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Is Narragansett really the PBR killer?

TEN YEARS ago this summer, Mark Hellendrung and a group of investors sat down with the owners of Pabst Brewing Co. and convinced them to part with one of its many retro beer brands, **Narragansett**.

"It was worth everything," said Hellendrung, a former executive with Nantucket Nectars and Magic Hat Brewing Co. "And it was worth nothing."

Narragansett had been around since 1890, and became part of the huge portfolio of brands that Pabst began acquiring in the 1970s when it took over its parent, Falstaff. Despite Gansett's old-school cred, few outside its home turf in Rhode Island were familiar with it, except perhaps as the can that shark-hunting Robert Shaw famously crushed in his fist in "Jaws."

It was selling about 5,000 cases a year.

"Pabst could see the potential," Hellendrung said, "but they didn't know what to do with it."

Under the 47-year-old Hellendrung's leadership, Narragansett today sells the equivalent of more than 1 million cases a year. Its dou-



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ble-digit annual growth prompted CNN to declare that the brand is on the verge of supplanting **Pabst Blue Ribbon** as America's hipster beer.

That's laughably wrong on two counts.

First, though PBR's sales growth is slipping, it's still selling more than 5 million barrels — or about 70 million cases — a year. Narragansett, available only in the Northeast and a few other markets, has a long way to go.

And, second, Narragansett is far more than the ironic choice of the disaffected skinny-jeans set. Craft-beer lovers — people who willingly pay a premium price for full-flavored, small-batch brews — are reaching for the brand, too. Today, it is the highest-rated mainstream lager among BeerAdvocate.com's famously picky users.

Now, you could say this is a re-

sult of discount pricing and savvy marketing, but it's also because Narragansett is actually a good beer. It's smooth and dry, with a clean, refreshing finish — a near-perfect pounder that's an easy-drinking follow-up when your palate is played out by all those IPAs.

No, it's not all-malt; it contains a portion of corn. Hellendrung said he got the recipe from the last brewmaster at Narragansett's old plant, in Cranston, R.I. Today, the beer is brewed by Genesee, in Rochester, N.Y.

How does Hellendrung explain its appeal?

"You have to remember that, 75 years ago, regional brands like Narragansett were the original craft beer," he said. "They got steam-rolled by Anheuser-Busch, but we've got that heritage going for us ...

"Craft beer is in our DNA."

Now, if you're thinking this sounds an awful lot like what you might hear from the folks up in Pottsville, Pa., you're on the right



track. Like **Yuengling**, Narragansett is trading on memories and regional pride. But as his company happily clings to the past (annually issuing a circa 1975 version of its Lager can to commemorate that famous scene in "Jaws"), Hellendrung has been far less conservative than the Yuengling clan about stepping into the future.

Narragansett has expanded its portfolio to about 20 styles (compared to fewer than a dozen from Yuengling). Some are traditional: a very good porter, for example. But can you imagine Yuengling canning a coffee milk stout? Narragansett did, and its collaboration with Rhode Island's Autocrat Coffee was one of last winter's winners. Next month, it will

release the latest in its series honoring horror writer H.P. Lovecraft: **Reanimator Helles Lager**.

While most of Narragansett's specialty brews are produced at Buzzard's Bay Brewing in Massachusetts, Hellendrung said he's moving forward with plans to open his own brewery in 2016.

"I drink a lot of lot of craft beer," Hellendrung said. "But sometimes you need to drink something different, but craft beer drinkers don't want to switch to the big Super Bowl brands."

That's the niche that Narragansett Lager fills.

► Speaking of old-line breweries, Wilkes-Barre's Lion Brewery is launching a new Stegmaier Cellar Series that pushes beyond the 110-year-old brewery's traditional roots. First up: **Grand Hoppa**, a very hoppy double IPA with 8.9 percent alcohol. ■

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