

BUSINESS

Tuesday, October 26, 2010 • 865-0942 or (800) 427-3124 • business@burlingtonfreepress.com • Page 6B



BEN SARLE, for the Free Press

Jill Markie of Burlington, a bartender at 156 Bistro in Burlington, serves up a Narragansett Beer on Monday. Narragansett was once dominant in New England and has returned to Vermont after a long absence, being offered by 156 Bistro and several other bars in Vermont.

Narragansett Beer returns to Vermont

The onetime No. 1 beer in New England poised for comeback

By Dan D'Ambrosio
Free Press Staff Writer

After a long hiatus, a New England beer that once was the official brew of the Boston Red Sox is expanding again across the region and into Vermont.

After about a month in the state, Narragansett is being sold in 26 locations in Vermont, including nine in greater Burlington. The 156 Bistro in downtown Burlington began selling Narragansett about two weeks ago, and so far it seems to be doing well, Chef David Fonte said.

"It's becoming more of the hipster-scene beer like Pabst was five or six years ago," Fonte said. "A lot of people are picking up on it."

Kevin McCabe, manager of 156 Bistro, said he grew up in New England and remembers his father drinking Narragansett Beer.

"It was the beer of choice for not only Red Sox fans but also people in the Boston-Rhode Island area," McCabe said.

Mark Hellendrung, CEO of Narragansett Beer in Providence, R.I., and a former interim president of South-Burlington-based Magic Hat Brewing Co., grew up in Rhode Island and remembers when 'Gansett ruled in New England.

"It was a monster," Hel-

"I just thought there's no place in America more deeply rooted and true to their own than New England."

Mark Hellendrung,
CEO of Narragansett Beer

lendrung said. "Narragansett was the official beer of the Red Sox for 40 years and the No. 1 beer in New England from 1919 until the late 1960s."

At one time, Narragansett controlled 65 percent of the beer market in New England, Hellendrung said. But financial troubles involving a parent company led to retrenchment.

By the time Hellendrung bought the company, Narragansett was on "life support," he said, brewing less than 1,000 barrels yearly, and selling only in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. He bought the company with a group of investors in 2005 for less than \$100,000.

Having spent his career in New England, as president of Nantucket Nectars from 1994 to 2002 and interim president of Magic Hat from 2003 to 2004,

Hellendrung said he felt Narragansett deserved better.

"I just thought there's no place in America more deeply rooted and true to their own than New England," he said. "The more people I talked to, the more there were who said it would be a great thing to bring Narragansett Beer back."

Hellendrung began shoring up the market for the beer where it began, in Rhode Island, and then focused on increasing sales in Massachusetts, where he said it's the fastest-growing brand in the state. Next, he concentrated on re-introducing Narragansett to New Hampshire and Maine, and finally to Vermont late last month.

"It was cool to finally get the last state in New England wrapped up," said Hellendrung, who expects his company to reach close to \$5 million in sales this year.

Hellendrung said he had dinner at 156 Bistro anonymously about three weeks ago, then came back the next night to introduce himself as the president and CEO of Narragansett. McCabe said getting a sales pitch from the CEO made a difference.

"It's like the approach Jim Cook took with Sam Adams," he said. "It goes a long way."