

My happy Rhode Island entrepreneurial adventure

ROBIN SQUIBB

You're nuts! You can't just start an iced-tea company."

We were sailing south towards Beavertail. The wind was perfect. The sun was warm.

"You don't know a thing about the beverage business, marketing, sales! Who's going to pay for it? Have you ever written a business plan?"

I had spent the last 30 years working as a script supervisor in the film business. I barely knew what a business plan was. Sam had made lots of dough as a private-equity investor.

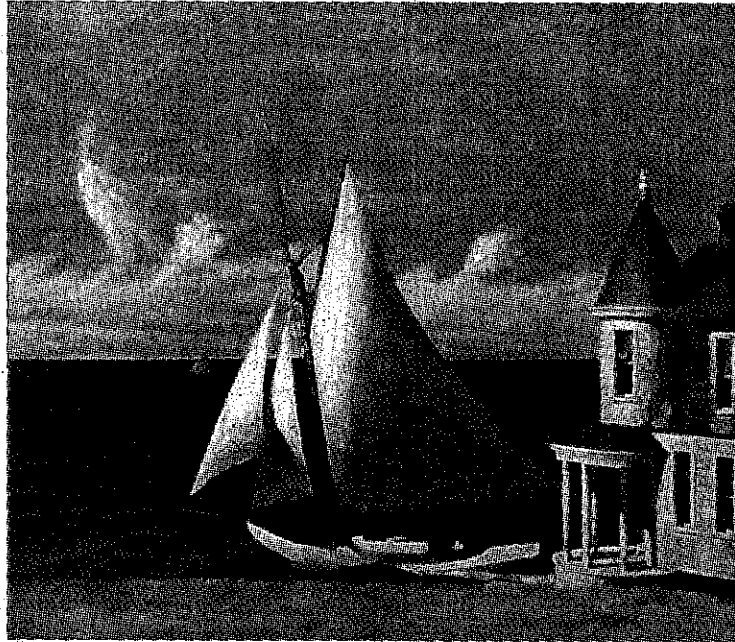
"All I know is that everyone in Saunderstown has been making Granny's iced tea for generations and every one loves it."

"So what? You really think you could compete with Arizona? Snapple? Coke? Head up! That damn catboat's going faster than we are!"

All the more reason to go for it, I thought as I pushed the tiller away from me.

For years, friends had been telling me that someone ought to be selling "Granny Squibb's." The community had long since given a name to the lemon/mint iced tea they all made from my grandmother's recipe. I'd recently moved home to Rhode Island from New York City and was looking for a new venture. This might be it. I continued to work on films, but now I was plying casts and crews with the homemade brew, and much to everyone's amusement, was reading *Beverage World* between set-ups.

From the very beginning, living in Rhode Island worked to my advantage in starting the business. As Rhode Islanders know, the rest of the world might be separated by six degrees of separation. We are separated by only one, or two at the most. One phone call was all it took to get the name and e-mail address of Jim Hines, executive director of Rhody Fresh Milk. I had learned that dairies sometimes make their own iced tea. Jim explained that Rhody Fresh didn't have its own bottling facilities but he put me in touch with its distributor, Little Rhody Foods, whose owner happened to be



From "The Lee Shore," by Edward Hopper

looking for an iced tea to add to his product line. Starting out with a distributor would be a considerable advantage.

Peter Marcionetti, a neighbor who happens to be a partner at the Providence advertising/public relations firm of Duffy & Shanley, offered his help. Peter was already a fan of Granny Squibb's homebrew from drinking it at the Saunderstown Yacht Club, where it is served every Saturday during the summer. We agreed that building the brand around the story of my grandmother would add upscale authenticity. The "buy local" trend was taking off, and we thought it would work in our favor.

I soon discovered that if you have the passion to pursue your dreams, there is much help to be found here in Rhode Island. I took a basic course on starting a business at the Center for Women & Enterprise's Providence operation and soon found out what a business plan was! A program called "Innovation Monday" at the Rhode Island Small Business Development Center (SBDC) kept me headed in the right direction as I worked on a commercial formula. A taste test organized by Johnson & Wales provided helpful consumer response. The SBDC also provided the services of a business adviser, Jim Crisafulli, who helped set up the book-

keeping system.

A commercial recipe was finally formulated (Number 53) that fooled even Saunderstown taste buds! At last we had a beverage as good as the homebrew. I continued to work on the business plan.

Peter Marcionetti introduced me to Mark Hellundrung, past president of Nantucket Nectars and present owner of Narragansett Beer. Mark's advice and connections to the beverage world have been critical in setting up operations.

In May 2009 the first bottles of Granny Squibb's® Lemon/Mint Iced Tea were produced. I managed to get a small, non-speaking part for one of our bottles in the Jennifer Aniston movie "The Bounty Hunter," and waved goodbye to show biz. I was scared to death. But as we had planned, many Rhode Island independent grocery stores, happy to support local products, agreed that our iced tea was "Astonishingly Delicious" (as our label proclaims), and made room for us in their coolers.

Rhode Island being Rhode Island, it wasn't long before I discovered the helpful services of Danny Warshay, a serial entrepreneur and adjunct professor at Brown University who teaches entrepreneurial courses and advises start-ups. I attended seminars at the Rhode Island Econom-

ic Development Corporation and the Rhode Island Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. The business school at Johnson & Wales University supervised a team of students who came up with some very useful ideas that helped move us along. I continued to work on the business plan.

Jim Crisafulli just happened to sit on the board of Chex Finer Foods, a third-generation distribution company in Attleboro. Jim urged me to talk to it about taking on Granny Squibb's. Its distribution area includes all of New England and is expanding fast in the New York area. And, it took on Granny Squibb! I soon discovered that Chex's president had not yet been born when I graduated from the Wheeler School, on Providence's East Side, the same school from which he graduated years later.

Last winter I entered the Rhode Island Business Plan competition, co-chaired by Garrett Hunter and Larry Davidson, for promoting entrepreneurship and development of start-up and early stage companies in Rhode Island. The contacts alone were sufficient to make the effort worthwhile. And the contest deadline and dreams of winnings were the incentives that I needed to complete my business plan. I finished it, reached the finals and won some very handy money and, more importantly, some very helpful services from accountants Kahn, Litwin, Renza & Co., lawyers Hinkley, Allen & Snyder, the Small Business Development Corporation and Foresight Science and Technology.

Thanks to all this help, Granny Squibb's "Astonishingly Delicious" Iced Teas are now in well over 100 stores (including Whole Foods), restaurants and schools! Needless to say, The Granny Squibb Company LLC has a very long way to go, but because of starting out in such a small state with so many people willing to help we have gotten off to a great start. So the next time you are out sailing and dreaming big dreams, I urge you to follow your heart and show that maybe, just maybe, you're not nuts after all.

Robin Squibb is film-script supervisor and a Rhode Island entrepreneur.