



# Drink locally: How Boston's water powers local businesses

*'Dirty' no more*

BY **KAREN CORD TAYLOR** | MAY 18, 2017, 11:57AM EDT



Boston Harbor in 1980. | City of Boston Archives/Flickr

Pretend it's 1966. You're listening to the radio in Boston. You hear the Standells' new song, "Dirty Water." You recognize the water they're singing about. The Charles River teams with raw sewage, submerged appliances, and toxic waste from old industrial plants. Boston Harbor is filled with "floatables." With such visibly bad conditions, you wonder if your tap water is safe to drink.

Luckily, most of your drinking water comes through tunnels from the clean Quabbin Reservoir in Western Massachusetts. The water tastes OK, but the pipes into your building probably contain lead.

Fifty-one years later, the Standells' song is still popular, especially after one of Boston's teams wins. But the water? Totally different.

The Charles River is one of the cleanest in America. Boston Harbor has been saved by pouring about \$4 billion into those Deer Island digesters you see as your plane takes off and a 9.5-mile tunnel that carries clean sewer outfall into the Atlantic.

The drinking water quality, still coming from the

Quabbin, is the pride of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, which since 1985 has managed the water supply, as well as treating the sewage and cleaning up the harbor.

"Both the drinking water quality and the environmental water quality of Boston Harbor are excellent," said Ria Convery, a MWRA spokesperson.

She reports that the MWRA tests the drinking water thousands of times each week. The American Water Works Association, a scientific nonprofit dedicated to managing and treating water, judged Boston's water as the best-tasting of any municipal supply in 2014.

In 2015, Boston's water was judged third best. "It still tastes great today," said Convery.

You could even drink the harbor's water with impunity. Save the Harbor/Save the Bay ranked Boston's urban beaches the cleanest in the country.

So what effect does such good water have on Boston's businesses?

We talked with Matt Malloy, a founder of the Dorchester Brewing Company; Alex Jong, the head baker at Levend Bagelry at the Boston Public Market; Jared Auerbach of Red's Best, a wholesale seafood company with a retail shop at the Boston Public Market; and Jen Faigel, who runs the non-profit Commonwealth Kitchen, which offers a commercial kitchen to food startups.

## How much water do you use?

That was hard for our interviewees to quantify. But a few hints emerged. Malloy, whose brewery makes its own beer as well as following other brewers' recipes for their own small labels, said he has a dozen 60-barrel fermenters, each able to hold 1,860 gallons of beer.

Auerbach didn't know how much water he uses, but it is a lot. He produces 14 tons of ice each day in his fish-processing facility at the Boston Fish Pier.

## How did Boston's good water quality affect your decision to locate in the city?

"It never crossed my mind," Auerbach said.

Jong and Faigel also took the good water for granted.

Malloy, however, was grateful not only for the good water, but also for one employee of the Boston Water and Sewer Commission who was a brewer himself. "He knew the composition of the water and suggested how to add different minerals," Malloy said. "Boston's water is of an extremely high quality, consistent and neutral."



Levend Bagelry's Daniel Perrez watches over the bagels boiling in Boston's tap water. | Boston Public Market

## Have you had any difficulty with the water?

Commonwealth Kitchen had to install a water filter because the water contained so much sediment. But that was a local pipe issue, said Convery, because MWRA's water contains no sediment. Nor does it contain lead. A spokesperson for the Boston Water and Sewer Commission said none of the city's lines contain lead.

Some older properties might still have lead service pipes leading from the street. The BWSC's homepage links to a map that highlights areas that still might have such service pipes. Property owners are responsible for replacing them and might qualify for a subsidy or a financing plan.

## Do you treat the water before you use it?

Malloy's brewery filters the water just as a precaution. He also adds chemicals to adjust the water for certain beer recipes, if need be.

Red's Best adds ozone because it extends the shelf life of fish by "zapping the bacteria," as Auerbach puts it. He does not filter the water.

Alex Jong said he adds malt extract to give bagels color and a shine, but otherwise does not treat the water. He recognizes that Boston's water has a low mineral content, making it "soft."

"Harder water will make a stiffer dough and soft water will make a soupier dough," he said.

## Now that it no longer applies, will the song "Dirty Water" ever go away?

Doubtful. After all, "Charlie on the MTA" is still around even after it was renamed the MBTA in 1964.

Karen Cord Taylor was the founding editor and publisher of the Beacon Hill Times in 1995, and is the author of *Blue Laws, Brahmins and Breakdown Lanes: An Alphabetic Guide to Boston and Bostonians and Legendary Locals of Beacon Hill*.