

'We're all about having a good time.'

Former Army captain turns to hard seltzer business with launch of Hinny



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Tim Nickels, former Army captain and New York City cop turned entrepreneur and hard seltzer maker, is a workaholic.

He's the kind of guy who wants what he wants when he wants it - "and I want it right now," Nickels said.

Take his hard seltzer. The two years and four days of time lapsed from concept to store shelf and bar tap - in one case, it took nearly two years to get a certain flavor just right, he said - was like a kid lying in bed on Christmas morning waiting for the rest of the family to wake up.

But Nickels said he didn't want to rush his Hinny Hard Seltzer.

"I think it's going to have huge dividends by not rushing it and not saying it's good enough, send it out," Nickels said. "I told my people in the beginning, I don't want to hear it's OK. I don't want to hear, 'Well, I would drink that or if I had to, I would drink it.' I want to hear this is the best. Until we can get there, I don't want to hear anything else."

On Jan. 6, Nickels sold his first order.

Hinny? What's a hinny?



A hinny is the offspring of a stallion and a jenny, which is a female donkey; not quite a mule – the hinny is a bit more mild-mannered – but close.

Close enough for Nickels, who originally wanted an Army mule to help his hard seltzer stand out on store shelves, but that was taken. So was a jackass.

Hinny it is, and he named the character on the can Clyde, his adopted hometown after starting and expanding his former business, DNT Express, which brought him to Wayne County. The company, which was sold in 2020, served as a warehouse and delivery service of wine and spirits for more than 4,000 retail locations across upstate.

Hinny, hmmm.

“Yeah, I like that. It’s not highly recognized but I was like, we’re going to put you in the sunshine, put a spotlight on you and tell the world about the hinny,” Nickels said.

Yes, some people mispronounce it as heinie, prompting his grandson to coin a slogan, “get off your heinie and get a Hinny.” The kid may have something there.

Family also plays a big role in the operation. He is naming a pink grapefruit Hinny “Smartass” because of his grandmother—not because she is one, but because she was always telling Nickels not to be one.

“We’re going to have a good time and laugh,” Nickels said. “We’re all about having a good time.”

Hinny flavors

After ruling out starting a hard cider business, Nickels set out to make hard seltzer for several reasons, among them taste.

"I didn't like the flavors of the hard seltzers that were in the market," Nickels said. "I still don't like them."

Now, his hard seltzer is being offered as a variety 12-pack with four flavors: blueberry mint, bourbon, cranberry and black cherry. Later on in the year, he'll release the pink grapefruit and purple seasonal flavors. Purple, as in grape – yes, he knows this is the Finger Lakes and grape is great.

As mentioned before, lots of trial and error was involved – "and a lot of rejection by our team" of tasters, he said -- in developing the flavors.

"I almost threw my hands up" trying to please his tasters with a black cherry flavor; that is, until they hit on it, finally.

"The blueberry mint came from a suggestion from a waiter and waitress at a restaurant I like to go to," Nickels said. "There was a lot of input from a lot of hardworking people."

And yes, he likes them.

Hinny's place in the market

National brands White Claw and Truly drive the hard seltzer market, which is expected to grow in the near future, according to the online research group Statista.

Volume sales of hard seltzer in the United States stood at 1.6 billion liters in 2021. By 2025, volume is expected to increase to 3.1 billion liters, the site reported.

Also, off-premise sales of hard seltzer have spiked in recent years, increasing tenfold from around \$496 million in 2018 to more than 4 billion U.S. dollars in 2021.

Locally, Hazlitt 1852 Vineyards and Engine 14 Brewery, both in Naples, offer hard seltzers. Hard seltzer is no flash in the pan, Nickels said, and there is a spot for Hinny.

"My position on it is, if it's going to be here, let's improve it and make a better one," Nickels said.

Hinny is produced and canned at Hazlitt Red Cat Cellars. The Fort Hill Performing Arts Center in Canandaigua, Stone & Taphouse in Clyde and Joey's Northside Grocery in Newark are among the places to find it locally.

He's trying to build the brand slowly, although this hockey fan did note Hinny Hard Seltzer was recently named a "power play" sponsor of the Binghamton Black Bears, a professional hockey team in the Federal Prospects Hockey League.

"Right now, it's a slow process but we're up to the challenge," Nickels said. "We're doing some tastings right now. If someone tastes it, they're buying it. And that puts a big smile on my face.

"We're going to keep growing nice and steady," Nickels said. "Grow it nice and steady and keep it handcrafted and made from people from this area."