

Can you tap bottled water?

Susan Botes spoke to hydrogeologist and South African National Bottled Water Association (SANBWA) chairperson John Weaver, and found that starting a bottled water brand presents farmers with a salesperson's challenges.

BETWEEN 80 AND 100 BOTTLERS of natural water in SA produce over 120 million litres a year, generating half a billion rand in turnover.

Local mineral water consumption grew a phenomenal 34,7% in 2006, as South Africans became more health conscious and averse to chemically sanitised tap water.

But John Weaver, hydrogeologist and chairperson of the South African National Bottled Water Association (SANBWA), warns that even if a farmer owns a suitable water resource, developing a lucrative sideline from it isn't always easy.

"It's a full-time job, not something to pursue in your spare time," he explains. "You have to be committed, but most importantly you have to be a salesperson at heart. When you look at a bottle you have to realise the water inside is a symbol of health and good living. Its quality requires getting the water microbiologically uncontaminated into the bottle and avoiding the number of places you can contaminate it – but that's only 10% of the business. Some 90% of the hard work lies in the packaging, marketing and distribution.

Get attractive packaging, then go knock on doors to get your product on the shelf. Once you've done that, you've got to make sure your distribution system is on the ball. The most important thing I tell farmers is to go look in the mirror and ask the person looking back at them if they're a salesperson. If they can answer yes without hesitation, then they can make it work."

Getting started

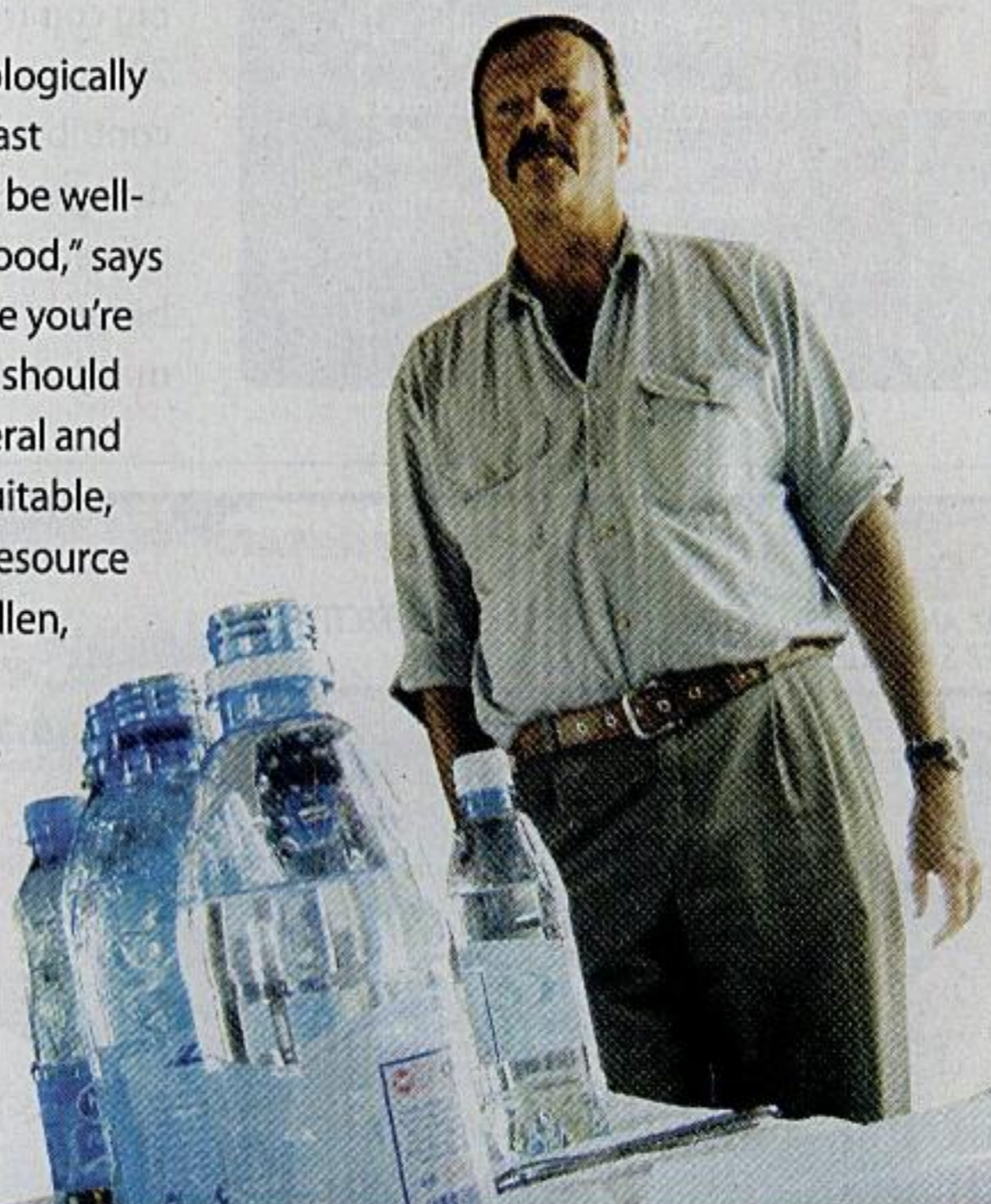
Bottled water needs to be microbiologically pure. Sinking a borehole costs at least R50 000 and the borehole needs to be well-protected. "The water must taste good," says Weaver, "Mainly to yourself, because you're the one selling the product." Water should also always be analysed for its mineral and microbial content. "If the water is suitable, the farmer has to secure his water resource against contamination by yeast, pollen, spores and faecal matter from insects and animals," he says. "More serious contamination threats come from organic chemicals, septic tanks and livestock kraals." Bottling water

means fulfilling a long list of requirements regarding buildings and facilities, hygiene, amenities and control, the filling operation and sanitation, your equipment, procedures, processes and control measures. The SABS standard, SANS 1657, has rules for treatment, testing, bottling, packaging and labelling.

• Contact SANBWA on (011) 884 5916, e-mail sanbwacg@worldonline.co.za or visit www.sanbwa.org.za. |fw

SANBWA chairperson John Weaver during a water-tasting event near Muldersdrift.

CORNELIA DU PLOOY



What makes good water?

Weaver explains water is divided into three classes. "Mineral water comes from boreholes or natural springs. Water defined by origin comes from a specific water resource without passing through a community water system, like iceberg water or rainwater. Prepared water originates from any acceptable water supply, even a tap."

The SA market carries mineral and spring water. "Mineral water travels through an aquifer (rock formation) and takes on the mineral character of the rock," he says. "It's pumped directly from the rock strata to the surface via a borehole. It's secure from contamination, and care must be taken that it doesn't become

contaminated once it reaches ground level." Spring water is also from a subterranean source, but flows naturally to a surface point and isn't pumped. It can be difficult to protect from contamination. Weaver recommends sinking a borehole above the spring, capping it to ensure it isn't contaminated.

Bottled water is classified as sulphate, alkaline or saline. Water with a predominantly sulphate taste is rare in SA. Saline water has a low alkalinity, a predominantly sodium or chloride taste, and comes from quartz rocks, mainly in mountain areas. High-saline water is found in SA's drier areas such as the Karoo, Kalahari and

Northern Cape. Low-salinity water is found in the mountainous coastal regions of the Western Cape, and the Natal and Mpumalanga highlands, and includes the brands Ceres, Bené and Caledon. Weaver compares its refreshing, light taste to a good Sauvignon Blanc.

Alkaline water is usually accompanied by high calcium or magnesium levels. It comes from dolomite or limestone areas, is found in Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Northern Province, and includes the brands Nestlé and Valpré. "This type of water has a fatter, broader taste," says Weaver. "It's more complex and somewhat acidic because of the weight of the minerals."