

# CAPE COD TIMES

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## FOOD

### Rise of the retros

#### CLASSIC SLOGANS

"Schaefer is the one beer to have when you're having more than one." (Schaefer)

"The beer that made Milwaukee famous." (Schlitz)

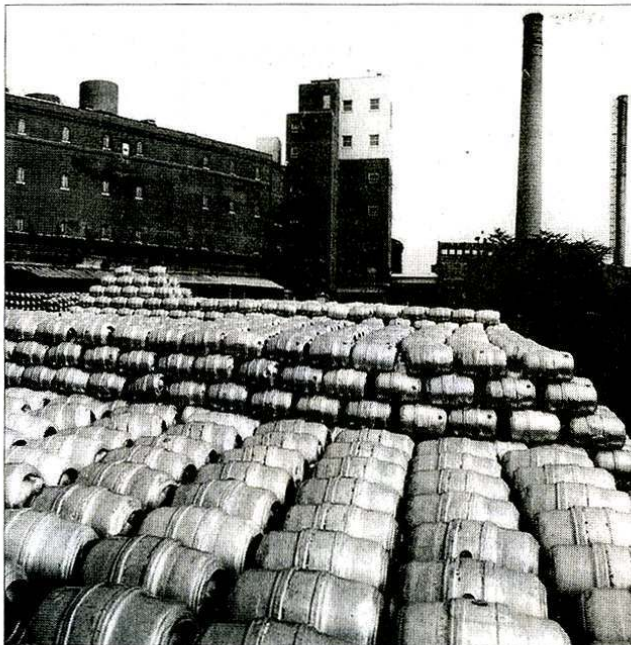
"Hey Mabel - Black Label!" (Carling Black Label)

"If you've got the time, we've got the beer." (Miller)

"When you say Budweiser, you've said it all." (Budweiser)

#### Pint-size pics

Thursday evening, check out a photo gallery of the top 10 places readers chose to raise a pint. [www.capecodonline.com](http://www.capecodonline.com)



COURTESY OF NARRAGANSETT BEER CO.

Beer kegs are shown stacked outside the Narragansett brewery in Cranston, R.I. The complex that once supplied brews to New England closed in 1983 and was subsequently demolished.

### Narragansett sets its sights on reclaiming its regional crown

By RICH HOLMES  
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**H**YANNIS - Back in the '50s and '60s, before the beginning of the craft beer era, domestic lagers ruled liquor store coolers and barroom taps. Many had started as regional beers but were snapped up by giant brewing companies during the decades after Prohibition. Today, few true regional lagers exist. But in New England, one has launched a comeback seeking to re-create that heyday.

At 42, though he was pretty young at the time, Mark Hellendrung says he remembers when Narragansett was the official beer of the Red Sox and sports announcer Curt Gowdy was the beer's spokesman.

That was before the 1980s, when worn equipment, inadequate marketing and financial pressures pushed owner Falstaff to move Narragansett's brewing operations from the Cranston, R.I., plant

to one in Fort Wayne, Ind. The quality of the beer suffered. The Cranston plant briefly reopened and closed in 1983, then demolition began in 1988. Narragansett was no more.

Five years ago, Hellendrung and a group of investors bought the rights to the Narragansett name back from Falstaff. Bill Anderson, brewmaster of the Cranston plant, was brought back to help resuscitate the brand. The

company now contracts to produce its flagship lager in Roch-



**MARK HELLENDRUNG**  
president,  
Narragansett Beer

see **RETRO**, page 2

# Retro: A new life for Narragansett

from C1

ester, N.Y. Seasonal offerings of bock, porter and an Oktoberfest marzen-style lager are being made at the Trinity Brewhouse in Providence, R.I., and Cottrell Brewing Co. in Pawcatuck, Conn. But Hellendrung has his sights set on bringing the brand back to a brewery he plans to build in New England.

"Probably my greatest frustration is that we don't brew ourselves," he says. "It'd be great to have a visitors center, someplace we can hang out and interact with the fans."

Positioned between national macrobrewers, such as Bud and Miller, and many smaller craft breweries, Narragansett seeks to carve out a niche defined by nostalgia and New England pride. The company's marketing features a friendly "Hi, neighbor!" slogan, old-fashioned 'Gansett Girls dressed in the company's red and white, and the corny claim to be the "official beer of the clam," which was emblazoned on a tie at Father's Day.

Making bank on retro appeal is not unique to Narragansett. Witness the popularity in recent years of PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon) among hipsters and the Schlitz ad campaign for its "classic 1960s formula" that features Cynthia Myers, a pinup model from that era. The Schlitz ads declare "Things had better body back then ... especially the beer."

Narragansett's throwback pitch seems to be working.

"We're up about 45 percent year-to-date," Hellendrung says. "We'll do close to 35,000 barrels."

That's equivalent to about 482,000 cases of beer. Narragansett says on its website that if it sells 7.5 million cases annually, it will build a brewery. That would re-establish it as a locally brewed regional beer, Hellendrung says, comparing his company to Lone Star (now owned by Pabst) in Texas and Yuengling (America's oldest brewery, and still family-owned) in Pennsylvania.

Narragansett representative Haley Rose says, however, that her company will not wait to

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sell 7.5 million cases before building, and, in fact, plans to break ground late next year on a brewery and eventually enlarge that plant to include bottling and canning lines. Hellendrung says the location has not yet been decided, though he says beer's "heart" is the Providence market, but New Bedford or another Massachusetts site might attract Narragansett from Rhode Island.

For some perspective on volume, the Brewers Association classifies a microbrewery as making less than 15,000 barrels a year. Boston Beer Co., maker of Samuel Adams, is the country's biggest independent craft brewer. According to its second-quarter report, Boston Beer sold nearly 1.1 million barrels in the first six months of this year, dwarfing Narragansett's output. And most of its beer is also brewed outside Massachusetts.

Though Narragansett traces its history back to 1888, its recipes don't date back to that time. The lager is made with the formula that made it New England's top seller in the '50s and '60s. The mix, like many macrobrews, contains corn, something craft beer fans might point out violates German brewing standards of using only barley, yeast, hops and water.

"It is what it is," Hellendrung says of the lager, saying the use of corn "is a function of flavor" and money. "The reason craft beers cost more is they're all malt," he says.

"Narragansett is a classic drinkable American lager," he says, proudly noting that it's "the highest rated by Beer

Advocate." Narragansett sells for about \$6.90 a six-pack, including tax and deposit. Cheaper beers are about \$1 or so less, while craft beers hover around \$9 to \$10.

Narragansett lager pours a fine white head atop clear yellow liquid. Not much aroma at first, but a dark honey scent gradually appears as the beer warms and the head fades. First taste has some bite on the tongue mainly due to carbonation, which decreases with time. Not much hops is in evidence. Taste is light grain and faintly sweet (perhaps from the corn), and a tiny bit of alcohol in the background. Body is round with a slick mouth feel. Overall refreshing, not heavy.

The Alström brothers, who run the beer critique website of Beer Advocate, put Narragansett in the realm of Pabst Blue Ribbon and Schlitz for top inexpensive American lagers.

"Wow! What a treat, finally a macro with a bit of flavor. I would not have a problem having this in my fridge year-round ... hell, it just bumped Schlitz off of my list," writes Jason Alström in an online review, in which he gives Narragansett a B-plus.

Not everyone is thrilled about another big competitor in the marketplace. Beth Marcus, who co-owns Cape Cod Beer in Hyannis with her brewmaster husband, Todd, says she prefers locally made beers to contract-brewed beers made by big businesses outside the region and marketed as being local. Local breweries provide local jobs, are invested in their community and make quality beer, she says. Cape Cod Beer has grown in six years from having one employee to 12 "by next spring," she says. The Marcuses have focused on serving Cape Cod.

"Beer tastes best when it's fresh," Marcus says, comparing local beer to the goodness of recently picked vegetables from a nearby farm.

"I'm not a big fan of the homogenization of America," she says. "We believe people should experience local flavors when they go to a region."

If Narragansett's lager is similar to national mass-produced brews, the company hews closer to craft beers with its seasonal offerings. Hellendrung, former president of Nantucket Nectars, credits the craft beer movement with helping to drive Americans' interest in food and drink that is locally made with good ingredients.

"People are getting in touch with local products, local stories," he says. "... We're doing craft styles now."

Brewing bocks and dark beer is nothing new for Narragansett, Hellendrung says, as the company has a long tradition of bringing out seasonal brews. And when the company



COURTESY NARRAGANSETT BEER CO.

**A beer wagon that predated Prohibition used to be displayed at the now-demolished Cranston, R.I., Narragansett brewery.**

was owned by Falstaff, it was also producing other brands from its Cranston plant, including Ballantine, Pickwick, Hanley, Kreuger, Boh, Boston Light, Falstaff and Haffenreffer Malt Liquor.

Hellendrung doesn't rule it out, but he says he has no plans to do any contract brewing if Narragansett builds a New England brewery. He does say that the purchase of rights to the Narragansett name did not include any rights to the Haffenreffer brand, named after a family that owned a Boston brewery complex and whose scion, Rudolf Jr., once was Narragansett's president.

Alan O'Campbell owns The Grain & Vine Spirit Shoppe in Hyannis, a store that specializes in craft beers and holds weekly tastings. Despite his love of microbrews, O'Campbell says he enjoys the return of Narragansett and other regional brews.

"I'm pretty excited to see people drink those," he wrote in an e-mail. "In some ways I think it's more of a reaction to the 'three kings' (Miller, Coors and Bud) than it is to the craft beers. That's why you see them

being enjoyed side by side in the craft beer bars. One quality of the craft brewers and drinkers is that they are free thinkers: exploring tastes, (and) variety and pushing boundaries, whereas the three kings are so heavily marketed they've lost any independent culture or identity."

During a subsequent interview, O'Campbell said the big breweries' recent attempts at making more craft-like beers have not been well-received, citing Budweiser's American Ale as an example.

The market for regional brews is strong, O'Campbell said, and they come at a lower price than microbrews, which makes them popular with young adults who may want an inexpensive alternative to national macros. Plus these beers have an appeal of their own.

"There's something cool about them," O'Campbell said, "... the classic labels. Something about that can."

But it's more than packaging and being local, he pointed out.

"They're actually making a better product than the big guys are," he said.