacturer's water-filtration system comes with a service support program, which includes pre-installation water testing for optimal filtration based on the location's water hardness and mineral count.

For more information on water-filtration systems for restaurants, visit *Foodservice Equipment & Supplies'* Web site at fesmag.com.

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A dispensing unit for chilled still and sparkling water.

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