

The Highest-rated Brands of Bottled Water

When scouring the landscape of reports on bottled water, we found many passionate write-ups on the subject. The most helpful in identifying the best products were multi-product taste tests conducted by 20/20 (summarized by an ABC News article), Real Simple and Scientific American magazines, and television show “Tricks of the Trade” (summarized by FineLiving.com). All the reports utilize blind taste tests, which is the most effective way of ranking the best products on this market. However, another sentiment commonly felt in these reports is that, while popular, bottled water may not hold a health advantage over what is pumped through most American taps.

Bottled vs. Tap

According to ABC News, bottled water is not necessarily any better for you than tap water. This seems to be the consensus we found among many other reports including Scientific American, FineLiving.com, and the Boston Globe. It may seem strange then that the bottled water industry is worth over \$9.8 billion in the US alone, including price tags that may be up to 7,500 times more per gallon than regular tap water. Why then are Americans spending their hard-earned money on a commodity that flows abundantly throughout most of their households? The answer, says ABC News, is primarily advertising.

Companies that market bottled water, including giants such as PepsiCo and Coca-Cola, want the consumer to believe that their product is superior in taste and health benefits to your local municipal water supply. In many cases this just is not true, yet 54% of Americans drink bottled water regularly. Among the taste tests that we found, tap water consistently ranked above average when compared to bottled water, but we also found that some brands fared better than others (including tap) over more than one test. Ironically enough, in an industry that already has a built-in price premium, the more inexpensive brands were typically the ones that did best in studies.

Overall Best Choice

Although there does not seem to be a clear consensus among taste tests as to which brand is the absolute best choice, 20/20 rates a K-Mart brand water called American Fare at the top of its list. A test of 39 bottled waters performed by Consumer Reports in 2000 also highly rated a K-Mart brand (Prestige Premium). Because of these findings, K-Mart brand waters are the closest thing to an expert’s pick for overall best choice. At \$1.28 per gallon, it is inexpensive compared to the higher profile bottled waters and is just as easily accessible due to the vast number of K-Mart locations throughout the country. More popular brands such as Coca-Cola’s Dasani and PepsiCo’s Aquafina were consistently rated as middle of the pack waters by most of the sources we found.

Under-performing Brands

One brand that experts say to avoid is Evian. This French staple of the bottled water industry is significantly pricier than most brands yet placed last in three out of the top four reports that we found. It was only given a decent review in the Real Simple report which states: “The rich viscosity gives this water a “wetter” feeling and a smooth taste.”

Evian's price tag of \$5 per gallon is just way too high for a brand that underperformed in the top reports. Poland Spring water by Nestle will also not be included in Fast Answers due to its consistent placement at the bottom of the pack in taste tests.

Is bottled water worth the cost?

As mentioned, the biggest discrepancy amongst collected reports was not which brand of bottled water is best but is bottled water worth its cost when compared to the abundant supply of municipal tap water that we have access to in this country. To resolve this issue, we can start by looking at the health benefits or detriments of both bottled and tap waters. According to FineLiving.com, tap water is regulated by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) while the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) handles bottled water regulation.

Against popular belief, the regulations on tap water are much stricter than those imposed on the sale of bottled water. In fact, the FDA only regulates about 30% of existing bottled waters, and no regulation is required on the federal level for bottled waters produced and sold in the same state. One such example of this is that the FDA has no requirements for testing of parasites such as Cryptosporidium or Giardia, which is a requirement of tap water. The FDA states that the sources from which bottled water comes from are unlikely to harvest these dangers and testing for them is unnecessary. Even so, experts say that, for most people, health safety is not an issue to those who choose to drink either bottled water or from a tap.

The marketing efforts of corporations have led the average consumer to believe that bottled water is much safer than regular tap, or at least tastes better. The facts just do not show this. There are other reasons why consumers prefer tap water's much more expensive counterpart. The New York Times states that "Bottled water is undeniably more fashionable and portable than tap water." A good case for portability can be made, and marketing has done its job in making bottled water fashionable.

When considering this, it is not all that surprising that bottled water has caught on like it has, even when 1/4th of all bottled waters state on their labels that their contents come from a municipal supply (same as your tap). As stated though, certain brands are ranked higher than others, so ultimately the choice to purchase bottled water is yours and this report will help you make the best choices, based on the research we have collected, when doing so.

Types of bottled water

It is helpful in making an informed decision to know the different types of bottled water that exist on the market today. Drinking water, the general name for all bottled water, is water sold for human consumption with no added chemicals or sweeteners. It must be free of calories and sugar and may or may not contain low levels of sodium. There are six different types of drinking water that are classified for bottling by the FDA. These types include artesian, mineral, purified, sparkling, spring, and well water. The following descriptions of each have been gathered from bottledwater.org.

Artesian water: "Bottled water from a well that taps a confined aquifer (a water-bearing underground layer of rock or sand) in which the water level stands at some height above the top of the aquifer." Fiji brand is an example of artesian water.

Mineral water: “Containing not less than 250 parts per million total dissolved solids... No minerals can be added to this product.” Evian brand is an example of mineral water.

Purified water: “Water that has been produced by distillation, deionization, reverse osmosis or other suitable processes while meeting the definition of purified water in the United States Pharmacopoeia may be labeled as purified bottled water.” Popular brands Dasani and Aquafina are both examples of purified water. This group also represents the 1/4th of bottled waters that originate from municipal sources (tap).

Sparkling water: “After treatment and possible replacement with carbon dioxide, contains the same amount of carbon dioxide it had at the source (not to be confused with soda water, seltzer water or tonic water).”

Spring water: “Bottled water derived from an underground formation from which water flows naturally to the surface of the earth. Spring water must be collected only at the spring or through a borehole tapping the underground formation feeding the spring.” Arrowhead Mountain Spring Water and Ethos brand are both examples of spring water.

Well water: “Water from a hole bored or drilled into the ground, which taps into an aquifer.”

Although sellers of each type try to persuade the consumer that their type is purer, no evidence has been found that any type is purer or better than another. According to Forbes, any other type of water that is sold, including those with added flavor, enhancements, or vitamins, is considered a soft drink.

Types of bottles

Another consideration when purchasing bottled water is the container itself. Experts say that water tastes best in glass, but most of the purchased bottled water in the US comes in bottles of the plastic variety. Most come in one of two types of plastics. The first is called PET (polyethylene terephthalate) or PETE plastic, and the second is HDPE (high-density polyethylene).

Consumer Reports says that water tastes better when it is packaged in clear PET plastic, rather than cloudy HDPE plastic. They state that HDPE can “impart a slight, melted-plastic taste.” You can tell the difference by looking at the bottom of the bottle: PET plastics have #1 on the bottom while HDPE products show #2. #3, which is PVC plastic, should be avoided at all costs since it contains toxins that are harmful to both humans and the environment. However, when water is ice cold, these taste differences become much less noticeable.

Best brands of bottled water

Because of the large variety of bottled water brands on the market today, experts do not unanimously agree on one that stands out among the pack as the best. Taste tests largely rely on the preferences of the testers involved and are thusly subjective. The top test that we found proclaimed K-Mart’s American Fare the winner among five others that were tested. American Fare was also the cheapest choice at \$1.28 per gallon, not including regular tap water. As mentioned, another K-Mart brand, Prestige Premium,

was rated highly in a 2000 Consumer Reports taste test of 39 brands. Consumer Reports did state that a hint of plastic existed when testers tasted the K-Mart water. It should also be noted that Aberfoyle, a brand sold by Wal-Mart, took top honors in a test summarized by the Real Simple report.

As far as the more visible brands, PepsiCo's Aquafina holds the highest percentage of the US market share for bottled water sales. Aquafina won top honors in a taste test conducted by television show "Tricks of the Trade" where it was preferred by 33% of the testers. It also was ranked second in the 20/20 test after K-Mart brand. This comes with a hefty price at an estimated \$6.82 per gallon, along with some mediocre to poor ratings.

The Real Simple report places Aquafina eighth out of ten stating that "The top seller is among my least favorites because of a slight papery taste in the mouth and a bitterness in the aftertaste." A report from Bill's Water World also alerts us that since Aquafina moved its production from Springfield, Missouri to Bloomington, Illinois, the quality in taste has gone down. Other popular brands such as Dasani and Nestle's Deer Park were consistently rated as middle of the pack, although nothing indicated that they were poor choices.

Fiji bottled water received its fair share of accolades in the tests, with no indications that it had any shortcomings. In the Boston Globe test, Fiji got a thumbs-up from testers, and New York Magazine states that "Clear yet full-bodied, this artesian water from tropical rain is the best option at the average deli." The only thing holding it back was its absence in the best multi-product taste tests that we found, so it is hard to say how Fiji would have tested against other brands that fared well. Priced at \$5.77, Fiji is a top choice among "higher end" mainstream waters.

Lowest rated brand

The most unanimous decision that stuck out among the top reviews was a negative rating for Evian brand water. In the ABC News, Scientific American, and FineLiving.com reports, Evian ranked last among other brands. Couple this with a relatively expensive price tag of \$5 per gallon and it is fair to say that, based on the reviews, Evian would not be good choice when purchasing bottled water. Over half of the tasters in the 20/20 test said that Evian plain tasted bad; with one going as far as saying "It tasted like toilet water." While this may be an extreme opinion in one case, it is safe to say that the experts do not recommend Evian brand water under any circumstances.

What the experts say

- **Water gets its taste from minerals and trace elements.** Chances are, if you do not like one brand, there may be another one out there that suits you. This is due to the many different origins of bottled water.
- **Water tastes better in clear hard plastic than in opaque plastic.** Glass is the absolute best medium for optimizing taste of water, but most brands of water are bottled in plastic. Choosing a hard, clear plastic is imperative in getting the best taste out of your water.
- **The differences between inexpensive and expensive brands are hard to identify.** In this industry, pricier does not always mean better, and in all cases

that we found it does not at all. It is better to go with an inexpensive brand that your tastes are comfortable with.

Overall, the purchase of bottled water can be a tricky one due to the mass quantities of brands and companies on the market today. Taste tests are subjective, and experts generally say to pick a brand that you are comfortable with. If the less expensive brands suit your taste, then that makes the most sense as the more expensive brands do not typically test any better.

Alternative Considerations

We found that the main alternative to bottled water, municipal tap water, comes highly recommended by almost all experts. As covered in detail above, the perception that it is worse for you than bottled water is generally a false one. The fact is that about 99% of the major municipalities in this country provide perfectly safe water. At an estimated price of \$0.01 per gallon, it is also 240 to 7,500 times cheaper than bottled water. However, if you live in an area without this commodity, then it is time to look for alternatives such as bottled water.

In blind taste tests, tap water fared extremely well. In the Scientific American report, regular New York City tap water was preferred by 45% of all testers. Another test showed that 75% of New Yorkers preferred their tap to bottled water.

Detractors of tap water state in most cases that they do not like the taste. This can be remedied in a few different ways. One is to simply store the water in a container in a refrigerator for 20 minutes. The chlorine (added by some municipalities for purification) taste will dissipate in this time. Another way is to use a home water filter such as a pitcher or faucet mount system. For more information on this, check out our report on [Water Filters](#). With these considerations and expert consensus, we are including municipal tap water in our Fast Answers report.

One more alternative to the standard bottled water choice is Ethos, a socially conscience brand. Instead of the proceeds going to a large corporation, Ethos uses its profits to bring purified, safe water to parts of the world that do not have it. At \$3.77 per gallon, this is a sound purchase, especially in a country that has this luxury along with bottled water choices.

Best Research

A great place to start learning about bottled water is the [International Bottled Water Association \(IBWA\)](#) website. Facts about bottled water and regulations are both listed on the site.

The [US Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) also is a good resource in identifying types of bottled water. A comparison between bottled and tap water is located here.

The [Natural Resources Defense Council \(NRDC\)](#) has an expansive list of websites including a comparison of EPA and FDA water regulations.