

PROVIDENCE Journal

'Gansett



Artist Theodor Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, brought Chief Gansett to life in his illustrations during the 1930s. PHOTO COURTESY OF NARRAGANSETT BREWING CO.

10 years into its revival, the iconic R.I. beer is hotter and hipper than ever, far beyond the Ocean State

By Gail Ciampa | Journal Food Editor

It's opening night for Quentin Tarantino's "The Hateful Eight" 70mm movie at the historic Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline, Massachusetts. The young, hip crowd lines up for the handful of beer selections offered at the bar, and two are tallboys from Rhode Island — Narragansett Lager and Autocrat Coffee Milk Stout.

It's not easy to stay relevant in any business. Yet, Narragansett Brewing is enjoying great popularity 10 years into its renaissance, and 125 years after it was introduced in Rhode Island. Its reach is well beyond the Ocean State and expanding.

How did it happen?

With nostalgia and good taste.

But before we talk about that, let's look back to the beginning.

It was Dec. 29, 1890, when six German-Americans formed the Narragansett Brewing Company. One of them was Jacob Wirth, founder and namesake of Boston's longtime German restaurant in the theater district.

There were challenges, great ones, including Prohibition, mas-

tering cold storage and working to



Vintage cans and bottles of Narragansett are mixed with new ones, reflecting the evolution of the Rhode Island-based brewery over its 125-year history.

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The Narragansett 125th Anniversary Bash with Deer Tick and special guest Last Good Tooth will be Saturday, Jan. 2 at Lupo's Heartbreak Hotel, 79 Washington St., Providence. Doors will open at 8 p.m. Tickets to the show, open to all ages, are \$25 in advance, \$28 the day of. To purchase online or for in-person purchase info go to narragansettbeer.com.

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ship overseas.

For a while in the late '30s, company illustrations were drawn by Theodor Geisel, a.k.a. Dr. Seuss, who was hired by Rudolf Haffenreffer Jr., president of Narragansett, to develop Chief Gansett ads.

There were many firsts for the company, including being the first in New England to can their beer, right there at the long-ago-razed Cranston plant.

They were also the first to engage in sponsorships, first of the Boston Braves and then of the Boston Red Sox, starting in the mid-1940s.

Golden-tongued Red Sox broadcaster Curt Gowdy coined the famous "Hi Neighbor, Have a 'Gansett" phrase.

At its peak in 1965, Narragansett's market share accounted for 65 percent of all beer sold in New England.

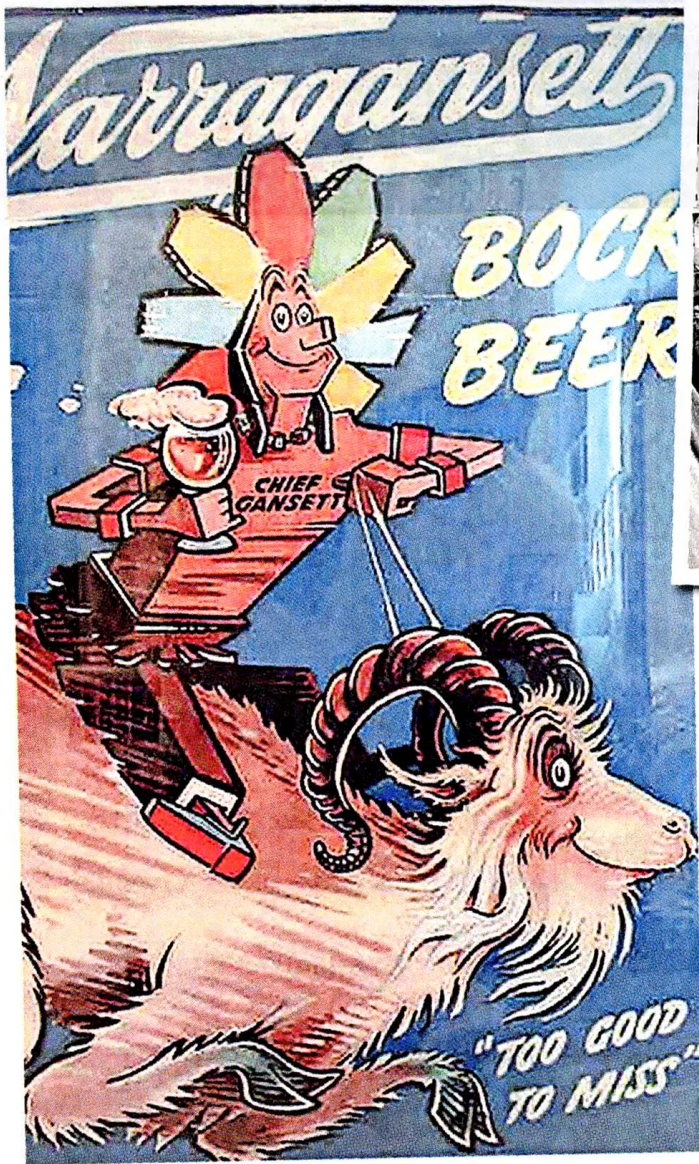
Then it all went bad.

Narragansett was sold to Falstaff Brewing Corp. in 1965 and production was moved to the Midwest. Without that good Scituate Reservoir water, the taste fell into decline and the beer got a new nickname: "Nasty Narry." It stopped being made in 1983.

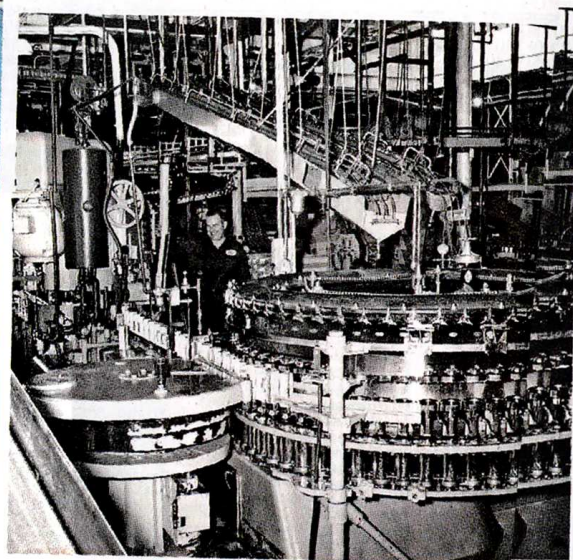
Twenty-two years later, native Rhode Islander Mark Hellendrung, the president of Nantucket Nectars which was sold to Snapple, resurrected Narragansett with a group of investors.

He recalled the moment he got the idea to bring it back, and the day he knew it would succeed.

It was 15 years ago. Hellendrung was at a local pub, Cappy's Hillside Cafe, in Newport.



Narragansett Brewing's Chief Gansett was illustrated by Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, during the 1930s. The iconic Rhode Island brewery fell on hard times, but has been going strong since its revival 10 years ago. PHOTO COURTESY OF NARRAGANSETT BREWING CO.



The brewery's automated canning equipment, shown above in 1958, helped Narragansett own the New England market. It once accounted for 65 percent of all beer sold in the region.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NARRAGANSETT BREWING CO.



Mark Hellendrung is responsible for putting Narragansett Beer back in business 10 years ago. PROVIDENCE JOURNAL FILES

"It was not what it is today with craft beers," he said. "We had exhausted the list of beers, and I complained that there had to be something else to try."

"Somebody yelled out 'Give him a 'Gansett.' " There were laughs, but soon the stories of drinking Narragansett, and of baseball and Narragansett ensued, said Hellendrung. Nostalgia for the brand consumed the place.

He thought the time might be right to bring the brand back.

Not long afterward, Hellendrung was working as interim president of Magic Hat Brewing Co. in Burlington, Vermont. One night he was driving home to Rhode Island.

"I didn't realize it, but I was speeding going through New Hampshire and got pulled over," he said.

"You're doing 80," the officer told Hellendrung.

"What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about bringing Narragansett beer back," he told him.

Well, that's all the officer needed to hear to go down his own memory lane.

"He told me he grew up around the transistor radio listening to baseball games with his mother," he said.

She would drink one 16-ounce returnable bottle, pouring it into an 8-ounce glass from which she sipped

during the game.

"He let me go with no ticket," Hellendrung said. The rest is history.

"It's been an incredible journey that Narragansett's been on," he reflected.

"It brings a smile to a lot of faces, and there's great satisfaction in that."

But being a local icon and all the nostalgia around that is only one part of the equation.

One step in the revival was bringing back as a consultant

Bill Anderson, its former brewmaster, then in his 70s, to re-create the old flavor. The formula had been altered by corporate buyers.

"When you shift to the quality side of the beer, you realize we inherited this beer that was kicked around and diluted and called Nasty Narry," Hellendrung said.

"We've made it back and have our Lovecraft series that won awards."

Narragansett is halfway

through a series of beers that pays homage to H.P. Lovecraft through the release of limited-edition themed beers with designs by local artists. He was born the year the company was founded.

They've also done successful mash-ups with other Rhody icons, including Autocrat Coffee (a stout beer), Del's Lemonade (a shandy) and Allie's Donuts (a chocolate porter).

But the Narragansett Lager

is still king.

"We are one of the hottest beers in New York City, and so our reach is really extending," said Hellendrung.

He grimaces at the concept that it has become the choice beer for hipsters and said it's more than that.

"We are the choice of craft beer drinkers when they want to change up to something lighter on their palate," he said. "You can only drink so

many IPAs."

The beer offers different tastes for different times and different occasions, he added.

This year has seen Narragansett up another 10 percent in production, which speaks to momentum.

Next year, the company will produce more than 100,000 barrels, he predicted. The first year back in production, 2005, it made 580.

Last year, the Brewers Association added Narragansett to the Top 50 U.S. Craft Brewers list and put it at No. 47 in terms of sales volume. Hellendrung expects to rise to the low 30s when the 2015 rankings are released.

The next major milestone for the company will be opening a brewery in Rhode Island to produce the beer.

Most of it is now brewed at North American Breweries in Rochester, New York, with some smaller batches made at Buzzards Bay Brewing in Westport, Massachusetts.

When will that local brewery come to fruition?

"We are in the eighth inning, and we look forward to hitting it out of the park," he said, adding a guffaw.

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Narragansett Brewing was the first in New England to can its beer, as shown in these vintage examples.