

On tap: Tap water, please!

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

The March 3 lectionary texts encouraged Christians to think about water. In John 4:14 Jesus tells the woman at the well that “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up eternal life.” The woman answers, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

The March 8 *Wall Street Journal* printed a cover story by Shelly Branch about the delivery of water in today’s restaurants. She featured Todd Goodrich, a New York waiter who spoke for many as he described how restaurants can make money off of water in a slow economy. Some of the suggested devices appeal to the sense of sight: place bottles on the table for a “visual sell.” Bring the water out in a gorgeous silver bucket, doing a kind of eye-catching ballet. Pour bottled water into crystal goblets, but use only simple tumblers for tap water. Or do the “fast pour,” in which the waiter keeps filling glasses, sip after sip, in order to sneak another bottle or two of designer water to the table. The waiters who follow this advice engage in what Branch calls a “ruthlessly manipulative science.”

Some New York restaurants charge \$14 for a one-liter bottle of Badoit or Alpenrose water, a sum that represents a mark-up of five or ten times wholesale cost. There’s a new CD-ROM training manual, “Pour on Tips,” that tells servers they can earn hundreds of dollars “simply by offering bottled water instead of tap.” It gives the emphatic advice: Don’t offer tap water; ask whether the party prefers San Pellegrino or Panna. Ask, “Would you like to have a couple more bottles chilled down?” People will say yes; it feeds their ego.

Note that the word “tap” has already appeared three times. Here are some more. “We make a point of not saying ‘tap,’” says a California restaurateur. “It just doesn’t sound very professional.” Worse, drinking tap water stigmatizes us. Says server Dollfin: “I get great pleasure out of making each of those ladies who are trying to impress their friends . . . repeat the word ‘tap’ back to me.” They can’t bring themselves to say the low-down word. It makes them blush.

Now “tap” has appeared seven times and I’m not blushing. What is the problem with that word? Should we go to a thesaurus to find alternatives that won’t make people blush? My thesaurus offers options that would turn out like this: instead of “Do you want a bottle of Hildon or tap water?” we could say: “Do you want [a choice bottled brand] or a) faucet water; b) spigot water; c) stopcock water; d) cock water; e) valve water; f) spout water; g) gate water; h) petcock water?”

Of these, “tap” sounds best and is least likely to make us blush. Cole Porter wrote songs celebrating “beat, beat, beat” and “tick, tick, tock” and “drip, drip, drip.” Why don’t you (or one of “those ladies”—how un-PC can a waiter get?) pretend you are Cole Porter and practice “tap, tap, tap” until it trips easily off the tongue and triggers no blushes?

In Chicago’s best restaurants you can get bottled Chicago tap water, or just free water from the tap, if you can bring yourself to say the word and ask for it. But if it remains a turn-off, turn it off. There are other options.

I’d dwell on the “living water” that quenches and lasts so that neither the woman at the well nor you or I have to go back to the well. Or endure waiters practicing a “ruthlessly manipulative science.”

Tap water, please! That’s 16 “taps” on one page. It gets easier all the time. I’ll soon be ready to go to a restaurant again.