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## High hopes bloom on Mission Hill

District mixes business with its cultures, ambition with a city setting

By **Kathleen Pierce** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    OCTOBER 16, 2011



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**Boston City Councilor Mike Ross in his neighborhood, in front of The Mission Bar and Grill on Huntington Avenue.**

Mike Ross is at Mike's Donuts nursing a coffee. The Mission Hill bakery known for its hand-forged honey-dipped doughnuts is sparsely populated this morning, giving the Boston city councilor a moment to himself. Not for long.

Owner Maria Weinograd comes over with a wide smile and a plate of doughnut holes. Although he ran several miles through the neighborhood's punishing hills an hour ago, Ross is hesitant to indulge.

"I can't remember the last time I had a doughnut," says the trim 39-year-old with a late-summer tan.



Popping a sugar-fried morsel into his mouth, he nods with approval.

Since moving to Mission Hill four years ago, Ross has made it his mission to support independent businesses like Mike's Donuts in this overlooked enclave with some of the best views of the rest of the city.

"There's a certain texture to Mission Hill, a vibe, a feeling that is unique in itself," says Ross, who fell in love with the working-class neighborhood when he first ran for office in 1999.

He bought a modest townhouse here after living for more than a decade on Boston's tonier hill. "As much as I loved Beacon Hill I wanted to put my shoulder into a new neighborhood," Ross says. "It's an area struggling to succeed. You can feel its trajectory and strength."

Walking down Tremont Street toward the Longwood Medical Area, Ross points out signs that the so-called "wrong side of Huntington Ave." is back.

The Mission Bar and Grill, jutting into Brigham Circle, is the first.

Sitting at a high-top table in the sleek brick restaurant, owner Michel Soltani breaks from a meeting to give Ross a handshake and heartfelt hello. Ross says the wings here are the best in the city.

To Soltani, the best thing about having Ross as a city councilor is that he is also a customer. "He listens. He knows the needs of the people," said Soltani. "The key is being present and not just at election time."

But today we are not on a listening tour, but rather a gastronomic tour.

Ross has to get to City Hall in an hour, and needs lunch. Across Huntington Avenue, Penguin Pizza awaits.

There are a dozen pie slingers in this pocket of the city, but none like Penguin. If it were in Boston proper, you would be hard-pressed to find a seat. But because this welcoming tavern

with yellow and blue walls sits on a jangle of train tracks at a busy intersection, you can sneak in at midday, blend in with Northeastern students, and enjoy the best pizza this side of New Haven.

“I’d put it up there with Regina Pizzeria,” says Ross, knowing that in Boston city politics those are fighting words.

At Penguin crusts are dusted with cornmeal and garlic oil for a perfect crunch. At \$3 a slice, one could easily feed two. Take cues from owner Dermot Doyne, who also owns the Brigham Circle Diner next door, and order the Margherita pizza.

Turning a slice upside down to demonstrate the greaseless appeal of this four-cheese and basil delight is a favorite trick of the proprietor.

Like Ross, Doyne is new to Mission Hill, and is working to reverse the curse. Ten years ago Brigham Circle was “grids and graffiti,” said Doyne, an Irishman who grew up in London and worked his way through the pubs of Manhattan before moving to Boston.

The first thing he did when he opened Penguin Pizza in 2004 was remove the padlocked grid at night. “I think grids equal ghetto,” he said.

By early afternoon Doyne’s diner is packed. The blackboard lists gourmet burgers such as the Mike Ross, a “Democrat pattie in red, white, blue” (blue cheese and grilled red onions).

It's second only to the Mayor Menino burger, "a five-time winner." Ross, a self-described pescetarian, is amused, but doesn't partake.

With a Spanish and Jamaican restaurant down the street and a Cambodian-run liquor store nearby, Mission Hill has become a "little Brooklyn," Doyne believes. "It's the veins of the city. The green line goes through, people are coming home from work at all times of night, it's got a New York flavor to it."

After a quick slice at Penguin with cups of water instead of beer - there are 33 on tap - we cross back over Huntington for a power walk up Kevin W. Fitzgerald Park.

Tucked behind One Brigham Circle, the former puddingstone quarry had been closed for decades, used for years by Harvard as a snow dumping ground. Thanks to a public effort, it's now a pleasing greenway with sweeping paths that lead to epic views of downtown Boston.

To those acquainted with Mission Hill's past, the park is more than a place to walk your dog or cool down after a run. "It's a bridge between two sides of Mission Hill. It's been different ever since," said Pat Flaherty, a community activist with whom Ross meets regularly.

From this pleasing perch, one sees the spires of the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help reaching to the sky. The landmark casts a European aura over the neighborhood.

Thrown into the spotlight when Senator Edward M. Kennedy's funeral was held there in August 2009, the basilica, formerly the Mission Church, which gave the neighborhood its name, has moved beyond local gem status.

Ross attends many funerals in the majestic space with a shrine for the disabled and infirm, but the onetime Jewish boy from Newton admits, "I'm not like James Michael Curley, who went to every funeral."

At the park high up over Boston, the blaring traffic on Huntington recedes and it's easy to imagine spending an hour up here, or two.

But Ross is not a lingerer. Within minutes we are back in his Volvo cruising down Terrace Street, where this neighborhood-in-transition comes into view. Vacant lots, some weed-choked, give way to landmarks of renewal such as the Diablo Glass School. Ross pulls over.

Inside the low-slung building with a corrugated steel and orange facade, owner Sean Clarke pulls out molten glass from a furnace, blows into a metal rod, and demonstrates the alchemy of the craft.

Students make wine glasses, stained glass, and learn how to cut, fuse, and blow glass into artistic keepsakes in a weekend. Monthly wine and cheese tastings are among the most eclectic in the city.

A trip to Mission Hill is not complete without a pint at the Squealing Pig. But Ross has to return to City Hall. When he does visit this snug spot in the Triangle district of two-story brownstones after a game of softball, he will order the Mars Bar Toastie: waffles stuffed with a Mars bar that's melted to gooey perfection.

Driving down Tremont, Ross notices something he doesn't like.

A traffic light is blinking yellow. He whips out his phone and calls the mayor's hot line - for the second time this morning. "I'd like to report a light out on Tremont Street in Mission Hill. It's forbidding pedestrians to pass on a very busy street."

He hangs up and heads into work.

**If you go...**

**What to do**

**Diablo Glass School**

123 Terrace St.

617-442-7444

[www.diabloglassschool.com](http://www.diabloglassschool.com)

Classes start at \$25; wine tasting on last Saturday of every month is \$35.

### **Kevin W. Fitzgerald Park**

Entrance on St. Alphonsus Street

### **Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help**

1545 Tremont St.

617-445-2600

[www.themissionchurchboston.com](http://www.themissionchurchboston.com)

### **Where to eat**

#### **Mike's Donuts**

1524A Tremont St.

617-427-6828

Doughnuts \$1.

## **The Mission Bar and Grill**

724 Huntington Ave.

617-566-1244

[www.themissionbar.com](http://www.themissionbar.com)

\$8-\$19

## **Penguin Pizza**

735 Huntington Ave.

617- 277-9200

[www.thepenguinpizza.com](http://www.thepenguinpizza.com)

\$3.21-\$16.99

## **The Squealing Pig**

134 Smith St.

617-566-6651

[www.squealingpigboston.com](http://www.squealingpigboston.com)

\$8-\$13.99