

Simple Tastes

Tap water is put to the test by the people who know it best.

BY RICHARD RIES

Jeff Nash, one of three judges, assesses an entry at the competition, won by the Peace River Manasota Water Supply Authority (right).

WE MIGHT ASK RENOWNED CRITIC ROBERT

Parker for advice on tasting wine. For beer, perhaps Jim Koch, the Sam Adams guy who sponsors beer-tasting events across the nation. Coffee? Maybe Starbucks' CEO Howard Schultz. But to whom do we turn for water tasting? And isn't it just two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen anyway?

Answers: (1) Environmental engineers; and (2) It is—and it isn't.

First of all, I thought for sure a "water tasting contest" would revolve around bottled waters. A "Fight of the Century" between Coke's version of tap water, Dasani, and Pepsi's Aquafina (neither of which is spring water). Or perhaps Florida's actual spring water Zephyrhills would sumo-wrestle France's Evian or street fight Maine's Poland Spring. The generic spring waters of Pub-

lix, Winn-Dixie, and 7-Eleven would reveal themselves as champions in a collective flourish, and we would all look the other way at the amount of money we've spent on the stuff.

I was wrong.

The contest was a blind taste test of Florida tap water, sponsored by the Florida section of the American Water Works Association (AWWA), and it took place recently at the Renaissance Orlando at SeaWorld during the Florida Water Resources Confer-



ence. Let Trekkies have their *Star Trek* conventions; let the auto shows exhibit their 2014 models with slinky women. Water professionals have their own powwows, thank you very much—and they have them in large hotel exhibit halls, with displays of state-of-the-art water technology, presentations of conference papers and quaffings of water.

What does a water taster look for? Some surprisingly similar attributes to wine: color and clarity, odor and taste. Water can be

hard (more traces of calcium or magnesium) or soft. It should be clear, not cloudy; odorless and refreshing. "Sometimes water tastes dead," says Jeff Nash, an Orlando engineer who serves as the national director of the AWWA. "Good water should taste crisp." A panel of three environmental engineers presided at the final tasting. No dissenting opinions were issued.

Drinking water is a complex topic that involves more than meets the eye. Environmental



(From left) Judges Jeff Nash, Peggy Guingona and Rick Harmon discuss matters of taste.

engineers, pollution control officers and municipality officials work around the clock to guarantee us life's most quintessential ingredient. They are the unseen and unsung heroes.

While variations in tap water taste are slight, if not microscopically so, Florida water—with its limestone, aquifer and wetlands—can vary slightly depending on the area. We boast the third most square miles of fresh water than any other state, after Alaska and Minnesota. Several factors can affect water taste: its source, its disinfectants and treatment process, the soil and minerals it was near, and piping. Dissolved trace elements or organic material, which show up as “PPMs” (parts per million) in posted consumer confidence reports, can also play a decisive role. But don't let anything scare you into stocking up on bottled water: it is less regulated than tap water and doesn't always beat tap water in blind tests.

For tasting purposes, Florida is divided into 12 geographical regions; Orlando lies squarely in region III. Our regional winner this year was Melbourne (silver and bronze medals aren't awarded

to water), and Lake Mary won a reclaimed water award. The 2013 best-tasting Florida water—the AWWA equivalent of Miss Florida—came from the Peace River. [The Peace River Manasota Water Supply Authority went on to compete at the national water-tasting contest over the summer, but that was won by the Oklahoma City Water Utilities Trust.]

The Peace River sounds like something out of either Greek mythology or the 1960s flower child movement. In fact it originates in a watershed in Polk County, wends its way through Manatee and Sarasota counties, and ends its freshwater life in Port Charlotte, where manatees and other species with penchants for brackish water depend on it.

Richard Anderson, an engineer who accepted the Florida Best Water Award on behalf of the Manasota authority, says its secret to victory was that it doesn't share its source with any other agency. “All water authorities are constantly having to balance the needs of the environment with the needs of society,” says Anderson. “To make water clean, safe, and reliable, you have to be stewards of both.”

CELEBRATING H₂O

If you feel there's more to water than meets the eye, you might want to bring the kids to the Florida Water Environmental Association's Florida Water Festival at Cranes Roost Park in Altamonte Springs on Saturday, October 26. There, water engineers will judge student science water design projects, host a Walk for Water, provide information on local water treatment and the environment, and offer snacks, face painting and prizes for kids. For information go to fwea.org

Springfield in Our Midst—DOH!

BY MARK I. PINSKY

For more than two decades, fans of *The Simpsons* have debated where the iconic TV family's hometown of Springfield is located. Now, Central Florida—in particular, Universal Studios Florida—is making a pretty good argument that it should be here.

In May, Universal unveiled a Springfield-themed area next to its existing Simpsons ride, which exits through a gift shop re-creation of the show's Kwik-E-Mart. Restaurants include Krusty Burger, serving “Krusty-certified meat sandwiches;” Moe's Tavern, featuring the Springfield-produced Duff beer; Luigi's Pizza; Lard Lad's Donuts; and The Frying Dutchman. Still to come: The Androids' Dungeons & Baseball Card Shop (home of the Comic Book Guy) and Twirl 'n Hurl, an outdoor spinning ride based on the space aliens Kang and Kodos.

Over the years, the series' creators and writers have scattered tantalizing, coy and intentionally contradictory hints about Springfield's loca-

tion—there's even a 10,000-word treatise on the subject at the Simpsons Archive at snpp.com. The generic Springfield in the series doesn't sound like Florida: The city has a mountain; a large, navigable body of water; an international border; and a rural area populated by hillbilly yokels. Most speculation has centered around existing Springfields in Ohio, Kentucky and Illinois, with Oregon—series creator Matt Groening's home state—as a long-shot outsider.

On the other hand, Downtown Disney's Cirque du Soleil performed in Springfield in one episode, and Homer's evangelical next-door neighbor Ned Flanders built a Bible-based theme park called Praiseland (can you say Holy Land Experience?).

There's one tiny problem, though: The Simpson family was banned from Florida in the show's 11th season for a spring break beach incident in which Homer drove over a famous alligator named Captain Jack.



Families are chowing down at Simpsonsque eateries.