What makes a city world-renowned? For New York (according to the NYC Department of Environmental Protection), it's the quality of its drinking water.

Should this be so surprising? After all, what more fundamental connection does a city have to its residents and visitors than the life-sustaining water that it provides?

Recent events in San Francisco's East Bay have shaken our trust in, and enjoyment of our municipal drinking water. Perhaps these events are a harbinger of an approaching new water aesthetic.

Most of us can't detect particular chemicals that might make up a small portion of a glass of water, but we know what we like to drink. Growing up in Chicago, I only knew one way that a glass of water could taste. The water came from Lake Michigan which, with the exception of one disturbing year when millions of alewives flung themselves on the beaches to die, always gave off the impression that its supplies would refresh and that it was relatively clean. A large water purification plant two miles offshore served as a symbolic guardian of our health and safety. I thought the water was delicious.

Sometimes in the summer, we would travel to Los Angeles to visit cousins, and we quickly learned that not all drinking water is palatable. L.A. served up water that tasted pretty much the way the Colorado River looks – rusty and flat.

Cities all over the world have different attitudes and relationships with the stuff that comes out of the tap. In much of Europe, restaurant patrons drink exclusively from factory-sealed bottles. While living briefly in Barcelona, my wife and I enjoyed and freely consumed the municipal water. But in restaurants, servers looked at us with much alarm when we asked for water from the faucet. They refused to let us have the local stuff, even when the price of bottled water was included with the meal.

In San Francisco and the Bay Area, on the other hand, we love to boast about our fresh and tasty tap water. The Anchor Steam Brewery tells its visitors that it set up shop in San Francisco largely because the water delivered via the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir was of such high quality. Trumer Pils makes a similar claim about the water at its Berkeley brewery.

Imagine our shock, then, when the East Bay water became a stranger. It started on a recent Sunday, when the shower smelled like a sewer line. Then the water started tasting less like a mountain spring and more like a tin can. The East Bay Municipal

Utility District was flooded with complaints.

EBMUD explained the problem as being drought-related. The Pardee Reservoir, which serves the East Bay, also helps to control fish flows downstream. Because the river level is low, the water is warmer than the salmon would like, and will undoubtedly be too shallow during next October's salmon run. To make up the difference, East Bay MUD needs to save the colder water deeper in the reservoir to release downstream in the fall. That colder water is the good-tasting stuff that East Bay MUD likes to send to the urbanized areas. So instead, the water company began taking the warmer water closer to the surface for drinking and irrigation. Smelly, unpleasant-tasting algae like to grow in that warmer water.

After receiving many complaints, East Bay MUD shifted back to withdrawing from deeper in the reservoir, but that is only a temporary fix. The District is trying to figure out how to meet its obligation to the fish and keep its customers happy at the same time. For now, East Bay MUD recommends adding a slice of lemon or orange to a glass of water to mask the taste.

Our confidence is shaken. When something as basic as water changes, we wonder whether it will ever go back to the way it was. Does a changing climate, with its more extreme weather patterns, mean that supply and quality challenges will become more frequent? Can we conserve our way out of the problem by dramatically and permanently reducing our use of water? Will cities rush to build energy-intensive desalination plants to ensure water that is adequate, both in terms of supply and taste?

In the meantime, officials assure us that the water remains safe to drink. One category of things that will likely need to change is our expectations. We can start by appreciating what we have a little more, and doubling down on our efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We can reduce water use, because it is the right thing to do, in any event. We can remember that fussing over something like the taste of otherwise healthy drinking water is quite a privileged activity in a world with much more vital water challenges to address. We can take occasional changes in water taste as another reminder that California can hardly absorb the next ten million new residents as well as it accommodated the last ten. And, we may need to reach for that lemon slice a little more often.