

Thirst for Bottled Water

By Ato Ekusa

In ancient times, the Japanese called their land "a luxurious land covered with rice paddies." And of course, the rice plants could not grow without a lot of water. So Japan was known as a country with plentiful water. A medium-latitude archipelago surrounded on all sides by the blue ocean, Japan has a rainy season in early summer, typhoons in autumn, and heavy snowfall in winter. For ages the Japanese took water for granted, just like the air they breathed.

Moreover, a range of mountains, 2,000 to 3,000 meters high, runs down the spine of Japan, and the many rivers that flow rapidly from these provide much sparklingly clean and mineral-rich water. Before World War II, ships leaving the port of Yokohama reported that the tank water on board remained drinkable even after they crossed the equator. At that time Japan's tap water was extremely tasty.

As Japan became increasingly industrialized in the postwar years, however, the destruction of its forests and rivers progressed in proportion to the growth of its economy, and outbreaks of pollution became common. As its rivers became increasingly dirty, the country's tap water lost its fine taste. Because it had to be disinfected, the water smelled of bleaching powder, and the mineral content declined.

So it came to be that even in Japan, the land of water, mineral water became available in bottles. The first bottled water to go on sale in Tokyo, in about 1965, was "Fuji Mineral Water" from the hot spring resort of Shimobe in Yamanashi Prefecture. At first it was used in bars in the high-class Ginza entertainment district as a mixer for whiskey. Newspapers ran stories on the phenomenon with humorous headlines like "Water for Sale—It's the Age of Watering."

From around 1970, however, the pollution of Japan's rivers took a turn for the worse as the process of industrialization continued unabated, and the taste of tap water deteriorated. Demand for bottled



A Tokyo department store has opened this "Aqua bar" that serves water only, symbolizing the recent boom in the popularity of mineral water.

mineral water for drinking in the home therefore began an upward trend that has continued to this day. In the last two or three years especially, demand has spiraled; the total shipment of bottled mineral water in fiscal 1990 (April 1990 to March 1991) reached 150,000 kiloliters.

According to an official of Suntory Ltd., which supplies a lot of the mineral water that goes to bar owners and the like, "The ultimate gourmet item now is water. Some people even cook their rice in mineral water these days." An official of House Food Industrial Co., which accounts for nearly 50% of the home-consumption mineral water market, said, "Both the business as a whole and our Rokko water are enjoying phenomenal growth."

Following a revision of the food sanitation law in 1985, imported mineral water has made inroads into the Japanese market, especially Volvic, Evian and Vittel from France. Sales of imported mineral water reached 25,000 kiloliters in 1990, a 24-fold increase over six years. While Volvic claims to be a soft water similar to Japan's, Evian aims to focus on enhanced quality to appeal to Japanese consumers.

In the last two or three years Japan's local governments have been trying to cash in on the boom, as part of their efforts to revitalize local economies. Kumamoto Prefecture, on the southern island of Kyushu, has been promoting delicious water from Mt. Aso on the streets of Tokyo. And the town of Iwaizumi in Iwate Prefecture, northern Japan, has begun selling bottled water from nearby Ryusendo, which is famous for its limestone caves, by mail order through the post office. The product is included in a mail-order catalog available at post offices throughout the country.

When Japanese travel to countries in Southeast Asia, they are advised not to drink tap water. Nevertheless, many people still become ill, because the ice in drinks is often made from the local water. Such experiences serve to remind people of the importance of good water—and to guarantee that the demand for bottled water in Japan will continue to grow. ■

Ato Ekusa is a free-lance reporter based in Tokyo.