



## The New England Beer That Could Dethrone PBR

*Maxim* talked to the Narragansett CEO about how a return to tradition helped save their iconic tall boy.

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Just one decade ago, a fixture of New England was on the brink of disaster.

Narragansett, the crisp American lager that for generations was a mainstay in beach towns and at Red Sox games, was dying. Its volume had dwindled to just a few thousand barrels from a production peak of millions of barrels in the 1960s and 1970s. Growing up in the suburbs of Boston (and with mother's Rhode Island roots), the disappearance of Narragansett seems unimaginable: I spent my teenage years drinking Gansetts at house parties and BBQs, on the shores of Walden Pond and Cape Cod. The beer has embodied New England culture for generations, the default complement to oysters and fried clams, the sand and the sea. Now living in Brooklyn, I drink the stuff whenever I can just to quell my homesickness and satiate my inner Masshole.

But after years of falling sales, Narragansett is making a comeback. [Rebecca Greenfield reports in \*Bloomberg Business\*](#) that the once-iconic beer is enjoying a resurgence in both sales and acclaim, especially among the highest-value demographic in the country: Millennials with disposable income. "[Narragansett] is becoming a popular alternative to Pabst Blue Ribbon among price-sensitive beer drinkers at hip Brooklyn bars," Greenfield reports. "It was the cheapest of the top four fastest-growing beers in Brooklyn in the past year."

So how did a dying but storied beer emerge as a modern challenger to the tyranny of PBR? *Maxim* spoke to Narragansett CEO Mark Hellendrung on the past, present and future of the American lager.

### **What was the state of Narragansett prior to your purchase?**

It was down to about 5,000 cases a year and really it was largely just a couple hundred guys spread across Rhode Island and southern Massachusetts who just never stopped drinking Narragansett. It was kind of cool to run into these guys. They were mainly in their 60s and 70s and just had a great affinity for the brand and never quit. It was like their badge of honor.

But what was really cool is that, when I bought the brand, there were a bunch of hipster dive/music joints that were featuring it and buying 100 cases or so a month, which was pretty interesting given the usual suspects. You'll be amazed, it was 10 years ago that I signed the deal to get the brand back.

### **What do you think those younger drinkers saw in the beer? What did that signal to you at the time of the purchase?**

I think it was a very counter-mainstream thing. Everyone else was drinking Bud, and I think Narragansett stood out as an alternative. Plus, most of the bartenders were deep Rhode Island natives, the torchbearers who kept the brand alive for me and everyone else who's drinking it today.

### **What were the biggest changes you've made, then?**

We changed the beer back to its original recipe, which is just an awesome beer. We've won several awards over the past 10 years simply by going back to the original Narragansett recipe before the brand was purchased and passed around over the years. Now it's the highest-rated American lager on *BeerAdvocate* (the highly-respected beer-ranking index published out of Boston). That's not me standing on a mountaintop; that's 3,000 beer drinkers rating our stuff.

The original recipe has a higher malt profile, which gives it way more body than more watery substitutes, and it's got higher IBUs which gives it a little more flavor. It's just a bigger-bodied, more flavorful beer than the other competitors.

Frankly, taste matters, and the original Narragansett flavor really fell by the wayside over the years. Narragansett was bought out by Falstaff Brewing Company in the mid-60s, then Falstaff went bankrupt and somebody bought it. Ultimately, Pabst became the owner of old regionals like Schlitz and Shaeffer and Lone Star and Natty Bo. Over time and over different owners, the beers were bounced around from so many breweries and watered down over the years into a flavorless, generic beer.

### **According to *Bloomberg Business*, a lot of bars in high-density, Millennial-rich neighborhoods (read: Brooklyn) tend to stock Narragansett as a classier substitute to a Bud or a Coors or a PBR. Why is that?**

I think we have this great vintage classic Americana look in our packaging. But one of the challenges of bringing this brand back is that you're both shackled and empowered by your history. You've got all this stuff in your past that if you bring it back to life in a cool way, it helps instill this authentic heritage. We brought back the cans featured in *Jaws* some 40 years ago; We're breathing life into a brand and reimagining our great history in a contemporary context.

What's ironic is, when I think back 10 years ago, given all the old guys who were drinking Narragansett, I thought the younger drinkers would be the hardest to crack. Ten years later, the opposite is true. The people drinking Narragansett are craft beer drinkers in major metropolitan areas who want something more independent and unique when drinking this style of beer. This is why we're catching on in New York and Philly and Portland, Oregon.

## **What about broad trends in American beer drinkers outside your changes to the original recipe and nostalgia-heavy packaging?**

The growth of the craft beer segment. Yuengling and Narragansett are the only two American lagers classified as craft; 30% of our volume is in craft. I drink a lot of craft beer, i drink a lot of big IPAs, but after awhile you just can't do that. You can't, say, go to a Patriots game and drink 10 of 'em. At some point, you want to transition to something a little more refreshing and a little lighter on a palette. That's where Narragansett comes in: People have portfolios of beers that people drinks, and for some reason a lot of people gravitate toward us.

## **Is this because of "beer fatigue?"**

Those beers are struggling to capture the imagination of American beer drinkers' palettes. Those are the raw numbers (ed note). This is especially true in the younger demo: Young beer drinkers want more flavorful beers. Look at what's going on with Not Your Father's Root Beer – that's sold a lot in a short period of time. Or look at the Reds from MillerCoors, or the Angry Orchard. People are looking for flavors, and because our beer is more flavorful than the average lager, that's why we win.

## **So what else can we expect to see from you in the next few years?**

In terms of new markets, we're pretty measured. The beer industry is so competitive, we're happy that we space to grow in our existing markets. But we're certainly seeing success in places like Portland, Oregon, or down in Florida; in eastern Tennessee. A lot of craft breweries have massive aspirations, but we don't really have that.

We really want to continue pushing out our interesting beers. It's our 125th anniversary in December, and we were founded by six German immigrants, so my brewmaster and Sean Larkin are going to Germany in July to try a lot of great German lagers and come back with some ideas and recipes for some German-style pilsners to celebrate our anniversary.

The final chapter in pulling this all together is bringing brewery operations back to Rhode Island. We had a building all lined up in March, but somebody was growing medicinal marijuana in there, there was a little accident, and an 85,000 square foot facility went up in smoke, but we're back on track, and hopefully we'll have big news in the fall on bringing the brewery operations back to Rhode Island.

## **Wait, what?**

This was a cooperative project with a bunch of other breweries to create a "guild" of sorts. We were real close to closing a deal on the building and we were going to start putting equipment in. I woke up March 5th, there was a five-alarm fire, and the place was just decimated.

But hey, I'm taking the long view: As I see it, it's just one more comical moment in our long, illustrious history.