

# MEN'S JOURNAL

## FOOD & DRINK

# What's the Difference Between Seltzer, Sparkling and Mineral Water?



Credit: S.B. Nace / Getty Images

For thousands of years, people have quaffed—and even bathed in—mineral water for its supposed health benefits. Greek physician Hippocrates, Julius Caesar, and Leonardo DaVinci all sought mineral springs for healing. Today, carbonated water, available in a dizzying array of varieties and flavors, is big business: in 2014, according to trade publication *Beverage Industry*, mineral and sparkling waters accounted for \$1.2 billion in retail sales. National Beverage Corp.'s LaCroy Sparkling Water (yes, it's pronounced "LaCroy"—to rhyme, the company says, with "enjoy") has developed a loyal and voluble cult following. Talking Rain Beverage Company has seen sales grow from \$2.7 million in 2009 to a staggering \$384 million in 2014. Suddenly, seltzer is trendy again. But is it the same as mineral water and club soda? What are the differences, and why do we call everything "seltzer"?

The first mineral water craze came to North America in the 18th century, when enterprising residents of Niederselters, Germany bottled the effervescent waters of a local mineral spring for export; according to a 1769 treatise, the water, which contains salts, sulfur compounds, and gases, "tempers and sweetens the whole Mass of Blood, promoting a brisk and free Circulation." Some natural springs are not naturally effervescent, and European scientists began developing various methods for artificially carbonating water as early as 1741. Johann Jacob Schwebpe developed a reliable method for mass production of *sodawasser* in 1783. (Today, the use of the term "mineral water" is [regulated by the Food and Drug Administration](#), which issues guidelines about water source and mineral content for products bearing that label.)

American entrepreneurs began making their own artificial mineral water around 1810. Flimsy bottles often exploded, which meant that seltzer was often enjoyed in public—at pharmacies, department stores, soda fountains, or seltzer stands on the sidewalks of New York's Lower East Side. In 1862, Austrian immigrant Carl H. Schultz began his own artificial mineral water company, using heavy glass bottles with a modified French siphon that dispensed water without letting the gas escape from the bottle. Over the next decades, "seltzer" simply came to mean carbonated tap or filtered water, no minerals added.

Enter seltzer delivery. Just as customers returned glass milk bottles to dairies for refilling, seltzer drinkers left the empty bottles to be picked up each week. Known in Yiddish as *greps-wasser* ("burp water"), seltzer—drinking it and manufacturing it—was especially popular among immigrants from central Europe. Twentieth-century Jewish food doyenne Joan Nathan calls it "the Champagne of the Diaspora." (Many cooks say that adding seltzer to the mix results in a lighter, fluffier matzo ball.)

The seltzer deliveryman remained a New York fixture until the rise of the suburban supermarket—and improved canning and plastic bottling—drove him out of business after World War II. In 1977, Perrier—a French company that began bottling the waters of a spring in southern France in 1898—launched a \$5 million advertising campaign, including a [TV spot narrated by Orson Welles](#), who delivered lines like "its natural sparkle is more delicate than any made by man, and therefore more quenching and refreshing" in dulcet tones. The campaign kicked off a new mania for carbonated water: by 1980, Perrier sales had grown by 3,000 percent. (The company subsequently began using the slogan "Earth's first soft drink.") Brands touted the health benefits of mineral-infused water and the absence of sugar, artificial sweeteners, and caffeine.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, European mineral waters were a yuppie status item, but as consumption of bottled water has grown, carbonated waters have proliferated. (Soda water—also called "club soda," which was originally a brand name coined by an Irish company—is artificially carbonated water with sodium salts added.) At the same time, honest to goodness old-fashioned seltzer, became harder to find. Today, the Gomberg Seltzer Works is the last seltzer factory in New York. For years, the company, founded by Mo Gomberg in 1953, has filled bottles for the last few seltzer men in the five boroughs. "We always knew that seltzer men were getting out of this business, and the business was fizzing out," says Alex Gomberg, Mo's great-great grandson. "These seltzer men are in their late 50s, 60s, 70s, even early 80s. They're not passing these torches onto their kids in recent years."

But the seltzer your grandparents had dropped off at their back door has staged a comeback, with die-hard enthusiasts claiming that siphon bottles, which hold their pressure, produce the best bubbles. Gomberg Seltzer is carbonated at 60 pounds of pressure, while commercial seltzers might be carbonated at 5 pounds. In 2012, Alex Gomberg had just finished a master's degree in higher education administration, but decided to return to the family business. He launched [Brooklyn Seltzer Boys](#) and began delivering seltzer—not only to homes, as seltzer men always have, but, for the first time, to restaurants and bars, taking advantage of the craft cocktail craze. Says Gomberg, "How do you make a better craft cocktail using seltzer? You use a real seltzer bottle."

In addition to Brooklyn Seltzer Boys, seltzer companies in Pittsburgh, PA, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Palm Beach, FL still deliver. But those of us unable to get the good stuff still have a lot of options, including the SodaStream counter-top carbonator, a product relatively new in the U.S. but well established in Europe. Dozens of brands compete for space on store shelves. There's something for everyone.

Fizzy waters may go in and out of fashion, but they never really change, exotic flavors and touted health benefits notwithstanding. It's a universal truth: water's wet—and effervescent. And maybe that's what makes it so great. Americans drink less and less cola each year, and trendy products like Vitaminwater have washed out. Yet no matter what changes, seltzer's appeal never falls flat.

– [Jacqui Shine](#)

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