



NPR Script

Shops and restaurants in San Francisco that serve bubble tea have a big stake in straw politics. San Francisco may become the next U.S. city to ban plastic straws. The board of supervisors gave its approval on a preliminary basis last week, and the final decision is on the agenda tomorrow. Michelle Wiley from member station KQED has been speaking with business owners who sell the drink that needs a straw. Here's her report.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: So the first thing we do is grab boba, your topping, which is boba.

MICHELLE WILEY, BYLINE: Bubble tea is typically served in a big plastic cup over ice. It has balls of tapioca at the bottom the size of small marbles. You use a wide straw to suck up the tapioca, or boba, from the bottom of the cup.

(SOUNDBITE OF SLURPING)

WILEY: For boba fans, the straw is an integral part of the experience. Here's Steep Creamery and Tea co-owner Alvin Yu.

ALVIN YU: Boba is just - in general, it's an expression, right? You have not just tapioca pearls, but you also have aloe jelly. You have these herbal jellies that we make ourselves. And all requires a straw.

WILEY: According to Yelp, more than 200 shops sell bubble tea in San Francisco. All of them will have to change their business practices if the city bans plastic straws to help reduce litter and landfill.

KATY TANG: The size and the shape of the straws is what is the most harmful.

WILEY: San Francisco supervisor Katy Tang spearheaded the bill.

TANG: When they're being sorted in the sorting machines, they just fall through the cracks. And so they don't actually get composted even if they are supposedly made of compostable materials.

WILEY: So this ban goes a step farther than other straw bans. Not even plastic that's compostable is allowed. Alvin Yu says he was lucky. His shop was able to beat the rush and order paper straws in advance of the ban. Other boba shops haven't been so fortunate. Only a few companies manufacture supersized paper straws big enough for bubble tea. They're all reporting huge orders and delays lasting up to four months. But paper is not a perfect fix because...

YU: Part of the experience of drinking boba is poking a sharp end of a straw through the plastic seal of a cup. And that's something that we want to emulate.

WILEY: But the paper straws Yu ordered aren't cut with a point on the end, so he and his staff have to cut them all by hand. And the paper straws are expensive, about 10 times more than plastic straws. What about drinking bubble tea without a straw? Here's boba fan Julie Abad. She's drinking a plain black tea with tapioca and lychee jelly at the bottom.

Can you imagine what it would be like to try and have it without a straw?

JULIE ABAD: Oh, without a straw, it would be really hard. I think I'd have to, like, pour it into a different cup and use a spoon or something.

WILEY: Others, like customer Kehlani Penland, just dismiss the idea outright.

KEHLANI PENLAND: Nobody wants to do that when you're walking, and it's cold outside. You know, you just want to (laughter) sip it with a straw.

WILEY: Right now, Steep Creamery & Tea is offering the paper straws for free. But Alvin Yu says over time he will have to raise prices. Still, some environmentally conscious boba consumers, like 10-year-old Alice Asoyan, say all this effort is worth it.

ALICE ASOYAN: Our world is in big danger right now because of plastic. So paper's probably better.

WILEY: If the bill passes again tomorrow, it goes to mayor London Breed for her signature. She's previously come out in favor of the ban. Businesses will then have until July of next year to trade in their plastic for paper. And customers can use those, or do what supervisor Katy Tang suggests - carry a metal straw just for bubble tea. For NPR News, I'm Michelle Wiley in San Francisco.