

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

A TALE OF ARSENIC AND OLD WAYS

Southland Armenians are surprised, and a bit miffed, by an FDA warning on a traditional tonic water.
By Rong-Gong Lin II, Times Staff Writer
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For generations, bottled mineral water from the town of Jermuk has been a kind of national tonic in Armenia, proudly sipped like a fine chardonnay in California or taken for its perceived medicinal value, like chicken soup. As the Armenian population here has grown, demand for the water has grown with it.

So when the FDA warned Americans last month to stop drinking five brands of imported Jermuk water because of unsafe levels of arsenic, the action touched off more than a mere product recall for local distributors. It was seen by many as an insult to Armenians, stirring passions from the ethnic enclaves of Glendale and North Hollywood all the way to the mountain resort in the West Asian country that supplies the bubbly water.

After the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warning, Canada and Hong Kong followed suit, issuing their own advisories.

The recall swiftly prompted coverage in the Armenian press, with government officials defending the water. One economist went so far as to speculate in the AZG Armenian Daily that the recall was part of a plot by France, Germany and Italy, who export their own mineral water, to prevent competition from Armenian bottlers.

At one shopping center in North Hollywood, Armenian Americans defended the mineral water of their homeland, proudly saying they have continued to drink Jermuk. Some even stocked up on it immediately after news of the warning and before it was pulled from store shelves.

"It's been around for so many years, and it hasn't harmed anyone," said Nora Avetisian, 28, who says she once traveled to Jermuk. "It's just wrong," adding that the recall is "a threat to our culture."

"How many years have Armenians been drinking it? And suddenly it's no good?" asked Kazar Mesropyan, 54, the owner of Dream Bakery, as his customers murmured in assent. "It's the best mineral water in the world."

Edgar Ghazarian, an advisor to the president of Jermuk Group, a bottled water exporter, said in a telephone interview, "There are no illnesses reported at this moment.... Why are you saying not to drink this water at this moment?"

According to the FDA, the arsenic levels in the Armenian water were well above U.S. safety standards for bottled water.

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Federal rules permit no more than 10 micrograms of arsenic per liter of bottled water; U.S. government lab tests showed that the recalled water had between 454 and 674 micrograms per liter. (A liter equals about a quart.)

But that's well within Armenian safety limits, wrote Naira Manucharova, a spokeswoman with the Armenian Consulate General in Beverly Hills, in an e-mail to the Times. The Armenian health ministry permits arsenic levels up to 700 micrograms per liter.

Jermuk water naturally contains arsenic, she wrote.

"If Jermuk was not safe, Armenia's health and standard authorities would not allow production of this water in Armenia," she wrote. "No illness, related to the consumption of Jermuk mineral water, has ever been reported."

The FDA confirmed that it has not received any reports of illness associated with drinking Jermuk water. Yet the arsenic levels are significant, said Dr. David Acheson, chief medical officer for the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

"Once this data was seen and validated, we had the potential of a serious adverse health consequence," Acheson said.

At the tested concentrations, there is a chance that drinking a single half-liter bottle of the water a day may not cause illness, he said.

But, he added, continuous heavy consumption—three or four liters a day—could trigger toxic effects.

After years of exposure, such consumption could lead to cancer, depending on how readily a drinker absorbs arsenic into the body, he said.

The FDA's tests were part of a routine examination of food and beverage products the federal agency regulates.

Jermuk water is second only to cognac as the Armenian national drink, said Harut Sassounian, publisher of a Glendale-based newspaper for the Armenian community and president of the United Armenian Fund, a humanitarian group. Its popularity extends to ethnic Armenians who grew up in other countries around the world, he said.

"I'm 55 years old and ever since I was a little kid, I've heard of Jermuk," said Sassounian, who was raised in Lebanon but has been served the heavy, strong-tasting mineral water countless times on business trips to Armenia, a small country east of Turkey. "It's like apple pie in the U.S.... When you're in Armenia, no matter where you go—family visits, restaurants—there's bottles of Jermuk on the table." In Glendale, where 40% of residents

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are of Armenian descent, the drink is a liquid connection with their roots, Sassounian said. "It's more than just a drinking water," he said. "This is water from the homeland."

Nonetheless, Sassounian said he accepted the FDA findings and scoffed at the conspiracy theories, saying, "I don't think the FDA is in the business of selling rival water."

Jermuk water gained a stronghold in ethnic grocery stores in the United States in recent years after Armenian expatriates invested in modernizing bottling plants.

In 2005, the export of nonalcoholic beverages from Armenia totaled \$2.2 million, up from just \$677,000 from 2000. In contrast, the export of Armenian alcoholic beverages in 2005 was about \$82 million, up from \$38 million five years earlier, according to statistics from an arm of the World Trade Organization.

The history of Jermuk is steeped in national lore.

The town was originally a fortress dating to the year 189, later becoming the summer residence of Armenian princes from a neighboring province.

An ancient stone bath is preserved as a historical monument.

In the early 20th century, government health officials began closely inspecting Jermuk water, and scientists attested to "its unquestionable medicinal properties," according to the Armenian consulate.

By 1945, during the era when Armenia was part of the USSR, Soviet officials decided to transform Jermuk into a "health resort of nationwide significance, in view of the mineral water's extraordinary healing properties," the consulate said. By 1970, 25,000 to 30,000 people, including generals and high-ranking government officials, were coming annually to visit Jermuk's sanitariums.

Today, Jermuk is advertised as a pristine mountain resort town, with gurgling springs filled with water rich in calcium and magnesium.

Andreas Andreasyan, 60, a North Hollywood Jermuk distributor, was shocked when he received the FDA warning and recalled his products last month.

An Armenian native who moved to North Hollywood a decade ago, Andreasyan said he drinks 10 to 16 bottles of Jermuk a day, pointedly downing several bottles during a recent interview at his backyard warehouse, where business has virtually ground to a halt.

He pointed out that his grandfather lived to age 98, and his grandmother to 101, and, he said, they both drank Jermuk water regularly.

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“They have no proof the water is poisoning the people,” Andreyan said. “The Armenian people are confused. Why? For what? This water is good for me.”

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ARMENIAN WATER RECALL

Arsenic is a natural poison found in Earth’s crust. The main source of arsenic in drinking water is arsenic-rich rock through which the water flowed, according to the World Health Organization. Arsenic contamination in groundwater also has been found in the United States, Argentina, Bangladesh, Chile, China, India, Mexico, Taiwan and Thailand.

- Levels of arsenic found in recalled Jermuk bottled water: 454-674 micrograms per liter.
- U.S. limits on arsenic in bottled water: 10 micrograms per liter.
- Armenian limits on arsenic in bottled water: 700 micrograms per liter.