

BEING GREEN VERSUS MAKING GREEN

# Bottleneck

## Restaurateurs ponder best way to serve water

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So far, it appears that bottled water is still going strong in Las Vegas. "The trend I see is that people are ordering more bottled water," said Alex Stratta, executive chef of Alex and Stratta at Wynn Las Vegas.

"I think a lot of people are kind of conditioned," said Michael Jordan, chef/owner of Rosemary's Restaurant on Sahara Avenue. "Either they go for the tap or they go for the bottle, and that's the way they dine."

There does, however, seem to be more of an awareness about water, mainly concerning the taste of what flows from our taps — and the way water bottles tax the environment in terms of production, transportation and disposal.

Mike Paice, president of GWC-Pure-O-Flow, said he's seeing increased demand for the company's reverse osmosis systems. "It's kind of a cost savings for them, when they can offer purified water and offer that they're becoming a green restaurant."

And while Jordan sells bottled water as long as there's a demand, he now offers his customers purified water as well.

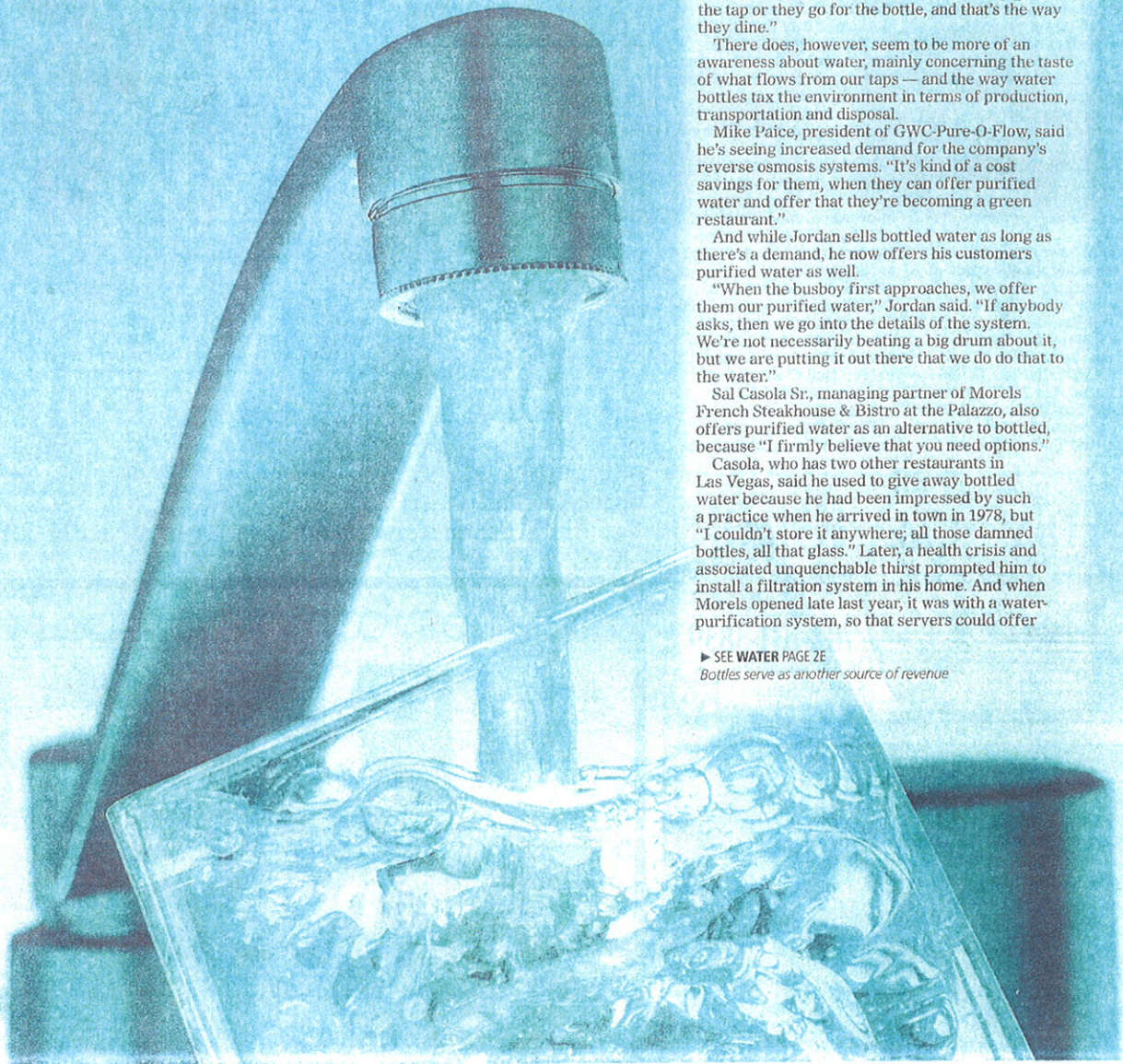
"When the busboy first approaches, we offer them our purified water," Jordan said. "If anybody asks, then we go into the details of the system. We're not necessarily beating a big drum about it, but we are putting it out there that we do do that to the water."

Sal Casola Sr., managing partner of Morels French Steakhouse & Bistro at the Palazzo, also offers purified water as an alternative to bottled, because "I firmly believe that you need options."

Casola, who has two other restaurants in Las Vegas, said he used to give away bottled water because he had been impressed by such a practice when he arrived in town in 1978, but "I couldn't store it anywhere; all those damned bottles, all that glass." Later, a health crisis and associated unquenchable thirst prompted him to install a filtration system in his home. And when Morels opened late last year, it was with a water-purification system, so that servers could offer

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*Bottles serve as another source of revenue*



## ▶ WATER: Restaurants realize bottles can serve as another source of revenue

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good-tasting, nonbottled water to customers as an option to Evian and Perrier.

The trend also is showing up on less highbrow levels. Don DeMichele, chairman and chief executive officer of Kaimos Partners, one of the owners of the Southern Nevada Dunkin' Donuts franchise, said the local shops use reverse-osmosis systems. Mainly, he said, that's because "we care about the taste of the coffee," but also, "we're not generating plastic bottles or anything else, and we're able to meet our quality level every time by delivering a consistent cup of coffee."

At Alex, Stratta said he made "a huge effort when we first opened here to get an RO system in next to our stockpot. The basis of cooking at Alex is chicken stock, which is 80 percent water."

When he first moved to Las Vegas from Phoenix, where he had a water-filtration system, he noticed his sauces did not taste right. "You can't get away from that tinny, metallic, muddy flavor of the water. We changed the water and, next thing you know, it's a huge difference."

He keeps big bottles of water — similar to the old office water cooler — in the back for the staff, and if a customer requests tap water, that's what he or she gets.

The restaurateurs concede that bottled water is a revenue source. Jordan said he was so enthused about the new water-purification system in his restaurant, he initially told the staff to get rid of the bottled water.

"They said, 'Wait, that's a revenue center,'" he recalled. "In all honesty, we kept it around as a service; the guest is just depending on that

product."

But in terms of the revenue generated, he said, "that definitely crosses everybody's mind. That's going to be a big hurdle to get over, especially in fine dining, because those margins are so tight."

Casola, who also conceded the revenue issue, but added "I'd rather sell you a drink" than a bottle of water, thinks the pendulum will eventually swing in the other direction, "as long as you offer the second option."

"If the option's there, I figure it will change," Casola said. "I don't know if it'll change the mentality of the corporate diner, but the guy like me it would change."

Then again, "it might change the corporate diner, too. Because he's concerned about the world, too."

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