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Dining Out

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Specialty Tonic Waters, Subtly Sweet

By ROB WILEY

Four years ago, Jordan Silbert had a gin and tonic that changed his life. The gin may have played some role, but the real catalyst was a large bottle of Schweppes tonic water, its label peeling and faded, plucked from the back of a bodega refrigerator.

"You could see it going flat as you drank it," he said. The tonic was so sweet and viscous that Mr. Silbert said he felt as if his teeth were wearing sweaters. In that moment he understood that building a better tonic water was his calling, and he eventually left his job as director of rebuilding initiatives for the Downtown Alliance in New York to go to business school and pursue it.

Not many people give much thought to tonic water, but those who do think deeply. Until recently, all Mr. Silbert had to show for his meditations were 1,200 single-serving bottles of a lean, briskly carbonated tonic water called Q stacked in a storage unit on 11th Avenue in Manhattan.

Now he has a deal with two cocktail bars in New York. And he hopes that retail sales will come early next year after wider distribution in bars and nightclubs. He is not the only one who sees an opening in the market. Stirrings, the Massachusetts-based maker of upscale cocktail mixers, quietly introduced a clean-tasting, triple-filtered tonic water in June. And Charles Rolls, who revitalized Plymouth gin a few years ago, is gearing up for the American release of Fever-Tree Premium Indian Tonic Water, flavored with Sicilian lemons, African marigolds and hand-pressed Tanzanian orange oil.

That sounds like an awful lot of subtlety for a drink ideally consumed in a hammock. But as Mr. Silbert points out, tonic water accounts for most of a properly made gin and tonic. Modern drinkers can be quite picky about gin or

vodka, he reasons, so why shouldn't they lavish attention on tonic as well?

"The sweetest spot for us," he said, "is people who like tonic but don't really have options."

In fact, Schweppes and Canada Dry dominate the market and are the only tonics most drinkers know. Mr. Silbert classifies both as, at best, a notch above the "well tonic" that comes out of soda guns. Much of his disdain for conventional tonics comes down to what are known in the soda business as sweetener systems.

In the early 1970s, surging sugar prices prompted most American soft drink producers to switch from sugar to high-fructose corn syrup. Since the sweetener is one of only four ingredients in most tonics — the other three are citric acid, carbonated water and quinine, which gives the drink its characteristic bitterness — its quality can have a profound influence on the flavor, according to tonic connoisseurs.

Stirrings and Fever-Tree are sweetened with cane sugar, which their makers claim has a purer, cleaner taste.

Q Tonic, on the other hand, uses agave nectar. "The flavor profile matches the sharpness of quinine better than cane sugar," Mr. Silbert said. He said he hired a food chemist to develop his tonic after two years of home tinkering yielded little more than scalded pots and sticky kitchen floors.

Not to be outdone, Mr. Rolls said he buys "pharmaceutical-grade" quinine from the last working cinchona plantation on the border of Congo and Rwanda, where the so-called fever trees (a reference to quinine's anti-malarial properties) are said to be descended from a robust strain of cinchona discovered in Peru by the 19th-century British explorer Charles Ledger. Mr. Rolls likened this quinine to first-press olive oil and said he prizes it for its "cleaner bitterness."



The coming wave of high-end tonics accompanies a renewed interest in the ingredient among bartenders, some of whom have been experimenting with making their own. In 2004, Per Se unveiled a \$17 gin and tonic made with powdered quinine. Since then, house-made tonics have popped up in Portland, Ore.; Atlanta, and suburban Washington.

Jim Meehan, a bartender at Gramercy Tavern and the Pegu Club in Manhattan, has been working for more than a year on a subtle variation of his own that is infused with lime and lemongrass. He believes there is room behind the bar for more than one tonic water.

"Maybe Q Tonic tastes best with a citrusy gin like Plymouth, and a more floral tonic, like the one I make, tastes better with dry gins like Tanqueray and Beefeater," Mr. Meehan said. He conceded that the concept of tonic specificity is "an advanced idea" that might take a while to catch on.

A greater challenge for the would-be tonic barons might be persuading drinkers that an improved mixer is worth the extra cost. For now, premium tonic water is not sending ripples of fear through the beverage industry. "I'm not real concerned about it," said Jim Trebilcock, senior vice president for consumer marketing at Cadbury Schweppes Americas Beverages, the parent company of both Schweppes and Canada Dry. "But I think it suggests an opportunity."