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Page: 64
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The good oil on that bottled water

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Dollars and sense



WHAT do you buy each time you reach into a shop fridge and grab a 600ml bottle of water?

About one-quarter of a bottle of oil, according to most authoritative estimates – taking into account the oil that has been used to make the plastic, turn it into a bottle, transport it to you and then take it away to be buried, burnt or recycled.

And you are buying more water than you imagine: typically double what's in the bottle when the water needed to cool and clean the bottling machines is taken into account.

So how did it come to this, and why is it still like this when both water and oil are more scarce than

they have ever been? That's the mystery investigated by American author Elizabeth Royte in *Bottlemania: How water went on sale and why we bought it*.

We haven't always bought bottled water in modern times, although we certainly did in earlier times when public water wasn't safe.

Royte says the "outrageous success of bottled water in a country where almost 90 per cent of the tap water meets or exceeds federal safety regulations, regularly wins in blind taste tests against name-brand water and costs 240 to 10,000 times less than bottled water is an unparalleled social phenomenon – one of the greatest marketing coups of the 20th and 21st centuries".

It began with Orson Welles intoning in 1978 that, "There is a spring and its name is Perrier." Sales tripled on a campaign built not around thirst, but image.

Then in 1989 came polyethylene terephthalate. The new so-called PET bottles were "cheap, light, shiny, bright and clean".

The advertisements used the pop star Madonna and pictures of waterfalls and mountains to imply that drinking bottled water was a "path to enlightenment – like practicing yoga or eating organic food".

Sales exploded from 115 million to 4 billion in seven years.

Along the way there was help from a myth – that each of us needed to drink eight glasses per day.

Royte traced it back to the food and nutrition board of the US National Research Council which once said that an adult needed one millilitre of water for each calorie of food.

But the board also went on to say that most of that water was already in the food we ate. Cooked rice and noodles are full of it.

And there was a particularly nasty attempt to change the attitude of restaurant patrons. Waiters were trained to shame them into paying for bottled water, sometimes by forcing them to repeat the word "tap".

In Canberra, with tap water too good to bottle, we should be above that.