

Narragansett beer lost its cool. Now it's hot again.

Beer

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For years, beer lovers have been rolling their eyes as hipsters embraced their grandfathers' blue-collar beer brands — Pabst Blue Ribbon, National Bohemian, Stroh's — in the name of cheap prices and “heritage.”

Cheap? Sure. But these days, there's little that's authentically Maryland about Natty Boh, a beer brewed in North Carolina under contract to a multinational corporation based in Los Angeles with a Texas post office box as its address.

But the hottest throwback beer sweeping the East Coast has a back story that rings true: Narragansett, founded in Rhode Island in 1890, was the official beer of the Boston Red Sox from the days of Ted Williams to the era of Carlton Fisk. It was the region's best-selling beer for decades, until a series of corporate buyouts and mergers crippled the brewery's products. By the time Rhode Island native and former Nantucket Nectars president Mark Hellendrung rediscovered the beer in a bar in 2003, it was a minor regional label owned by Pabst, with only about 5,000 cases a year leaving the brewery. “It was really watered down. The packaging hadn't changed in years,” Hellendrung says. “There wasn't any love or attention being shown to the brand.”

In 2005, Hellendrung and his partners bought the rights to Narragansett. The first thing he did, Hellendrung says, was bring back Bill Anderson — the last brew master of the old Narragansett, who still had the original recipe — and begin canning at a New York brewery. They started slowly, focusing on New England at first, eventually moving into Philadelphia in 2010 and New York City in 2011. At the urging of its New York distributors, Narragansett

entered the D.C. market in November 2013.

Soon after the launch here, Hellendrung stopped into the Pug, an H Street NE tavern where Genesee and Schmidt's beer signs hang on the wall and 16-ounce tallboy cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon and National Bohemian are the best-selling beers. It seemed a natural venue for Narragansett, especially after Hellendrung hit it off with bar owner Tony Tomelden, who added it to his menu and put out Narragansett coasters with cartoony puzzles. The 16-ounce cans sold fine, but this summer, it began blowing up.

“We did a week's vacation this summer with my buddies from New York, and they were all asking for it,” Tomelden says. “I didn't get it.” But by the middle of the summer, Narragansett had passed Schlitz to become the bar's third-best seller, running close to National Bohemian. “I thought it was because I was selling it for \$4, and people realized it's a pretty good tallboy that's cheaper than PBR,” Tomelden jokes.

Talk to bar owners and beer distributors from the District to New York, and no one can explain why Narragansett is having its moment in the sun. There's virtually no advertising other than social media, coasters and a few signs in bars. Some beer directors point to the lager's versatility: As an affordable fit, it can be at home and popular in a can-only dive like the Red Derby. Because it's from New England, it goes well with the summer oyster-shack vibe at Hank's on the Hill. Its independent ownership and decent reviews on BeerAdvocate.com make it acceptable at City Tap House, a craft-focused bar with 40 drafts.

Dave Delaplaine, beer director of the Roofers Union restaurant and beer bar in Adams Morgan, originally put Narragansett on the menu because of its intriguing back story and

because it's independent. But he didn't think it would become so popular: “In the peak of the summer, I think it was mid-July, there were times we'd sell 16 cases of cans in a night. It was ridiculous.” (Even funnier, he says: listening to customers jumping on the bandwagon without being able to pronounce “Narragansett.” Hint: It's “nair-uh-GANN-set.”)

He's surprised by the broad appeal. “There are people from New England who are crazy about it,” he says. “But I have friends, craft beer guys, who come in and have a sour or an IPA, and after a beer or two, they say, ‘I want a Narragansett.’”

Other bar owners think Narragansett's growth is about more than lager, pointing to the series of collaborations the brewery has done with iconic Rhode Island businesses: a wildly successful lemon shandy with the owners of Del's Frozen Lemonade, and a coffee stout made with Autocrat Coffee. Those are solid displays of regional pride, providing the brewery with visible authenticity.

And then there are Narragansett's IPAs, bock and English-style Innsmouth Olde Ale, which won a medal at this year's Great American Beer Festival and is part of a series of three beers brewed in honor of writer (and Providence, R.I., native) H.P. Lovecraft.

Robert Perry, owner of Philadelphia's eclectic dive bar Tattooed Mom, says that all of the above plays a part in Narragansett's appeal. In a crowded field with a strong local presence, “they've differentiated themselves by making two price points: Lager is really good for the cost-conscious person who wants to enjoy a nice beer; there's not too much at that end of the market. And at the other end, they've done some interesting, more contemporary beers. The H.P. Lovecraft beers

— the illustrations were modern, cool, a little edgier.”

For Perry, the tipping point happened in summer 2014, when Del’s Shandy hit the city. “You couldn’t get your hands on it. It was very in-demand,” he recalls. “Even though they’d been building steadily and methodically, the breakout success of the shandy really brought them to a whole new level.” Perry made Del’s Shady the featured beer this past summer, “and we did really well with it.” Although Del’s Shandy is disappearing for the season, the brewery’s name is still out there.

Narragansett also has a secret weapon that Pabst and Natty Boh can’t touch: It can call itself a craft beer. Last year, the Brewers Association, a national industry organization that runs the Great American Beer Festival, modified its standards to welcome breweries that use adjunct ingredients, such as corn or rice, as long as those breweries are independently owned and don’t produce more than 6 million barrels per year. Narragansett promptly vaulted to number 37 on the Brewers Association’s list of the country’s biggest craft brewers; Hellendrung says they’re on track to produce about 85,000 barrels this year.

The “craft” label, along with that compelling back story, helps get Narragansett into bars that might otherwise look askance at an American adjunct lager. Jacob Berg, the beer director at two New York bars — Astoria Bier and Cheese, and Milk & Hops — says Narragansett occupies a niche. “We don’t sell any macro beers, and Narragansett is most comparable to PBR,” he says.

The price is a factor — Astoria Bier and Cheese sells Narragansett for \$1 less than most of its other beers — but not the only one. “They have a great

story, and that authenticity really resonates with craft beer consumers,” Berg says. But what he really likes is that Narragansett acts more like a craft brewery than like a one-trick nostalgia brand. “Not only are they making the same damn beer they’ve always been making, but they’re making

other beers, too,” he says, ticking off the seasonal Summer Ale, Porter and the recent Town Beach IPA. “That kind of stuff, to me, is such a craft style.”

Maybe not what you’d expect from a 125-year-old brewery, but it’s enough to establish a beachhead.

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PHOTOS FROM [NARRAGANSETT BEER](#)

Narragansett, a Rhode Island brewery that launched 125 years ago, is enjoying surprising success under new ownership.

