

TESTING THE WATERS

As toxins emerge in water supplies around the country, is your water safe to drink?

By Bill Giebler



Cozy Jazz Age décor and artful cappuccinos make Café Rhema a popular stop in the heart of downtown Flint, MI. But, in the wake of Flint's water crisis, is the coffee safe to drink? Owner Joshua Spencer says yes. In fact, he adds, "In downtown Flint, all tests have come back lead-free right from the tap throughout the entire process." Surprising, when Virginia Tech found that 40 percent of Flint's residential water was contaminated.

Still, Spencer—who employed triple filtration even before the crisis—says he added additional filtration, "just to ensure people our water is safe." The Flint contaminations were spotty, often affecting only one home on a block, adds Spencer, who owns multiple residential properties in town. "If anything," he says, "Flint is a wakeup call for the rest of the country."

Indeed, Flint, Michigan, is not alone. Ithaca, Fort Worth and Pittsburgh are among the many cities reporting excessive amounts of lead in drinking water, often with elementary-

school children acting as canaries in the waterline. But it's not just lead. Last October it was revealed that Colorado's Peterson Air Force base has routinely dumped perfluorinated chemicals (PFCs) into municipal sewage. Concentrated animal waste from factory farms regularly makes its toxic way into ground and surface water. Mining tails and fracking chemicals like benzene, xylene and methane lace water supplies. Even the chromium-6 Erin Brockovich brought into awareness a quarter century ago persists.

"In the U.S., about 40 percent of our rivers or lakes are not safe for swimming or fishing," says Waterkeeper Alliance Executive Director Marc Yaggi.

The problem isn't halted at the treatment plant, either. In fact, the chlorine added to water to disinfect it is itself damaging and should be removed before drinking or bathing. Furthermore, says Yaggi, "If there is storm-water runoff and agricultural pollution getting into your drinking water system, the chlorine can have an adverse reaction to

that and create disinfection byproducts that are carcinogenic."

Then comes the municipal distribution infrastructure, and that's where lead and other heavy metals come into play, leaching from aging pipes.

Safe water consumption begins with finding out where your water comes from. "That's a fundamental piece of information we need to have," says Yaggi. "The really important thing people need to understand is that political decisions are being made every day that jeopardize the quality and quantity of their drinking water." These can result from cost-cutting measures or from politicians "turning a blind eye to polluters"—a product of campaign contributions.

Even so, the EPA, responding to OSM by email, wrote that thanks to nearly 100 national drinking-water standards, 91 percent of all drinking water systems across the U.S. meet all health-based standards all the time.

To find out if your water is safe, the EPA wrote, "Contact your local water