

# The East Greenwich Pendulum

Thursday, Nov. 4, 2010

## Tipping a few with the owner of the new Narragansett Beer



BY JAMES MEROLLA

NARRAGANSETT in R.I. – The C, E and O of Narragansett Beer CEO Mark Hellendrung



The Narragansett Beer Company has seen a lot over its 120-year history. It has been a Rhode Island institution, lost its brewery in the state, lain fallow as a viable brand, and then been resurrected in 2005 when it had its brand reintroduced by former Nantucket Nectars executive Mark Hellendrung. With the help of brewer Bill Anderson it is now up and running with some smart marketing that includes a retro nod to the past with 'Gansett girls and the 'Hi, neighbor!' slogan – and a plan for a brewery in New England.

stands for "Capture Every Opportunity."

Hellendrung, a Rhode Island native and Brown graduate, is the former President of Nantucket

Nectars who steered 100 miles northwest five years ago to buy, revive and restock one of the state's greatest exports, Narragansett Beer.

Hellendrung has now gotten Gansett stocked in every New England state. The little engine hat wasn't has gotten even Anheuser a bit Busched in these parts. His dream to build a new brewery in the Providence area is directly dependent on the rapidly regrowing company's ability to sell 7.5 million cases of brew each year.

His website invites lovers of the beer to tell their stories, help the cause and pitch in to make a former classic return to the, um, head of the class.

Here is a RICentral Newspaper interview with Mark

Hellendrung:



**RICentral:** Beyond the name, is there, or were there, any ties to the town of Narragansett itself?

**HELLENDRUNG:** I don't think so. I haven't really heard anything about the town and you've got to remember, that there was probably wasn't much going on down there in 1890.

**RICentral:** Any other connections to any other towns, besides the brewery? Any village idiot stories or the like?

**'GANSETT, 4-A**

## On tipping a few with the owner of the new Narragansett Beer



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**HELLENDRUNG:** Not, directly, but to the extent that it was such a personal company, with so many people working there, with such a huge market share, there had to be great connections in all the communities. I have heard countless stories of the events that the brewery would sponsor or the local support that it gave.

**RIC:** Do you have any personal ties to any of the 39 RI communities? Which one is native to you? Which do you call home?

**HELLENDRUNG:** I have been all over RI. I lived in Providence until I was 6, grew up in East Providence, played sports in all the towns around the state, and now live in Middletown with my wife and four girls. I'm pretty fortunate to travel all over the state with work, meeting so many great characters. I'm not sure I call either Middletown or East Providence home, but certainly call Rhode Island home and take a lot of pride in it.

**RIC:** You are going gangbusters in an economy that is clearly not, in a fight with major labels, which are clearly not. Is that because you are such a good product, or is it the type of product it is, where jobless people are

The brewery in its heyday produced a beer that was famous and made in RI.

fortifying themselves with the local ale to

drown sorrows?

**HELLENDRUNG:** I think in today's environment, people are looking for things that are genuine, unique and have a great story. Craft beers are priced a little higher, and they are enjoying huge success in this economy. Narragansett certainly plays into many of those emotions.

You look at some of the anger out there, justifiably so, around politics and corporate sellouts or layoffs, and 'Gansett is something positive that people can rally behind.

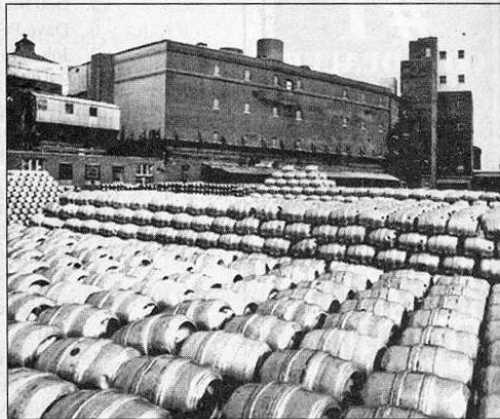
**RIC:** Tell me about your growth. How do you account for it?

**HELLENDRUNG:** I think it has all come to down to making a really great beer and respecting and embracing Narragansett's history. This may sound odd, but I frequently have conversations with myself, asking what would John English, Carl Haffenreffer or Jacob Wirth think about this, back in the day.

Then, from a customer standpoint, it's been great to not only reach the people who remember 'Gansett, but also reach out to a whole new generation of fans.

**RIC:** What's the best thing you've heard so far about the great comeback?

**HELLENDRUNG:** I guess



the best thing that I hear, and it really means a lot to me, is when someone simply says, "Thank you for bringing 'Gansett back. It tastes great and it's really great to have it back again."

What has always driven me is that the brewery had a fate that it didn't really deserve and it's fabulous that we've been able to turn it around.

**RIC:** What's the worst?

**HELLENDRUNG:** The worst comments usually come from the uninformed. Like there's nothing worse than people who haven't even tasted the beer say that it isn't any good. People have personal preferences and I don't expect everyone to like the beer, but at least taste one before you disregard it.

**RIC:** What's the most unusual thing you've heard when piecing together the history of the brewery?

**HELLENDRUNG:** There are a lot of great stories, and the best really aren't fit for print! Maybe the most interesting that I've heard is that our most popu-

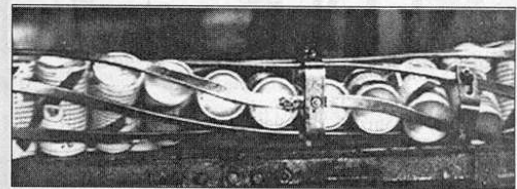
lar governor, Governor Garrahy, got elected in some part because of the relationship he built as a Narragansett salesman and the support of the brewery community.

**RIC:** Speaking of breweries, where is the ideal place to build the new one and why?

**HELLENDRUNG:** To be honest, we haven't gotten to that point yet. The history is in Cranston, but the heart today is in Providence. We also sell a ton of 'Gansett in Narragansett, and Pawtucket has some great buildings for a brewery.

**RIC:** You have, what, 7 or 8 employees now and interns from great colleges? 'Gansett at its peak had hundreds. How big can your company grow? What kind of boon do you imagine it might become for Rhode Island unemployed, as well as other local businesses?

**HELLENDRUNG:** That's hard to estimate, and really depends on what timeframe you are talking. We've been around for 120 years, and I want this beer to be here for another 120



more.

We would certainly need a dozen or so employees in the brewery on day one, and it will only grow from there as the brewery grows.

**RIC:** I remember animated cartoons for 'Gansett in the 60s. They were terrific comedy. Is the Internet the new marketing strategy? How do you bring a 1914 company into 2014??

**HELLENDRUNG:** Well, this is truly a David vs. Goliath industry and we will never have the money of, say, a Budweiser to compete in traditional advertising. But the Internet and social media is the new frontier and the great equalizer is that it costs very little to do and it's so much more interactive than listening to the TV or radio.

We literally have conversations with our fans daily via social media.

**RIC:** Why are you so passionate about this? Why was it such a right fit when you left the Presidency of Nantucket Nectars?

**HELLENDRUNG:** I guess I had the experience of running a beverage company after leaving Nectars, and I'm pretty passionate about this on several levels. Narragansett was an institution, a part of life for New Englanders, and it really sucks what happened.

It's pretty cool to be a part of something that stretches back generations and will go forward many more, to be part of some-



thing that is almost larger than life. I also have traveled around the country and we've got an opportunity around here to really breathe life into the beer culture.

If you travel to places like Colorado and the Pacific Northwest, there's a culture of support for great local breweries.

**RIC:** SO, which drink do you prefer, a Nectar or a Gansett?

**HELLENDRUNG:** 'Gansett, hands down!

**RIC:** And, speaking of hands, "Hi, Neighbor, Have A Gansett," is as memorable as any slogan in advertising history in my book. How do you top it? Is there a new slogan contest?

**HELLENDRUNG:** I'm not sure you CAN top it. Believe me, there was a part of us in the beginning that thought the slogan might be a little old and not so relevant and we tired other slogans, but nothing resonates more than, 'Hi, Neighbor, have a 'Gansett.'

For more information, go to [www.narragansettbeer.com](http://www.narragansettbeer.com).