Two guys familiar with the local food and wine scene have switched their focus to the emerging world of craft beer.

Patrick Lombardi, a former wine distributor, has founded 17th Star Distributing Co. and brought along partner Greg May, a former partner in three local Buffalo Wild Wings franchises.

Their business model calls for the representation of small microbrews, both from Columbus and beyond, and to Columbus and beyond.

They began selling in early March and now represent seven breweries -- three in Columbus, one in Millersburg, one in Dayton and one each in California, New Mexico and New Hampshire.

“We’re now moving into Dayton and hopefully by the end of the year, we will be moving into Cincinnati,” May said. “Our plan does not include going into northern Ohio right now. We’ll see how it goes.”

They’re filling a niche, given that there’s a paucity of mid-tier distributors in the area, May said.

“What that means is that for both the customer and the brewer, they don’t have many options in getting their beers out there,” he said.

Lombardi, a former product manager for a small distributor, said he watched as his company disregarded a growing industry.

“I saw the movement in the craft beer industry and the company I worked for wasn’t catching on,” he said. “And I stepped out on my own and started my own craft beer distributorship.”

The company is located in a cold-storage facility on Valleyview Drive on the West Side. Lombardi and May met through a mutual friend. May said when he first heard the idea, he was a bit skeptical.

“But as a restaurateur, I was seeing this huge change in customer demand,” he said. “I saw it with my own eyes. They wanted local beers, craft beers. Young beer-drinkers don’t have the brand loyalty the way their parents did. If they find a beer, that doesn’t mean they’ll be drinking it the rest of their lives.”

The two joined forces and now have 75 retail accounts, such as Crafty Pint, the Daily Growler, House Beer and Crafted Drafts.

May said basically what happens is that craft brewers start out small. As they build their inventory, they also have to market it and deliver. If business grows, craft brewers then have two options: hire staff and more trucks or hire a distributor.

“The experience of self-distribution certainly takes a toll on business and it takes a toll on them,” he said. “That’s kind of why we exist.”

They won’t accept just any beer, May said, adding he’s pleased with the quality and customer response to beers in 17th Star’s portfolio.

“We’re not going to recruit beers just to have them,” he said.

Mary Martineau, executive director of the Ohio Craft Brewers Association, said 17th Star definitely fills a void for small beer producers, which total about a dozen locally.

“I think it depends on your business plan and your operation,” she said. “I like the 17th Star guys. I like that they’re focusing on craft beers. There’s certainly a need for it.”

Fred Lee, who founded Actual Brewing with his wife, Mira, said 17th Star will give a voice to small breweries that don’t have the staff to constantly pitch to bars and restaurants.

“It’s a big deal,” said Lee, who has hired 17th Star as a distributor. “There’s a rule of thumb that you should have your distributor be as big as your brewery. That’s because you have to know the same things about the beer, you have to know the same customers.”

For more information, call 614-527-7610.
Markstein Beverage Co. Employee Recognized in National Program
*Pat Hodge Highlighted by National Beer Wholesalers Association*

August 13, 2014

Oceanside CA– Local beer distributor Markstein Beverage Co. is pleased to announce its longtime employee and Oceanside resident, Pat Hodge, has been recognized in the National Beer Wholesalers Association (NBWA) Employee Spotlight Program. Hodge has worked with Markstein Beverage Co. for more than 11 years, working up the ranks from his first position as merchandiser to his current position as inside sales representative.

America’s 3,300 independent beer distribution facilities employ approximately 130,000 men and women across the country. The NBWA Employee Spotlight Program highlights outstanding beer distribution employees and their achievements.

“It is often noted that many beer distribution companies are family-owned and -operated, and many of these businesses operate as an extended ‘family,’ with employees who have worked in the business for 10, 15, 20 years and more,” said NBWA President & CEO Craig Purser. “NBWA’s Employee Spotlight Program recognizes these standout employees who are the face of the American beer industry in their communities.”

Markstein Beverage Co.’s Director of Brand Strategy Kevin Luckey nominated Hodge for the award. He commented, “Pat Hodge has become our tel-sell guru. He has more retail accounts than any sales rep in the company – yet, somehow, he maintains a personal relationship with each one of them.”

“His customers rave about his positive attitude and kind-hearted nature,” Luckey added. “As a resident of Oceanside, he cares deeply about North San Diego County and is involved in supporting local charities. We’re so thankful to have Pat on our team.”

Markstein Beverage Co. is your locally owned and independently operated beer distributor, bringing fresh beer to California’s local bars, restaurants, and grocery stores since 1919. Today, the company markets over 200 brands of beer, from light American lagers and Mexican imports to barrel-aged stouts and Belgian sours. At its San Marcos distribution center, you will find 150 local beer experts, including draught service technicians, merchandisers, sales people, and delivery drivers, working around the clock to ensure a diverse selection of quality beer is available throughout North County. www.marksteinbeer.com

The National Beer Wholesalers Association (NBWA) represents the interests of America’s 3,300 licensed, independent beer distributor operations in every state, congressional district and media market across the country. Beer distributors are committed to ensuring alcohol is provided safely and responsibly to consumers of legal drinking age through the three-tier, state-based system of alcohol regulation and distribution. To learn more about America’s beer distributors, visit www.AmericasBeerDistributors.com.
Champion Brands and Trillium CNG break ground on new fueling station

By Jensen Werley
July 30, 2014

Jacksonville is one step closer to having its first public access CNG station, with the groundbreaking ceremony held today by Champion Brands and Trillium CNG.

The groundbreaking launched the start of the installation project by Trillium, which plans to have the compressed natural gas fueling station fully operational by October.

“This is an example of how these types of stations are a catalyst for other fleets to convert,” said Jeff Sheffield, executive director of the North Florida Transportation Planning Organization, who attended the event.

Speakers praised Champion Brands CEO Earl Benton for his decision to make the fueling station open to public use. Because of its public access, smaller companies will have more incentive to convert their fleets to natural gas — which is cheaper and cleaner burning than diesel — without the overhead of having to install their own fueling station.

“His foresight to make it available to the public is huge,” Sheffield told the Business Journal.

Because of its proximity to the port, railroads and highway infrastructure, Jacksonville was an ideal location to install CNG fueling stations.

“We are a recognized transportation hub,” said Alan Mosley, vice president of transportation, energy and logistics for Jax Chamber. “We are poised to be a global force in international trade.”

Mosley called this step toward natural gas-powered energy a “watershed moment.”

The station is the start of several natural gas projects in the works, including a fueling station in St. Johns County and liquefied natural gas ships for Crowley and Sea Star at the port.

Anddrik Frazier, regional development manager for Trillium CNG, said this was the first of several stations in the area.

“This is about energy, the environment and economics,” he said.

For Earl Benton, the decision gave him the most bang for his buck.

“I’m a capitalist,” he said. “If it didn’t make green sense, it didn’t make any sense.”
Dichello says party safe on St. Patrick’s Day

By Tony Lota, Dichello Distributors, Inc.
February 24, 2014

To the Editor:

Millions of adults will celebrate St. Patrick’s Day this year with parties and parades. But it takes more than the luck of the Irish to make sure everyone who observes the holiday gets home safely.

That’s why Dichello Distributors, Inc., the local Anheuser-Busch distributor, is working with area bars and restaurants to encourage revelers 21 and older to celebrate responsibly and designate a driver or make plans for a safe ride home.

Thanks to efforts like these and increased law enforcement, drunk-driving fatalities have declined 51 percent since 1982, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

We hope all residents will join us in celebrating responsibly on St. Patrick’s Day, and the weekend prior to it. After all, these are our roads and it’s our shared responsibility to keep them safe.

Tony Lota
Dichello Distributors, Inc.
High risk, high reward leads to Kramer success

By MICHAEL MILLER, Staff Writer
May 22, 2014

HAMMONTON - Kramer Beverage Co. owes its longevity as a fourth-generation beer distributor to bold decisions that have kept it competitive in South Jersey.

Success often comes when a company recognizes opportunity. CEO Charles Kramer, of Ventnor, has seen moments seized and moments lost.

The company started as a soft-drink bottler and distributor, founded in 1924 by his grandfather, the late Benjamin Kramer.

“Being a small soft-drink bottler was commonplace at the time. Now they’re almost non-existent because of the economy of scale,” he said.

Kramer Beverage passed on a chance to work with Pepsi Co. in the early 1970s. Pepsi was far from a national brand name at the time - and nobody had any inklings this upstart to Coca-Cola would climb to No. 43 of the Fortune 500’s biggest companies.

“We’d probably still be in the soda business if we had taken on Pepsi-Cola,” he said.

In 1986, Kramer Beverage was faced with a choice to pursue a franchise distributorship for another upstart - Coors Brewing Co. in Golden, Colo.

Doing so would require expensive and time-consuming applications to Coors with no guarantee of winning the contract. Success would mean going heavily into debt to expand the distribution company to accommodate the surge in new customers and a wider delivery range.

“There were a lot of sleepless nights,” said Lynn Kramer, Charles Kramer’s wife and the company’s retired chief financial officer.

But this decision made all the difference.

“That was the turning point. If we didn’t have Coors, we’d go out of business,” he said. “We had nothing to lose.”

In the 1970s, they gave up soft drinks, downsized the company and closed their office to work from their old warehouse.

“We just struggled through,” Lynn Kramer said.

“Without the casinos, we would not have been able to lease or sell our building in Atlantic City to move to Egg Harbor Township,” Charles Kramer said. “And if we hadn’t moved to Egg Harbor Township, we wouldn’t have survived.”

The company moved to Hammonton in 2002 as a central hub for the six counties it serves. Daily operations are now in the hands of the fourth generation, son Mark Kramer, of Voorhees, who is the company president.

His daughters represent the potential fifth generation.

Today, Coors remains its biggest supplier. As Kramer Beverage celebrates its 90th anniversary, it delivers more than 600 varieties of beers, wine coolers and ciders. This includes regional beers such as Yuengling, imports such as Corona and Guinness and a growing number of craft beers.

Craft beer is a booming segment of the domestic-beer market. Sales jumped 20 percent in 2013, according to the Brewers Association, a trade group based in Boulder, Colo.

Craft breweries sold more than 15 million barrels of beer in 2013 - up from 13 million in 2012. By comparison, industry-leading Coors routinely sells more than 18 million barrels per year.

The beer business is about forming good relationships with the brewers, the merchants and their customers, Mark Kramer said.

Cultivating good customer service is extremely important, a point the company re-inforces among its 140 employees through its 24-point “formula for success.”

But the company also relies heavily on technology to boost efficiency. With so many moving parts, coordination is essential, Mark Kramer said.

Kramer’s stocks inventory and loads trucks by computer so drivers ideally have to unload each pallet just once as they make their rounds. Drivers carry tablet computers to make changes and print final invoices on the road.

This automation cut down on mistakes and improved the speed of deliveries.

“It allowed us to handle a growing number of products. We have more than 600 now,” Mark Kramer said.

“People might think we’re just a middle man who adds cost to the price of beer. But we do a lot,” Mark Kramer said.

Kramer has its own promotional sign shop that makes the vinyl banners and advertisements that entice customers at bars and liquor stores. These promote special events such as the World Cup or the Super Bowl for each establishment or help introduce new products.

The company keeps the taps flowing at more than 1,000 bars and restaurants in six southern New Jersey counties and fills cooler cases at 250 liquor stores.

Camden and Gloucester counties are its biggest market, but brisk summer business keeps the company’s fleet of 55 trucks busy in Atlantic and Cape May counties. The company also serves Atlantic City’s casino hotels.

Mark Kramer said he has a lot of respect for his parents’ struggles.

“The reason we’ve grown so much is due to the hard work of my parents. Sometimes you have to make your own luck and be entrepreneurial,” he said. “With Coors, they went all in and it paid off.”
A local business recently donated 152 ham dinners to the Northfield Township Food Pantry in Glenview, to be provided to needy families this Christmas.

Joseph Mullarkey, a MillerCoors distributor in Glenview, purchased about $4,000 worth of food to donate to the food pantry. Food was purchased through the Jewel on Pfingsten Road in the village. Items included 900 canned vegetables, 150 10-lb. bags of potatoes, 300 cans of gravy, 75 packets of stuffing, 75 packets of white rice, 150 apple pies and 150 cooked hams.

“We were trying to be as local as possible and support our local community,” said Kevin Mullarkey, president for Joseph Mullarkey Distributors.

This food will help to provide Christmas dinners to the 720 families signed up for the pantry right now, according to Mary Lou Kratochwill, pantry coordinator. Other businesses have donated dinners as well. “All the meals have been donated this year,” she said.

Kevin Mullarkey, along with three other employees, picked up the food from Jewel and dropped it off at the pantry on Dec. 11.

Last year, Joseph Mullarkey Distributors donated money to Sunset Foods in Northbrook, which bought food for the Northfield Township pantry.

“We probably doubled our donations from last year,” Kevin Mullarkey said.

Joseph Mullarkey Distributors contacted Jewel in Glenview the first week of December to tell them about food that was needed.

Mr. Mullarkey said it is important to help out those in need within the local community.

“A lot of people look at Glenview and the North Shore and feel like there are not families in need. but there are. A lot more people are struggling in this area than people realize.”