

# The Water Rush

The pursuit of perfect drinking water ends in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia.

by Gideon Lewis-Kraus

ARTHUR VON WIESENBERGER, the water master at the Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting, is seated at the head of the table at the Complimentary Welcome Lunch for Judges. He's wearing a thin blue tie and sunglasses, so it's hard to gauge his reaction when Jeanne M., the éminence grise of Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, leans back in her chair, collects the attention of the assorted judges present, and stage-whispers, "Well, since all water tastes the same, anyway..." She trails off to enjoy the wake of half-scandalized titters.

The comment itself isn't surprising. It's by far the most common reaction to the idea of a water tasting—and this water tasting in particular, since it bills itself as the world's largest and most prestigious such event. (To dispense immediately with the answer to the second-most-common reaction: No, you cleanse your palate with neither orange soda nor spicy beef jerky, but with Carr's Table Water Crackers.) But this rejection of water tasting's premise is surprising when uttered by Jeanne, who not only organizes this town and this event but pretty much invented it. It is especially surprising, and a shade impolitic, that she has said it within spitting distance of Mr. von Wiesenerberger of Santa Barbara, California, a consummate professional and quite possibly the world's greatest expert on the taste of water.

ANYWHERE ELSE, THE FOUR AND A HALF acres of muddy, flat grass cross-hatched by asphalt paths and crowned by a green-pink-

and-white gazebo would be the town park. Here in Berkeley Springs, population 663, "the country's first spa," it is a state park. It is, in fact, the smallest state park in the nation. Along the embankment on the west side of the park is a camp of low-slung yellow-brick buildings that house the Berkeley Springs, font of the town's hydrocentric entertainments. Besides the springs, the town's attractions include antique malls, craft shops, acupuncturists, and a homeopathy museum.

George Washington, who surveyed the land for owner Lord Fairfax in the 1740s, was a frequent visitor. In Washington's time, the springs leaked desultorily from the embankment, which since the 1880s has been presided over by a small castle. Visitors dug their own ditches in the soft ground, waited for them to fill with water, and soaked. Today, however, the springs are organized into three dirt-bottomed wading pools with concrete sides. A viaduct delivers a channel of the 74-degree water down from the pools and through the park to the Roman Bathhouse at the northern end. At night, a silvery froth blows up from the water and hangs, a light, low shimmer of mineral smoke, over these dark dugouts. From a distance, the froth rising from the foot-high walls gives the impression that three small buildings have been very politely bombed, leaving perfectly intact foundations. The Roman Bathhouse, which offers half-hour soaks in the warmish water for twenty dollars, was built in 1815 and is one

of the town's oldest extant buildings. Outside the bathhouse is Lord Fairfax's Public Tap, where anyone with a barrel and an honest thirst can come and draw up to five gallons at a time for free.

In the late 1980s, Jeanne and other local leaders came up with the idea of hosting a water tasting—a tie-in to the spa culture—as a gimmicky way to pique tourist curiosity in the off-season. Jeanne, however, did not count on Arthur von Wiesenerberger, of New York, Rome, Geneva, Paris, London, and late (since 1973) of Southern California's Central Coast. As indicated by her flippancy, Jeanne seems to look at the event as little more than a just-might-be-wacky-enough-to-work conceit. The high point of the festival's visibility, she reports, was when it was featured in a spot on the *Tonight Show*: After Kent, Ohio, won the gold a few years back in the best municipal category, Leno sent a team, armed with all the predictable jokes, to Kent. Grainy clips from the broadcast loop on a VCR outside the tasting room throughout the weekend. By the end of lunch, it's clear that the organizers' estimation of the event isn't much higher than Leno's.

But Arthur von Wiesenerberger considers the goings-on anything but silly. When I first met him in Santa Barbara, it took him about ten minutes to convince me that water tasting, when done properly, is not only a practice on the rise but a legitimate pursuit. Uneducated about wine, uninterested in cigars, and unrefined when it comes to most every other epicurean delight, I was won



The culmination of the Berkeley Springs Water Festival 2006.

Photograph by Susannah Dowell

over by Arthur's unpretentiousness and confident sensibility. This international water tasting struck me as a good opportunity to set myself upon an odd but promising and uncrowded path toward a new *afición*.

Arthur has slicked-back, gray-blond hair that ends in pomaded curls fluffed above his thick, reddish neck; his plump jowls are bronze-pink and he looks not unlike a short and Continental George Washington. He spent his childhood in New York, but when Arthur was ten, his father semi-retired and moved the whole family to Rome. In one of the von Wiesenbergers' Rome apartments, the tap water was naturally carbonated; shampoo, Arthur says with wide eyes and a lathery pantomime, fizzed in your hair, and toothpaste spumed. When he was a teenager, there were more than two hundred varieties of bottled mineral waters in Italy alone, and most

towns had their own local brand on offer. He was trained to think about water not only as one might think about wine—which waters go best with which foods, and so on—but as one might think about vitamins. Europeans have long held that certain waters have demonstrable medicinal properties.

Arthur went away to boarding school above Montreux, Switzerland, and on to various vaguely identified but exotic-sounding educational institutions in Paris and London before settling in Santa Barbara. Upon repatriating, Arthur brought with him a small chest of his favorite waters, the French brands Contrexéville and Badoit first among them. At some point, he was writing for a magazine called *Wet*, which focused on “everything from surfboards to hot tubs to waterbeds,” when Arthur's editor saw his water cellar and asked if he

would do a small piece on bottled waters. This article grew into Arthur's first book. The book's late-'70s publication coincided with the Perrier-led explosion in American bottled-water consumption; he was soon hired by the Anheuser-Busch company to help develop its new water division. He has worked in water ever since, as a writer, consultant, and fancier.

Arthur's first public water-mastering was the Great Bay Area Water Tasting, organized by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1980. Since then, he has helped stage similar events in Texas (“lake water,” he says with a shrug), Florida, and elsewhere. When Jeanne put the first Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting together in 1991, the public-relations firm she hired found Arthur. He has been water master for all except two of the BSIWTs. Arthur is not



without a sense of humor—this weekend he seems particularly fond of one-liners about FEMA and Dick Cheney, which are hammy yet told with an endearing self-deprecation—but he is very serious about water, very serious about the future of water connoisseurship, and as serious about the Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting as he is permitted to be.

However, after fifteen years mastering this event, Arthur knows what he is up against: the jokes. The worst thing about a water tasting are the jokes.

MY OWN TRAINING AS A JUDGE—purely for reasons of affiliation with this magazine, I have been invited to serve as a judge—does not begin until Saturday, the day of the actual tasting, but I'm eager enough to start that I check into Arthur's seminar for the preliminary-round judges on Thursday afternoon. Jeanne and my other hosts from Travel Berkeley Springs have suggested I spend this time making the rounds of local art galleries, but I'm nervous about my unschooled palate and feel that if I'm going to be a responsible judge—and if I'm going to come out of this with a heightened sensitivity to water flavor—I ought to attend as much training as I can. The fourteen judges here have been asked to handle the first round, which cuts the field of about a hundred waters in half. They sit around a few long coffee tables in a basement conference room at the Coolfont Resort outside of town. Windows look out onto a dappled lake with a small beachfront. Arthur is wearing all black: a button-down shirt with white buttons, baggy Calvin Klein jeans, and a belt with a bright silver buckle.

The first-round judges, consisting of restaurateurs and landowners and members of the media from around the region, pass the baton of self-introduction around the table. Nobody says much else until we get to Charlie B.; there's a whole raft of water-tasting jokes inside of Charlie B., and his skin ripples in anticipation. He introduces himself as a retiree from D.C., though his accent is a raspy 1950s Far Rockaway. He's a volunteer at the local library. "Yeah, so, I'm qualified as a judge because I usually drink water every day." Pause, pans the room. "Every single day."

Awkward tee-hees around the table. These jokes operate on two levels. There is the anxiety that this might be just an inane

event and we're wasting our time here. And there is the more pressing anxiety that this is not at all an inane event and we're unqualified to judge it.

Arthur launches into his spiel before the jokes paralyze the mood: We are here to taste water as one might taste wine. Europeans drink water for what's in it, for its minerality, while Americans tend to drink water for what's not in it. As water commutes through the earth's crust, it "acquires a personality" or "develops a style." Magnesium might give water one particular flavor, while potassium—which Arthur pronounces "botazhium"—might give it a different flavor. Silica can make a water feel silky. The Japanese like young water, water that has not spent years streaming through geological filters like aquifers. One can be trained to be more perceptive about water. One *really* can be trained to be more perceptive about water. The results vary little from year to year, which lends some credence to these proceedings.

On the tables in front of us are pink "trial" judging sheets. Across the top run a series of boxes for water numbers, and down the side is the set of criteria we'll be using. Arthur goes through the criteria one by one, and explains what to look for.

The first criterion is Appearance, which is rated on a scale from zero to five. Good is colorless; bad is cloudy. Self-explanatory, so Arthur moves along quickly to Odor, which is also based on five possible points. The box on the sheet has one example of a positive descriptor on the left side—in this case, "none"—and a row of possible characterizations of water odor on the right side: chlorine, plastic, sulfur, chemical, musty. Next on the list is Flavor, rated out of ten points; the left side of the box reads "clean" and the right side has the identical list of identifiers provided for Odor, plus "salty." Mouthfeel is back down to a five-point criterion, and the relevant distinction is "refreshing/stale." There's a five-point box for Aftertaste (this one on a spectrum from "thirst-quenching" to "residue"), and finally we come to Overall Impressions.

Overall Impressions is scored out of fourteen points, which makes the total available points for each entrant an eyebrow-raising forty-nine. The fourteen-point scale is provided to us on an attached sheet. It was developed by a food scientist at UC Berkeley named William Bruvold. In the '60s, he pioneered experiments in the acceptability lev-

els of total dissolved solids in water, and he used his students as subjects; he incrementally increased the turbidity of the sample until the water came to resemble Turkish coffee and his students refused to drink it. Out of these experiments came this scale, which Arthur tantalizingly referred to the day I met him in Santa Barbara. Arthur seems a bit sheepish about the language of the document.

The fourteen-point scale, in its entirety, reads exactly as follows (all formatting original):

1. This water has a TERRIBLE, STRONG TASTE. I can't stand it in my mouth.
2. This water has a TERRIBLE TASTE. I would never drink it.
3. This water has a REAL BAD TASTE. I don't think I would ever drink it.
4. This water has a REAL BAD TASTE. I would drink it only in a serious emergency.
5. This water has a BAD TASTE. I could not accept it as my everyday drinking water, but I could drink it in an emergency.
6. This water has a BAD TASTE. I don't think I could accept it as my everyday drinking water.
7. This water has a FAIRLY BAD TASTE. I think I could accept it as my everyday drinking water.
8. This water has a MILD BAD TASTE. I could accept it as my everyday drinking water.
9. This water has an OFF TASTE. I could accept it as my everyday drinking water.
10. This water seems to have a MILD OFF TASTE. I would be satisfied to have it as my everyday drinking water.
11. This water seems to have a LITTLE TASTE. I would be satisfied to have it as my everyday drinking water.
12. This water has NO SPECIAL TASTE at all. I would be happy to have it for my everyday drinking water.
13. This water TASTES GOOD. I would be happy to have it for my everyday drinking water.
14. This water tastes REAL GOOD. I would be very happy to have it for my everyday drinking water.

We are instructed to use this scale to do a trial judging of three preselected waters, all poured into three identical glasses in front of each participant. One of my glasses has some pink lipstick on the rim, so I meekly request

a replacement. Arthur encourages us to use the sheets provided, but also to feel free to go beyond them; we should not feel limited to the adjectives (or, as it were, nouns) provided. One previous judge, Arthur tells us, coined the term *wet-Band-Aid* water, which, he explains, is the taste of water that one might suck out of a wet Band-Aid after having accidentally worn it in the shower.

We hold our glasses up to the fluorescent light; we nose their bouquets; we slosh our water and let it cover our palates; we record our comments on the pink sheets in front of us.

"Who liked water number one best?" Arthur asks. Six people raise their hands. Arthur fishes for comments. One man says he liked it because he found it "the most refreshing." Another woman takes issue with this, commenting instead that she "didn't find it very refreshing." She thinks for a moment. "It was not as refreshing as number two."

Arthur reassures the judges, who fidget. "Remember," he says, "that there are no right answers. Don't be nervous." Four of the judges prefer number two. One judge raises her hand, then lowers it, and seems to rethink her initially enthusiastic endorsement. She reraises her hand. "Did number two have, well, what do they call it in wine tasting, when you swish the glass around and the wine stays on the side of the glass? I think number two had that."

"Legs'?" Arthur asks. "They're called 'legs.' And sure, it's possible that some highly mineralized waters might have legs. But, on the whole, we do not do a whole lot of swirling here, no. Not much swirling."

We come to water number three. One mousy man, a second-string judge who's been silent thus far, looks up and smiles. "I really liked it. It had a lot of taste."

Charlie B. looks over at him. "*Oh my God*," Charlie says. "That stuff was repellent. *I cannot believe anybody liked that water*. It tasted like chlorine and pipes." Charlie is charming in a brash way and has shown, in conversation thus far, a clever and supple palate and a flair for description, but I am still glad he will not be judging with me. (After a last-minute cancellation, however, he will be promoted to serve as a first-string judge, but I will always keep my opinions to myself around him.)

Arthur confirms Charlie's revulsion by revealing that water number three is, in fact, tap water from Washington, D.C., where tap

water has been periodically nonpotable due to its lead content. The mousy man turns bright red and looks down at his pencil scrawls on the pink paper. "I grew up in Washington," he admits.

Arthur smiles. "Well, that brings up a good point. We're very attached to the water where we come from. It's one of the biggest factors in determining our taste in water. When we did the Great Bay Area Water Tasting in 1980, all of our judges were amateurs, and we tasted twenty municipal waters from around the whole Bay Area. We had one professional wine taster there, a Frenchman from the Chateau Lafitte family. Every single judge ranked the three Marin County entrants as the medal winners. But we had one ringer in the group—this was the *Chronicle's* idea, to have a ringer, so they went out and bought the most expensive bottle of water they could find, which was this French brand that sold for \$3.50 a bottle in 1980—and every single taster there ranked it last. Except the one Frenchman, who ranked it first." Arthur adopts a slight French accent. "'It reminds me of home,' this Frenchman said. And it turns out, this water was, in fact, the water he'd drunk as a kid! So don't worry, sir."

The man who fancies plumbous water waits for Arthur to finish his story. "You can just invert all of my results." Charlie B. looks as though he's about to stand and second this motion, but thinks better of it.

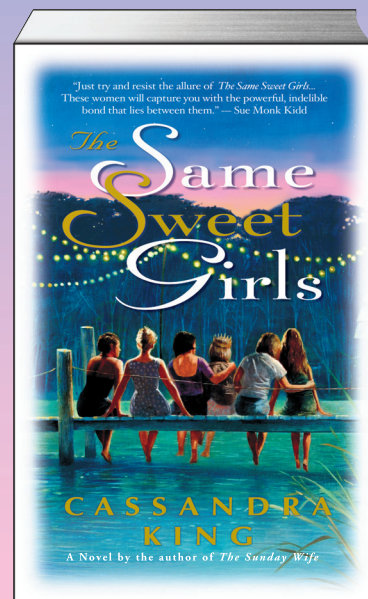
Once the training time is up, we move next door to the tasting room. Members of the water industry, bottled and municipal, have volunteered to stack and pile bottles of water atop cardboard boxes in front of the judges' tables, which are on a raised dais in front of seventy-five chairs. One man heaps bottles into sloppy hillocks. A woman slips around behind him, sorting his messy piles into gentle swells. She lines them in rows by height and color, and arranges them along the floor in a long wave.

On the podium, some of the judges are taking tastes of water and stuffing the water between their top lips and their teeth, then puffing it out, and then squirting the water farther out into their cheeks like chipmunks. This technique was not covered during the training. From what I can tell, Charlie B. invented it.

ON SATURDAY AT 1 P.M., the first-string judges file into the training room and I have

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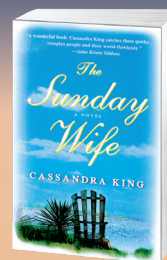


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a chance to meet my colleagues, only a handful of whom made it to the welcome lunch. Almost everyone has come from within a two-hour radius, and most of them work for local press organs. There is a young, Charleston-area newscastrix and a reporter from *Faerie* magazine, as well as a tall and tentatively dour man from the society pages of the *Washington Times*. One woman is making her fourth appearance as a judge; she has now written about the event three different times for three different magazines, and today she is a representative of *Virginia Living*. From what I can tell, she's the sharpest of all of us, but then again, she has the most experience. We move around the room introducing ourselves. Arthur, clad in a cadmium yellow Val d'Isere polypropylene mock turtleneck tucked into his black CK jeans, goes into his routine, which remains unchanged from Thursday. We move quickly through the list of criteria, make our way through the test tasting, and are shepherded into the tasting hall.

The eleven of us move up to the dais. Large name tags emblazoned with our media sponsors sit in front of rows of empty water glasses, each atop a numbered disk sloppily traced in thick marker on white copy paper. Jill Klein Rone, the part-time producer of the festival and the mother of Happy, the chief water-bearer, stands up to make a short introduction.

"This festival is first and foremost about drawing people to the town of Berkeley Springs, but it also has economic and financial impacts. Last year, the day after the festival, the winners in the municipal category—Desert Hot Springs, Arizona—went to Washington to lobby for more money for their water board. And every door they walked into, they introduced themselves and the people in Washington said, 'We know you, you just won the Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting.' So this event *literally* opened doors for them.

"We usually have a big buildup and then say, *Let the waters flow!*" Jill concludes, "but today we don't have much time, so we're just going to go ahead and get started."

Happy and her phalanx of associate water-bearers are already pouring waters into our rows of empty glasses. To my left is the morning-news anchorwoman, who has already begun to taste her waters. In each flight, she will ice me with her speed and tasting agility, her unflappable evaluative

confidence; she never once goes back to revisit an earlier score in light of subsequent waters. The first flight of waters today are the municipal tap waters. There are twenty to taste.

Since it's not all that much fun to watch anybody taste anything, especially water, Jill and Arthur occupy the small crowd with distractions from a podium to our left. The event goes into telethon mode. We are onstage with our routines—holding, nosing, scribbling—while various presenters inherit the microphone. The crowd of thirty or fifty people mills around and pays halting attention. A gentleman gets up and delivers a talk on water-bottle design, but all I really can hear is a list of human body parts that he finds handy as analogies. Arthur disappears and comes back in a white lab coat and a microphone headset. He says, *Europeans like water for what's in it but Americans—Japanese like young water that hasn't—Silica can make the texture seem—* And so on. I nose a water, taste it, write down a number, move along to the next water, maybe go back to retaste and make a score change. I lean over and check on the progress of the anchorwoman.

IT IS PRACTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE to take the Appearance category seriously. Water is just not supposed to have color or visible particulate matter of any kind floating in it. A few years ago, a company called Glacial Milk registered a cloudy water in the competition, and it apparently confounded the team of judges. Appearance is a yes-or-no proposition, and there's no extending that proposition over a zero-to-five spectrum without feeling fraudulent. I examine waters one and two in the municipal tap water flight and find them both quite acceptably clear, and decide that from that point on anything that looks transparent enough to me gets a four. Every once in a while there's a water that for no particular reason looks awesome—perhaps it catches the light well—and I give it a five. One water I give a harsh three, but I can't really say why.

Odor is a borderline case. But since Arthur has told us that water is supposed to be odorless, and this more or less conforms to consensus opinion among the kind of casual water drinkers we once were, we again find ourselves in a difficult position. There's certainly more room for variation in Odor than there was in Appearance, but these variations are almost always to the water's dis-

credit. You should not be able to smell chlorine in drinking water. If you can smell minerals—number five has a faint scent of rain-slicked slate—it can be good or bad, depending on preference and familiarity, but most people are turned off. I find, during the tasting, that a slight mineral smell has a certain personal appeal. So I don't make this the binary of Appearance, but I restrict myself to a narrower range than the full zero to five. I have a similar take on Aftertaste. *Thirst-quenching*, the suggested term of approval for the criterion, strikes me as misapplied. And *residue*, the opprobrious alternative provided, seems like a horrible thing in any water.

Which leaves us with two promising categories: Flavor and Mouthfeel. With tap waters, the range of flavors is small. Chemical tastes are easy to identify and are not winning. One way to evaluate this would be on a spectrum of chlorination, but that's no longer really a matter of taste, and even less a matter of connoisseurship: A lab test could tell you the chlorine level, and taste could be safely extrapolated from there. But, even after abstracting away the issue of chemical tincture, I am pleased to discover actual differences in the tastes of the tap waters. Number four has hints of apple and grape. (I feel betrayed when it is later disqualified for having been shipped to Berkeley Springs in unwashed fruit-juice containers.) Number seven, more legitimately, has no chemical smack, but tastes like running your tongue over the wood and then metal elements of an elementary-school desk. Number eleven features a nice sharpness to it, almost an astringency. Number twelve makes me pucker.

Once I reach the mid-teens, it is necessary to return to some of my earlier figures. I am finally feeling more discerning about the nuances Arthur has tried to describe. He also seems to me right in saying that some of them have a silkier or smoother texture than others do. The newscastrix breaks the rule about conferring and leans over to tell me that she likes number eighteen. When I get to eighteen, fifteen minutes later, it tastes to me like pencil shavings, with a stony aftertaste.

I reach number twenty and put my pencil down, more drained than I expected to be. We have a small break before we start in on the purified drinking waters, a relatively recent addition to the roster at Berkeley Springs.

Purified drinking water is water with everything but the strictly necessary items



removed. This category is not only absurd but almost infuriating. There is zero variation to the purified drinking waters, and I am inclined, after noticing the slight and almost pleasant variations among the tap waters, to say that the very idea of purified drinking water—Aquafina, for example, which Arthur calls “the Velveeta of water,” or Dasani, which Arthur won’t even comment on—is an insult to what we are trying to do. All of them seem bland and flat in comparison to the finest tap waters. (In retrospect, the tap waters have gained a universe of flavors, and I would like to go back and retaste them.) Dasani is the water, subjected to rigorous distillation, that flows through the taps and the toilets of the Coca-Cola bottling plant, and it is the best-selling water in the United States. This might be evidence in favor of Arthur’s characterization of American preference in waters. Or it might be a matter of packaging and product placement and ballpark franchises and local deli saturation and all of the other marketing aspects that make people skeptical of bottled water in the first place, and make the judges as uneasy about our duties as we are vigilant in carrying them out. When it comes to this flight, there’s all the justification in the world for the kind of disgust with which Tom Wolfe, for example, regards “designer waters.” (The designer waters are certainly here: One entrant in the competition for best package design is Bling H2O, apparently backed by a Hollywood screenwriter and selling for \$38 a liter, which has a lissome frosted bottle and its logo blocked out in Swarovski crystal.)

But I doubt Tom Wolfe has ever judged a water-tasting competition. When it comes to the final two flights, there is some real reason to believe Arthur and believe in the possibility of the water connoisseur. We take a short break to freshen up—they’ve asked us to dress nicely for the evening portion of the event, which includes the awards ceremony—and allow our overwatered palates to recover. We return in two hours for the final two flights: bottled noncarbonated water (spring water, artesian water, other top-shelf waters) and sparking mineral water.

BY THE TIME I REACH water nineteen of the bottled noncarbs, I have palate fatigue, and no matter how many wicker-basketfuls of Carr’s Table Water Crackers I eat—they’re supposed to stimulate saliva production—

the fatigue doesn’t really improve. Despite my worn and unresponsive palate, there are obvious and important differences to these waters. But I feel ill-equipped to articulate them. None of the categorical identifiers apply: None have a chlorine burn or a chemical tang. Varieties of the word *metallic* spring to mind most often, for obvious reasons. And quasi-synonyms of the word *wet* (*soggy*, *slippery*) tempt, but don’t communicate much.

The final category, sparkling mineral water, is comparatively easy. There’s a huge difference between a carbonation of two atmospheres and four, and the basics of the language are simple to pick up. Perrier has a big, unruly, aggressive “bead”—i.e. bubbles—and is thus good as a mixer, while waters that are good when paired with food have a finer and more even bead. Some of the mineral waters have a tartness to them, and as the tasting progresses it’s possible to make even finer appraisals. But where tasting purified drinking waters was inane, tasting these verges on uninteresting: There’s no danger that the activity might be ridiculous. The differences between the mineral waters are no less variable than the differences between

chocolates or coffees, and nobody disputes the existence of gourmets in those areas. The appeal of a water tasting, the appeal of water connoisseurship, is that one might successfully be trained to recognize the smallest possible nuances of taste in a liquid most people may rightly, if blithely, consider tasteless; if a water aficionado is not a preposterous figure, he might lay claim to being the most savantlike connoisseur of all.

But with the bottled noncarbonated waters, the heart of this competition and Arthur’s endeavor, it’s just really hard to say whether it makes any sense to talk about water connoisseurship. Coming into the event, I hoped it would; a new awareness of water’s subtleties might be transformative. My sense by the event’s finale, strange as this may sound, is that it’s too early to say.

After the event, I talk to a bottler named Bill. I ask him how he got involved in water.

“I’ve been drinking it all my life.” Bill is in his mid-fifties, and has a deeply lined, tanned face and spiky white hair; in a robin’s-egg-blue V-neck over a tight turtle-neck, he looks like a preppy David Byrne.

I ask Bill how long he’s worked in water. “A few years,” he says.



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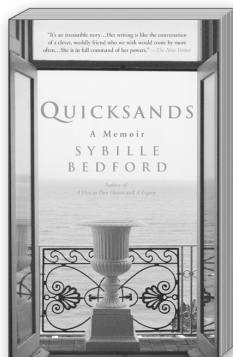
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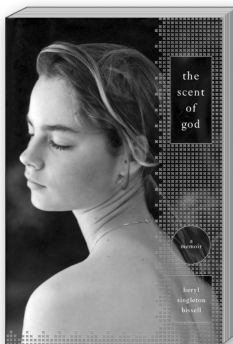
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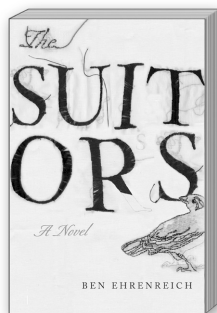


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## IN WEST VIRGINIA

As politely as I can, and out of genuine curiosity, I ask Bill how it's possible that these jokes haven't gotten old to him.

"I'm a cynical man," he says after a moment's thought. "I have to keep a certain cynicism about the whole thing, at least to outsiders."

Bill continues: "Because it's not always easy to talk to outsiders. It's a new language to learn. It's a matter of learning how to use new words, and having enough experience with those words that they start meaning something to you."

Bill's point, though well-put, begs the question. He presumes that there exists a well-developed and coherent vocabulary for water tasting, but that's not been the case here in Berkeley Springs. Most of the judges, both in the training sessions and in the tastings, resort to "refreshing" and "not-refreshing," and then there's "clean-tasting" and "drinkable." Some of the more specific terms Arthur introduced—metallic, chlorinated, and so on—have proven useful, but they are a simple language of identification, not a complex language of shade.

About half the length of Arthur's book *The Taste of Water* is devoted to a glossary, which tries to create the kind of water-tasting vocabulary I wish I had at my disposal. He explains what might be meant by "earthy" and "elegant," and there's a reasonable degree of coherence to his definitions. But Arthur has redefined these words in private, and there's little evidence—at least here, at the world's biggest international water tasting—that they've caught on.

Part of the problem is the nature of this event. The event's sponsors want a panel of media triflers like me, who know little to nothing about what a "delicate" water might be but might call attention to their nice town. You can't train someone in half an hour and expect to deepen the well of collective appreciation. The event should be weeks long, with discussions around examples of "green" waters and "dull" waters. All of these terms might form a meaningful vernacular if there were enough imaginative and experienced water tasters around to glean them from Arthur's glossary and enliven them in conversation. So the future of the water connoisseur is a murky one. Water tasting might continue to be a novelty, as for the most part it is here, or Arthur could persuade a new community to sprawl on the sense terrain he's tried so hard to stake out.

For now, however, the odds don't look good for Arthur. The winners are announced in a small ceremony. Great Glacier of Oxford, Wisconsin, takes first in bottled noncarbonated. The silver and gold, respectively, in best municipal go to Kent and Montpelier, Ohio. Of the top five in sparkling mineral, two go to Macedonians and two go to Bosnians, making the former Yugoslav republics the Ohio of Europe; Antipodes, from New Zealand, takes home the gold. Top honors in purified drinking water go to some brand whose name I don't really care to catch, since I loathed every entrant. I'm choosing not to report on best package design, because it runs contrary to the event's rightful aim. (Some of the packages were pretty fantastic, though.) Medalists get a certificate and a glass bowl-like thing that seems like a melted kaleidoscope.

"When we do the Water Rush," Arthur implores in his final moment as water master, "please don't jump over or push or hurt each other." Arthur dislikes the Water Rush, which is when members of the audience—whose ranks have swelled to perhaps a hundred in anticipation of this moment—get to run to the dais and grab as many bottles of water as they can. One greedy man in the front row has two huge, empty duffel bags. He is, apparently, a regular. Another couple has yard-long Rubbermaid containers. There are mesh bags and shopping bags and sweatshirts with the sleeves tied off.

Jill announces the beginning of the Rush, and the crowd descends unto the waters. The man from the front row literally throws his young daughter onto the pile, and she scrambles around on top and tosses him the distant bottles as he collects the closer ones. People are on their knees, elbows flying, stuffing their pockets and containers. The fancier-looking bottles get snapped up right away, and it's waters like the unprepossessingly packaged Water Boyz of Santa Fe that get rounded up last. Jeanne grins and takes pictures.

The heap of bottles is gone in less than eight minutes. But not before I've gotten in there and secured a dozen or so of the winners, which I will take home and store in a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight. I still have some faith in Arthur, the bon vivant of water, and maybe I'm getting in on the ground floor. ★