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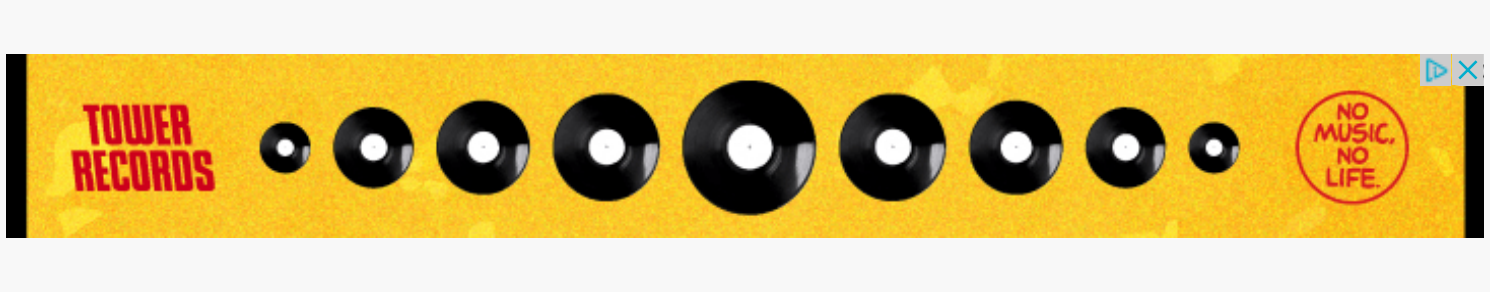

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Øl is the word for beer in Norwegian: How RI helped launch an international beer brand

Gail Ciampa The Providence Journal

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This is the story of a beer with a local angle, built on an international narrative.

And there's a love story, too.

The beer is Oslove, an American blonde ale from the Oslo Brewing Co. in Norway. It's newly distributed in Rhode Island.

The CEO of Oslo Brewing is Rhode Island native son Dimitri Yogaratnam, A graduate of South Kingstown High and the University of Rhode Island, he has returned home for the summer launch.

Dimitri Yogaratnam, who grew up in South Kingstown and now lives in Oslo, Norway, has brought his Oslove beer to Rhode Island. *David DelPoio, The Providence Journal*

Yogaratnam talked about his international history while he's back in the States this summer. He's visiting with his parents, who immigrated to Rhode Island from Sri Lanka back in the 1970s. He was born when they lived in North Providence but he grew up in South County.

How did he end up in Oslo founding a brewery? That's where the love story comes in.

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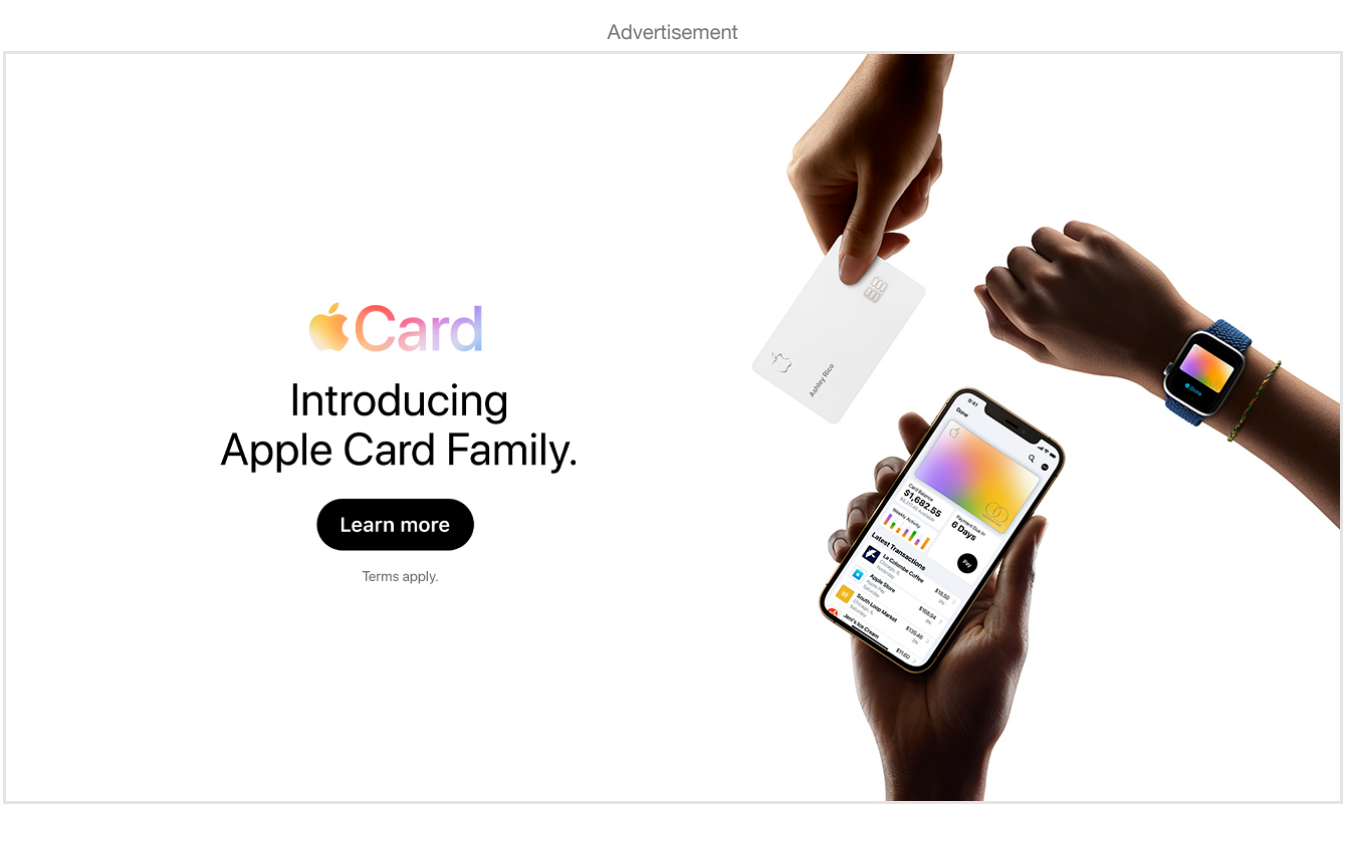

As a senior and business major at URI, Yogaratnam met a Norwegian woman during an exchange program in South Korea. He and Ingvild Bakke married in Narragansett in 2005 and had a wedding in Norway a year later.

He also got his master's degree in political science at URI, and then earned a pastry arts degree at Johnson & Wales University.

It was while he was a pastry chef at Castle Hill Inn in Newport, a Relais & Chateaux property, that he and his wife decided to move to Norway. In 2009, they moved and he went to work at Bagatelle, a Norwegian Relais & Chateaux property.

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His wife is in finance, and has what he calls "the stable job." They have a 4-year-old son, Walter.

After Bagatelle, he was hired by an American-themed restaurant in Oslo called The Nighthawk Diner. In 2012, The owner, Jan Vardøen, had a new craft beer bar opening and invited Yogaratnam to be a co-owner and manager at Smelteverket.

Two years later, Vardøen sold his shares of Smelteverket to a school friend of Yogaratnam's wife, Steffen Mussche-Johansen.

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"In 2015, I opened Oslo Brewing Co. with Steffen and a group of guys that all went to school with my wife with a very convenient set of skills." he said.

They included graphic designers, an accountant, a web designer, a sales manager, a PR specialist and a plumber and welder. Yogaratnam, with his food background, is CEO.

They also opened a craft beer bar in Tokyo that is called "Øl by Oslo Brewing Company."

"Øl is the word for beer in Norwegian," he said.

A pour of Oslove, an American blonde ale, produced by Oslo Brewing Co. in Norway. The CEO hails from Rhode Island. *David DelPoio, The Providence Journal*

Oslove, the company's first beer to launch in the United States, was inspired by Norwegian values of unity and tolerance and by the Pride movement. The ale has citrus and passion fruit flavors.

It was originally created to support the Oslo Pride festival as a one-off product back in 2016, and it sold out immediately. In 2017 the same happened. They made the beer a regular in their lineup after that.

"It's the first beer we launch with in every new market," Yogaratnam said. The message is part of the product.

Oslo Brewing beers are also sold in Singapore, Malaysia, Sweden, Iceland and Finland. He said they want to put Oslo on the craft beer map.

In the United States, Oslo Brewing Co. beers are made at Great South Bay Brewery on Long Island, which does contract brewing.

"A company like Oslo Brewing can bring their beer recipes and techniques and create the same great quality beers as they do at home in Oslo, Norway," Yogaratnam said. It enables them to get fresher beer in the hands of consumers.

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The Hot Club in Providence was the first to sign on to carry Oslove. Yogaratnam said his high-school classmate Sarah Bates saw his post about bringing the beer to Rhode Island and said she wanted to stock it at the Providence waterfront restaurant.

Sweeney's Liquors in Wakefield carries the canned beer. Bert DeSalvo, owner of Sweeney's, also went to high school with Yogaratnam. The two have stayed in touch since.

The beer is being distributed through Taprm.com in New York and Craft Collective in Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

After Oslove, the lineup of Oslo Brewing beers to be launched includes Smooth Sailing (a mango and passionfruit sour) and Kveik (a Norwegian farmhouse ale).

In Norway, their biggest seller is a Nordic pilsner, which Yogaratnam described as more malt-forward than a German or Czech pilsner.

Done with beer talk, Yogaratnam described how Norway compares to the Ocean State.

"The wind in winter is way worse here," he said. But then again, "January has only two hours of sunlight each day" in Norway.

In the summer, when the daylight hardly ends, everyone leaves Norway to go on holiday, he said. Businesses shut down from July 15 to Aug. 15.

When he returns home to Rhode Island, his Norwegian friends ask him to bring back Narragansett Beer for them. It seems that it is a hipster beer across the globe, he said.

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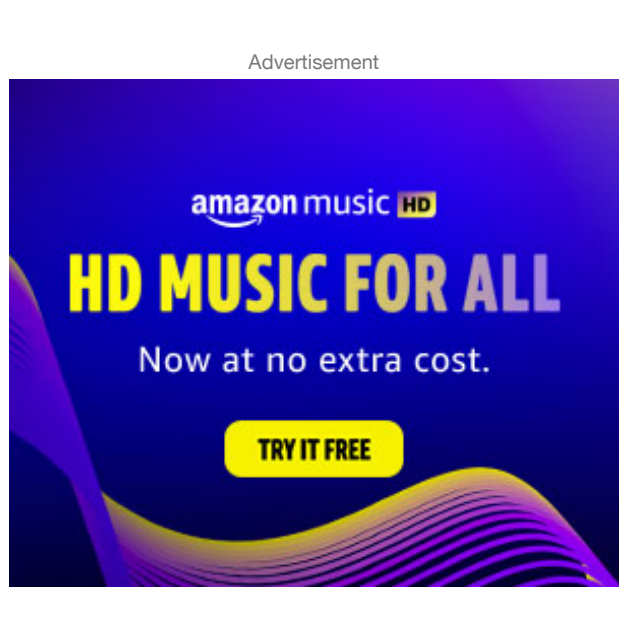

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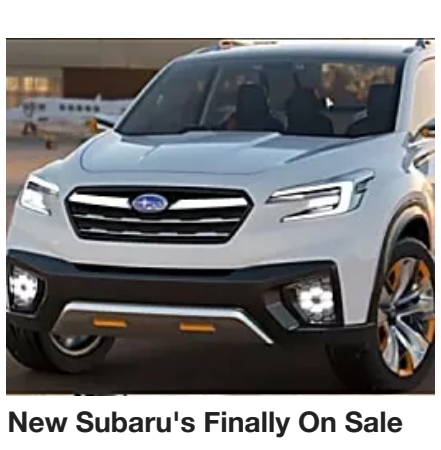
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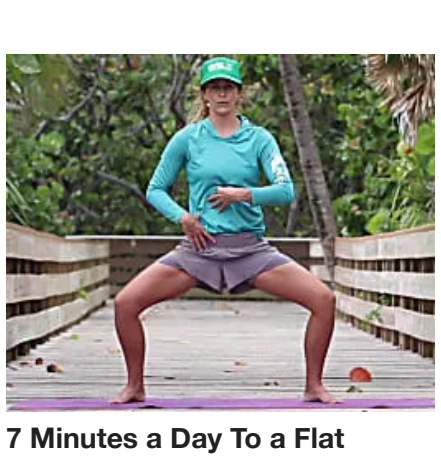
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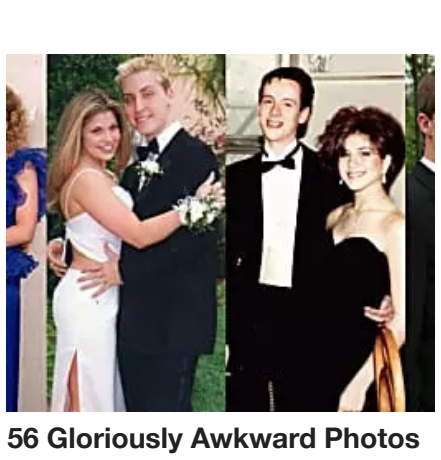
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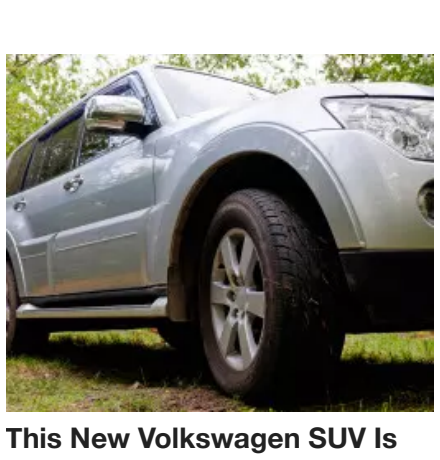
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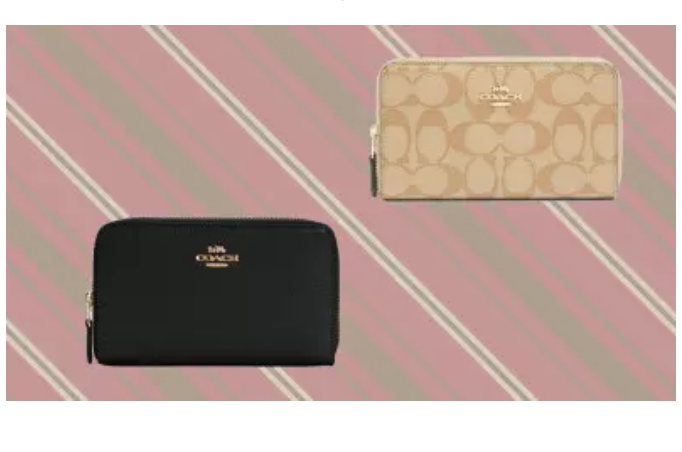

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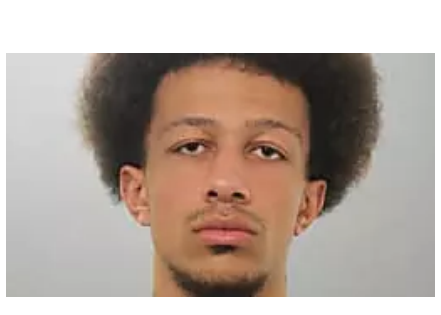
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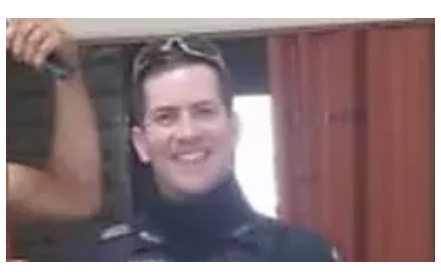
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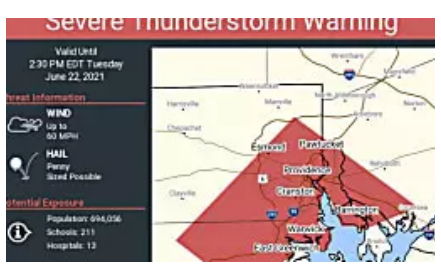
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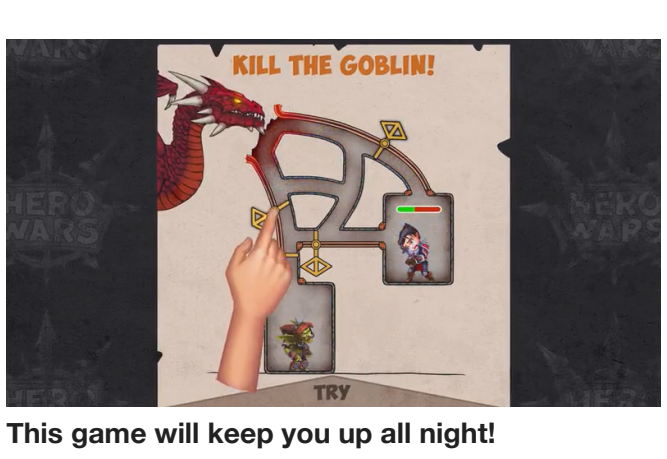
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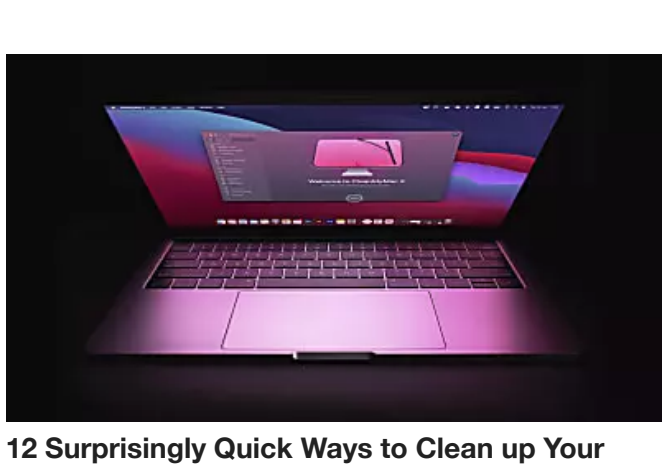
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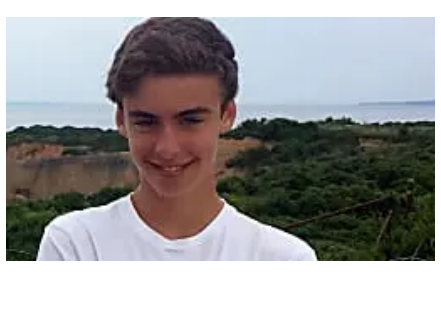
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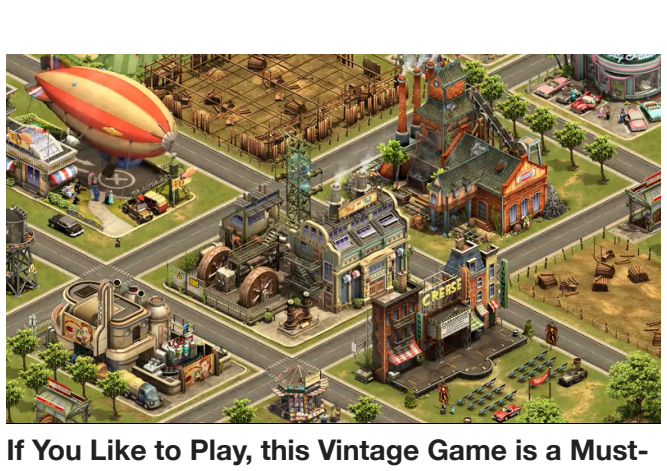
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