

# Connecticut Post



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## Taste

SECTION D



WHAT'S BREWING? Jim Zebora

### Different paths to Oktoberfest beers

Almost five years into a revival, Rhode Island's Narragansett is coming on as much like a microbrew as a traditional American regional beer.

Fresh out of the fermenter is Narragansett Fest Lager, an Oktoberfest or Märzen style of tawny amber beer with a rich flavor and a long malty finish. It joins other specialty brews the company has or plans to release, as well as the traditional golden lager of old, whose catch-phrase, "Hey, neighbor, have a 'Gansett," practically revived itself when the beer came back after a couple of decades of non-production.

"The classic regional lagers had a full stable of beers," said Narragansett owner Mark Hellendrung in a recent phone interview. "After this, we'll go into a porter and we'll bring back the bock and a stock ale."

Well, not exactly bring back. Narragansett's original specialty beer recipes have been lost to history, Hellendrung said. The modern specialty beers are crafted by a brewer at the Trinity Brewpub in Providence, R.I., and brewed in Rochester, N.Y.

Hellendrung got lucky with the golden lager, however.

See Narragansett D2

### Narragansett finds niche

Continued from D1

"We found Bill Anderson, who was the last brewmaster before they shut it down. He had the recipe kicking around in his head," Hellendrung said.

Arriving in a yellow-orange 16-ounce can, Gansett Fest is dryer than many Oktoberfest beers, and thus aimed at the mature palate a little more than some of the overly sweet versions. The hop bitterness comes through, adding complexity on the sides of the tongue, and in concert with the darker malts yielding a satisfying conclusion to each sip.

This beer's initial impression is of a thick, tan head with big bubbles that can take a couple of minutes to settle down in the glass, and a bit of roast in the aroma. It pours clear and well-carbonated, and need not be refrigerated to death. In fact, try it at both 35 degrees, the range for most American golden lagers, and at 45, where a German beer is more likely to reside, and you'll find it enjoyable at both.

In contrast to the Narragansett, Samuel Adams Oktoberfest is sweeter and a bit floral in aroma, and the beer definitely derives its flavor from crystal (or caramel) malts, which add a lot of complex sugars to the mix. It is more of a beer that looks forward to the winter holidays than heralds the autumn. The Sam Adams could be a good basis for a Christmas ale, whereas the Gansett is definitely a harvest-style beer. They are two divergent takes on an Oktoberfest — equally valid, but tuned for different palates.

Hellendrung hopes before long to be producing Narragansett Lager — now labeled "The Famous Narragansett" — and his other beers in Rhode Island at a brewery to be constructed perhaps next year. He's still working out the details of batch size and packaging and may focus on draft beer in Rhode Island, while Narragansett brews for retail sale would con-

tinue to be contracted out.

"That's really what will complete our mission," Hellendrung said. "It costs a lot of money to build a brewery, that's why we decided to build a consumer base first. It initially will be draft only."

Narragansett, which just completed its extended New England rollout with a debut in Vermont and recently enjoyed a successful launch in Philadelphia, will keep its distribution in the Northeast rather than seeking to become a national brand, he said.

"Our strength is focusing on our niche, our local niche," said Hellendrung.

What fan of baseball, football or bull riding would imagine that a company serving bland brews in paper cups at sports and entertainment arenas around the country would have a real interest in beer?

Amazingly, Stamford-based Centerplate, one of the country's biggest food concessionaires, has just completed its purchase of John Harvard's Brew House, which got its start in Cambridge, Mass., and has brewery restaurants in six locations.

"I am extremely excited to add the strong John Harvard's brand of restaurants to our suite of hospitality solutions," said Centerplate Chief Operating Officer Chris Verros. "Its positioning and historical success make it a great asset for use in our client venues as well as future free-standing locations."

Does that mean that mini-versions of John Harvard's Brew Houses will make their debut at various event venues? It wouldn't be the first time that quality beer outlets have operated in stadiums, etc. The Blue Moon Brewing Co. and the Molson Coors unit that makes Belgian-style beers has been a big success at the Colorado Rockies' Coors Field in Denver. Sure would beat a watery quart of Bud Light.