

I took Pittsburgh tap water to the Academy Awards of water. Here's how it fared.

Plus, some water tasting tips from the world water olympics.




The panel of judges. COURTESY OF SHANE CULGAN

[Rossilynne Culgan](#)
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BERKELEY SPRINGS, W. Va. – As I prepared to judge the world water olympics this weekend, a friend asked, “Do you think you’ll ever be able to enjoy normal water again?”

After tasting dozens of waters from around the globe in what some call the Academy Awards of water, I don’t know that I will. At least, I know I won’t taste Pittsburgh water the same way anymore.

You see, I headed to Berkeley Springs, a small town in the Eastern panhandle of West Virginia this weekend to drink a lot of water. Seriously. As a judge for the [Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting](https://berkeleyspringswatertasting.com/) (<https://berkeleyspringswatertasting.com/>), dubbed “the largest, longest-running water tasting competition in the world,” I sniffed, swirled, and sipped glass after glass of water for appearance, aroma, taste, mouthfeel, and aftertaste.

It’s like a wine tasting ... but sober.

Before the tasting, the weekend kicked off with a Friday seminar titled “Water: Beneath the Surface and Around the Globe,” which focused on the more serious aspects of water. Water experts’ remarks held [guidance for Pittsburgh](https://theincline.com/2019/02/22/3-things-pittsburghers-can-learn-from-the-international-water-olympics/) (<https://theincline.com/2019/02/22/3-things-pittsburghers-can-learn-from-the-international-water-olympics/>), as it handles a lead water crisis, flooding, and landslides.

During the contest on Saturday, we tasted municipal water, bottled water, purified water, and sparkling water from as far away as New Zealand, China, Greece, Japan, and Norway. This year, water from the West Indies made its debut among the 112 entries, of which we tasted the best 60 (a pre-judging on Thursday separated out the other half). Over the contest’s 29 years, more than 700 waters have been entered from every continent but Antarctica.

I’ve never “tasted” water before, so thankfully watermaster Arthur von Wiesenberger hosted a seminar to teach us the tricks of the trade and to enforce the rules. I judged alongside fellow journalists, a chef and a water advocate, and we each received a “Certified Water Taster” diploma.

Ours was a blind taste-testing, meaning we didn’t know the water’s origin and couldn’t see the packaging (plastic, glass, can, or carton) for any of the beverages we tried. Samples were served at room temperature, and we were offered water crackers to cleanse our palates.

First, the rules:

Before tasting, avoid coffee, spicy food, alcohol, and chewing gum.

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Don't wear perfume or cologne.

Don't talk to fellow judges or make loud verbal reactions (like yuck or yum) as these could impact others' ratings.

Take breaks. "Palate fatigue is not uncommon," von Wiesenberger explained. "It takes a lot of concentration." He recommended tasting no more than a couple dozen waters in one sitting.

How to judge water:

Appearance: Hold up the glass to assess the water from good (colorless) to bad (cloudy, suspended particles). Place a sheet of plain white paper behind the glass for extra clarity.

Odor: Take three short sniffs to determine if the water has any odor. Waters with no odor get highest marks. Waters with chlorine, plastic, sulphur, chemical, musty, or metallic odors get low marks.

Flavor: Roll the water around in your mouth and use your tastebuds to determine whether the water tastes clean or not-so-clean (flavors like chlorine, plastic, sulphur, chemical, musty, salty, for example).

Mouthfeel: Typically used in the beer tasting world, this component is also important for water. Is it refreshing and light on the palate? Or heavy and stale?

Aftertaste: How does it feel after swallowing? Did it quench your thirst or leave a residue on your palate?

Overall impressions: This is based on a very detailed 14-tier criteria, basically from 'this water sucks and I would never want to drink it' to 'this water is a delight and I would love to drink it daily.'

The goal is tastelessness. The less odor, the less taste, the better. It was hard to find discernible differences in some of the waters, particularly in the purified category. But for others, the scent and taste were just ... off.

Here are some of the adjectives I jotted down on my scorecards to describe the waters: Salty, manure, chlorine, heavy, filmy, cloudy, thick, chalky, sweet, silky, fresh, crisp.

While the tasting is a scientific process, it's also subjective. For instance, I found one water offensive with its cloudy appearance and chlorinated taste. But another judge said he loved it because it reminded him of his city water at home. I grew up drinking well water on a Westmoreland County farm, so it's no surprise that the natural spring waters appealed to me the most.

Even with our differences, judges were able to reach a consensus on which waters stood out as the very best. If you want really fresh tap water, it seems Colorado or Canada are the place to be, at least according to the list of winners:

Best Municipal Water (World): Clearbrook, BC Canada

Best Municipal Water (US): Eldorado Springs, CO

Best Bottled Water: Smeraldina Natural Artesian Water; Sardinia, Italy

Best Sparkling Water: Mountain Valley Spring Water Sparkling; Hot Springs, AR

Best Purified Water: Berkeley Springs Purified Water; Berkeley Springs, WV

People's Choice: Flavored Essence Sparkling: Mountain Valley Blackberry Pomegranate Sparkling Water; Hot Springs, AR

People's Choice: Packaging: Svalbaroi Polar Iceberg Water; Longyearbyen, Norway



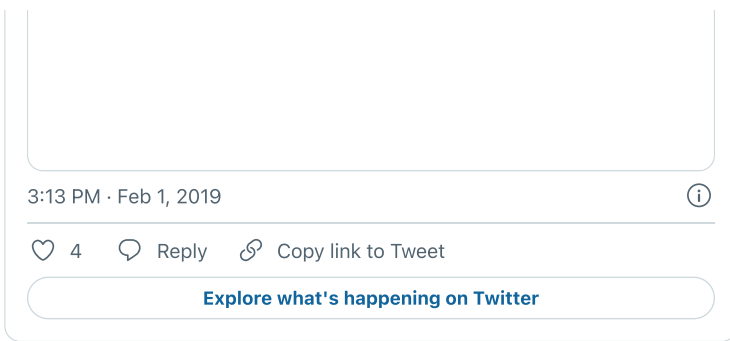
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I'm sittin' on the dock of the bay
Watchin' the tide roll away
I'm sittin' on the dock of the bay
Wastin' time
[#OtisRedding, 1967](#)

Arctic polar night at 78°N but remembering summer with
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For the towns and companies that participated, winning the gold is a big deal. Entrants are mostly smaller, specialty companies, not massive brands like Dasani, Aquafina, or Fiji.

“The impact of winning this event is extraordinary for a bottler,” Jeanne Mozier, one of the event founders, said in a press release. “Several have experienced exponential growth, others closed major deals, and almost all winners redesign their labels to display their winning medal.”

Pittsburgh water takes the stage

Though [Pittsburgh didn't enter this year](https://berkeleyspringswatertasting.com/participants/), its water placed in the [top five](http://berkeleyspringswatertasting.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Winners91-2018B.pdf) of the municipal water category in 1994 and 1995. But don't worry, dear reader. I brought along a bottle of Pittsburgh tap water straight from my Strip District spigot to compare with the others.

I took this water sample very seriously, carefully bottling the tap water in a glass bottle to reduce the chance of any interference from its vessel and storing it in a cool place all weekend until the municipal water tasting round. Here's how it fared:

Appearance: Pittsburgh's water scored well on appearance. It's colorless, and I didn't notice any suspended particles.

Odor: As for odor, I was shocked by the chlorine smell and really shocked that I'd never noticed it before my newfound water wisdom. But, I realized, I normally drink the water from the refrigerator, which filters the tap water.

Flavor: I thought the chlorine smell would negatively impact the flavor, but it surprisingly didn't as much as anticipated. The flavor was fine, certainly not as clean and crisp as the others but not awful.

Mouthfeel: Average

Aftertaste: Average

Overall impressions: Had Pittsburgh competed, it wouldn't have been in my top five, but it wouldn't have been my least favorite, either.






Get water rushed

After the winners are announced, the real fun starts.


During the weekend, an elaborate display of water bottles from around the world serves as decoration, and once the tasting ends, the public can




take as many bottles as they can carry in a wild blitz that's like the Cornucopia scene in "The Hunger Games." It's called The Water Rush.

 **Rossilynne Skena Culgan** 
@rossilynne 

Replying to @rossilynne
Here's the scene from The Water Rush. Sound on.

Watch on Twitter

10:32 AM · Feb 24, 2019 

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Berkeley Springs residents and visitors from all over bring bags to stuff full of bottled water. I even met a trio of friends wearing matching turquoise sweatshirts reading "I want to get water rushed." They traveled from Virginia Beach, Va. and West Chester, Pa. for the competition after stumbling upon information about it when passing through the town last year. This year, they trekked to Berkeley Springs for The Water Rush, and they ended up scoring a bunch of bottles and got what's sure to be a weird but epic story to tell.



Phil Franken and Jeff Coomer, of Virginia Beach; Lisa Butts, of West Chester. ROSSILYNNE CULGAN / THE INCLINE

If you too want to "get water rushed," here's what you need to know to soak it all in:

The water tasting is held annually, so [stay tuned here for 2020 dates](https://berkeleyspringswatertasting.com/) (https://berkeleyspringswatertasting.com/). Next year, the competition will turn 30.

The judging is open to the public to watch, if watching odorless, sober people in black-tie attire sip water on a Saturday sounds like your idea of fun. Just over 100 people filled the venue this year. If you can't make it, you can

watch live online (<https://www.facebook.com/Berkeleyspringswv/>), though it might be a little ... dry.

There are people's choice categories, so you, too, can taste waters and make your opinions known.

Bring a bag for the water rush.

On your trip to Berkeley Springs, you've got to visit [George Washington's Bathtub](https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/george-washingtons-bathtub) (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/george-washingtons-bathtub>), "the only outdoor monument to presidential bathing" because apparently our first president was all about the self care. Also stop by the natural springs, which stay tepidly warm at 74 degrees.

Berkeley Springs is about a two-and-a-half hour drive from Pittsburgh.


Editor's note: Travel Berkeley Springs, a local tourism group, provided lodging to media who served as judges during the competition but had no control over editorial content.

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