

# O.C.'s water is No. 1

**I** GET REALLY squeamish about certain things, like drinking strangers' urine. So when I found out that Orange County is going to recycle all its sewage back into tap water, I figured drinking from the faucet was just one more thing never to do in Orange County.

The Orange County Water District, it turns out, wasn't even hiding its toilet-to-tap plan, but heavily promoting it — including a slick brochure with a glossy photos of a sexy couple splashing each other with poo-water. So I decided to drive down to the plant in Fountain Valley and preview a glass.

Unlike Los Angeles and San Diego, where politicians abandoned similar systems when the public freaked out, Orange County went on the education offensive. Ron Wildermuth, water district communications director, has given more than 2,000 speeches to local groups and secured hundreds of endorsements from experts and community leaders. (Sen. Dianne Feinstein and the Anaheim Optimist Club ... both pro poo-water!)

When I arrived at the plant, there were six men waiting for me — with sandwiches. If Orange County were in charge of the war in Iraq, the French would have joined the coalition willingly.

While I was eating, my new friends pointed out that hundreds of sewage plants upstream are dumping into the Colorado River — which supplies 20% of the district's water — so adding a little sewage isn't going to make a big difference. They also told me that on the space shuttles all the urine — including from lab rats — is recycled into drinking water. I was less persuaded by this sec-

ond argument because astronauts are also willing to drink Tang, eat freeze-dried ice cream and risk getting blown up. When I helpfully mentioned that tap-water drinkers might get an extra thrill knowing they might be drinking O.C. celebrity urine, Wildermuth pointed out that Dennis Rodman lives in the county and that Britney Spears spends a lot of time there. Wildermuth is normally very good at his job.

The water coming into the plant from the sewage treatment facility across the street looked and smelled pretty clean to me, though Wildermuth assured me it would make me sick, possibly because of the Britney Spears urine. I watched it go through three levels of purification. If all goes as planned, next week they'll start pumping that water back underground, where it will filter through rock for more than six months. These guys somehow made cleaning poo-water sound like a Coors Light ad. I was incredibly impressed because I love the idea of gadgets fixing environmental problems, as opposed to my using less stuff.

At the end of the plant tour, I grabbed a plastic cup and filled it with the filtered water. I swirled and sniffed, partly to stall and partly to be a jerk. It had no odor at all. It tasted pretty awesome — slightly sweet and crisp, almost like Deer Park. After some quick tests, we found out it had a concentration of dissolved solids (minerals) of 13 (San Pellegrino has 1,109) and a pH balance of 6.4 (San Pellegrino is 7.7) — making it light and tasteless. Once the department adds some limestone and puts it into the aquifer, the water should end up a little heavier and less acidic. Right now

it's young, like an unaged Chateau Palmer. Even so, I drank a fair number of glasses. Two hours of watching water treatment can build a pretty mean thirst. It also causes a man, before getting in his car for a long drive back to L.A., to make his contribution to the drinking water of Orange County.

**I** GOT A BOTTLE for the road too. I had e-mailed Michael Mascha, the water sommelier who wrote "Fine Waters: A Connoisseur's Guide to the World's Most Distinctive Bottled Waters," for tips on what foods would be best with freshly treated sewage water. Mascha was ready for me. He'd actually tasted the water from a similar plant in Singapore. He said he found the water "flat and lifeless, kind of boring, but perfectly drinkable," and compared it to Le Bleu, a bottled water from North Carolina. He suggested fast food because "junk food has no *terroir* or natural source but is highly processed." So I pulled into a McDonald's for a double cheeseburger. It was a terrific pairing, the water's sweetness cutting through the burger's sodium, the extreme softness of both blending together.

Unfortunately, here in Los Angeles, our mayor is such a political wimp that he'll only back a voluntary water-saving campaign, allowing our precious poo-water to run out to sea. So I call upon In-N-Out to launch a massive "enjoy some sweet groundwater-replenishment-system beverage with your Double-Double" campaign. I could have that meal just about every day.

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