

# **Southampton tap water said tops in taste in U.S.**

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SOUTHAMPTON - Christos Sierros says one of the reasons he opened a restaurant in Southampton was the quality of the town's drinking water. It seems he was on to something, for that water was declared the nation's best-tasting Tuesday.

Southampton topped 38 other states after a panel of three judges sampled the town's drinking water for bouquet, clarity and taste at the annual National Rural Water Association meeting in Washington, D.C. Held on Earth Day, the contest was the ninth-annual Great American Water Taste Test.

News of the prize was greeted warmly in town Wednesday by residents who appreciate the quality of their town's water - and with caution by some who urged Southampton to take steps to protect its water quality in the long term.

Paisano's, which has been open for more than 10 years, doesn't sell bottled water because the town's water "is so good," said Sierros, an owner of the College Highway restaurant.

"You can tell the beauty of the water - it's very flavorful, clean, tasty," Sierros said. "We hear good things about it. Local people know."

Sierros has worked at restaurants where the water quality was not as good. "A good cook would know," Sierros said. "If there's too much salt in the water, the pizza doesn't come up right and the dough looks sick."

The water used in the contest was sampled from the town's well, which provides more than a million gallons a day to 1,261 homes. The well, located off of Route 10, was made larger in order to serve more people about four years ago, according to Joe Slattery, Southampton's water superintendent.

"I still can't believe that we won it - what are the chances of a small, little community like this going against the whole continental U.S. and coming out on top?" asked Slattery, who was notified by the association but unable to make it to D.C. this week. "I'm really, really thrilled that we emerged as victors."

Last year, Three Rivers, a village in Palmer, won the national contest.

"That speaks pretty well for the water departments throughout Massachusetts," Slattery said.

A few Southampton residents shopping in the town's center Wednesday said they were not surprised by the news.

"It's a good deal for us, it's clean, it's tasty ... we should bottle it," said Tony Brbovic, who disconnected his private well to use the town's supply a couple of years ago.

Neighbors Carl Strader and Rachel Perriti, residents of Southampton for about 30 years, say they drink the town's water every day. "If you're going to buy bottled water, it will cost you as much as gasoline and that's exorbitant," Strader said. "A lot of it's coming right out of somebody's tap anyway. You don't know where it's from."

### **Conserving the quality**

The town's water comes from the Barnes Aquifer, where sand and gravel deposits were laid down after the glaciers retreated, according to Smith College geology professor Robert M. Newton, who has been studying the aquifer since 1982.

Robert Floyd, of the Conservation Commission, said Southampton's nationally ranked water quality is one of many reasons the town's natural resources need to be preserved.

"Our water quality is essential to our way of life," Floyd said. "We underestimate the important value of our health when it comes to being able to fill a glass from the tap and it is essential that we start planning to conserve the town's natural resources because they're the only ones we have."

The salt used to protect roads when they are covered with ice can be a problem for drinking water systems, as runoff affects local soil quality, groundwater and surface water supplies, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Web site.

Road salt, which has contaminated more than 10 private domestic wells on Route 10 in Westfield and Southampton, is a long-term threat to the Barnes Aquifer, according to Newton, who is a member of the Barnes Aquifer Protection Advisory Council.

"It's definitely a concern," Newton said. He noted that the council has not yet done careful studies regarding the effects of salt contamination in wells that use the aquifer because it is not a "big, looming threat."

The salt is suspected to have contaminated private wells not located in the aquifer, Newton said. Contaminated wells tend to be drilled into bedrock, which has less pervasive water flow than the aquifer's sand and gravel deposits, he added.

Timothy and Linda Wing, who have a private well on 407 College Highway, started drinking bottled water about a year ago, when a group from Smith College tested their water and advised the couple not to drink it. Timothy Wing said his well water is not safe to drink or cook with, and it makes dishes "grimy" after running them in the dishwasher.

Linda Wing's doctor advised her not to drink the water because she has high blood pressure, he added.

Wing's daughter, Cherilynn Boden, who has a private well on 415 College Highway, has two young children and spends about \$10 for 10 gallons of water a week for drinking and cooking.

Beginning in January, several complaints have been filed with the state Highway Department.

"There's really nothing I can do about it. If road salt is the source, it's going to happen forever," Wing said after he filed his complaint in February. "The only way I can see that it would ever be secured is to have town water put in. All the wells here are the same."

### **Impact of development**

Another long-term threat to the town's water quality is development, according to Newton. "As you pave over, put big tanks and put different kinds of industries in the area, you put pressure on the aquifer," he said.

He added, "The Barnes Aquifer needs to be protected because it has the best water."

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