

# Mount Pleasant's Growing Pain

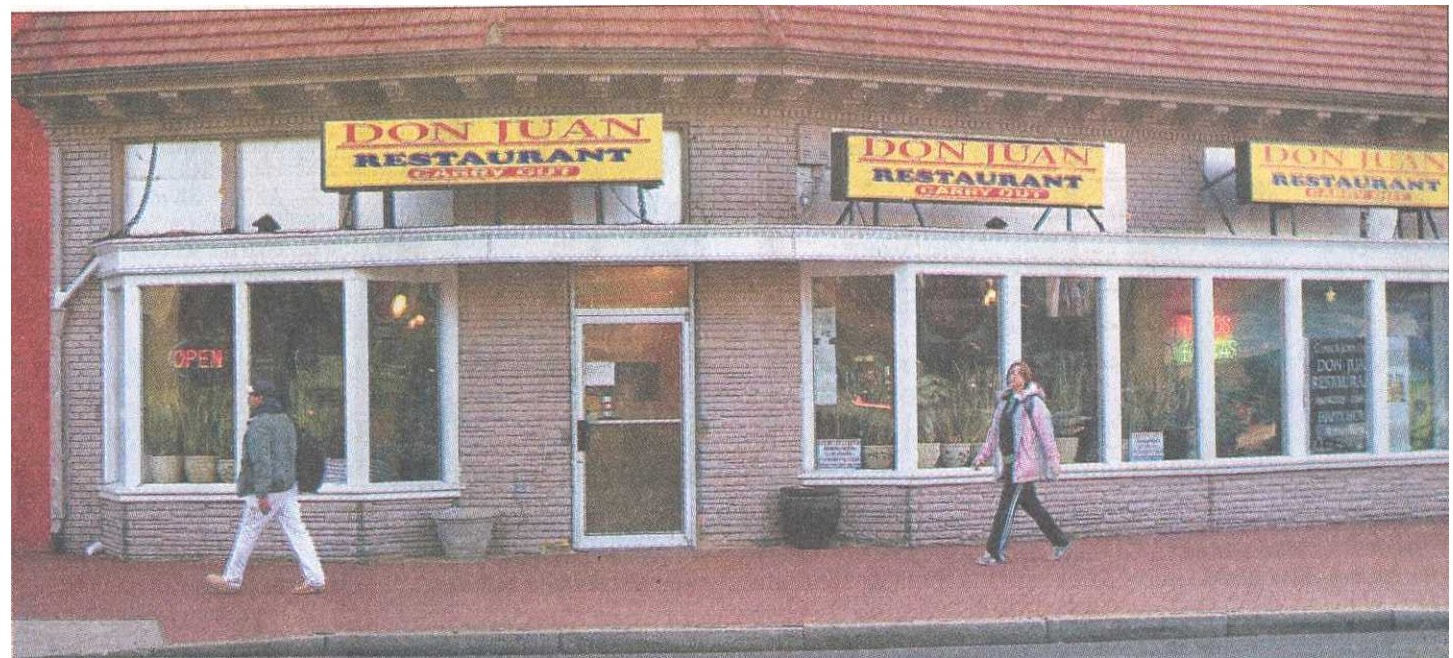
An Outdoor Trash Bin At a Latino Restaurant Proves an Unlikely Trigger Of an Ideological Clash In a D.C. Neighborhood

By N.C. Aizenman  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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In another time or place, the dispute over where Mount Pleasant's Don Juan restaurant should stow its trash might have played out as a squabble between a struggling business and a group of residents trying to improve the look of their streets. Instead, it's being cast as a battle for the very soul of one of the District's most celebrated Latino immigrant neighborhoods.

This is largely because those targeting the working-class, Latino hangout are the mostly Anglo, white-collar leaders of a residents association called the Mount Pleasant Neighborhood Alliance. For almost two decades, the Alliance has lodged complaints against many of the Latino restaurants, bars and grocery shops that have defined the neighborhood.

The quarrel also comes as Mount Pleasant's pupusa carryouts, money-wiring outfits and laundromats are being steadily eclipsed by gourmet pizza joints and bistros selling sauvignon blanc by the glass to the neighborhood's growing population of professionals. And this changing landscape has prompted a second group of residents, calling itself Hear Mount Pleasant, to



Don Juan restaurant, a Latino hangout in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Northwest Washington, has drawn attention over where it puts its trash.

mobilize in Don Juan's defense.

Also led mostly by Anglos, members of Hear Mount Pleasant, which formed a year ago and boasts about 100 foot soldiers, say their mission is to preserve the neighborhood's immigrant character in the face of a concerted campaign by the Alliance to hound the neighborhood's working-class establishments out of business so more chic shops and restaurants can move in.

The group's original goal was to bring back the mariachi bands and other live music groups that were prohibited under voluntary agreements that local Latino restaurant owners negotiated with the Alliance years ago in exchange for their support on liquor licenses. But their aims, and passions, have grown. In November, when the city moved to demolish a closet-size trash enclosure behind the restaurant at Mount Pleasant and Lamont streets, dozens of activists streamed out of their homes to form a human shield.

"This is about what the future fabric of this neighborhood should be," said Claudia Schlosberg, 52, a lawyer and one of the group's founders. "Some people don't like the way it is now, and others of us celebrate the diversity."

Members of the Alliance, which collects dues from more than 800 households, say they are confounded by such statements. "Everyone embraces the diversity of this neighborhood; that's why we're all here," said Laurie Collins, the Alliance's president. But, she said, that doesn't mean residents shouldn't hold Don Juan's Salvadoran-born owner, Alberto Ferrufino, to the same standard as other restaurants, which keep their trash indoors or on outdoor property that they own. Don Juan puts its trash bin behind the building on a paved patch of publicly owned land that faces a row of houses.

"No other restaurant keeps their trash in public space, so why should he?" Collins asked.

That position has the backing of Monica Rubio, 41, a Peruvian-born economist who bought a rowhouse in Mount Pleasant in 2001 so her children could grow up hearing Spanish. Rubio said Ferrufino has often turned a blind eye as his customers stumbled out and urinated on her front lawn or woke up her children with loud arguments.



PHOTOS BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

**"This is about what the future fabric of this neighborhood should be," said Claudia Schlosberg, a lawyer and a founder of Hear Mount Pleasant, a group formed to preserve Mount Pleasant's immigrant character.**

"For God's sake," Rubio said, "[that] is not what I associate with being Latino."

The Central American immigrants who make up most of Don Juan's customers have remained largely on the sidelines. "Of course we feel bad about this, because people are blaming us when the ones causing problems are in the [next door] park," said Joaquin Marquez, 60, a Salvadoran-born janitor. "The problem is that we in the Latino community have been lacking the knowledge of how to fight this."

Peter J. Nickles, the city's acting attorney general, is attempting to broker a compromise. Whatever the outcome, it seems likely to leave scars on a neighborhood struggling to redefine itself in the face of dramatic demographic change.



Mount Pleasant Neighborhood Alliance President Laurie Collins says the group wants to hold Don Juan to the same standard as other businesses.

A series of long, leafy blocks lined with turn-of-the-century rowhouses clustered around a short commercial strip of storefronts and apartment buildings, the neighborhood emerged as the city's Latino hub in the 1980s, when Salvadorans and Guatemalans fleeing civil wars flocked to its affordable housing. According to the 2000 census, about a third of Mount Pleasant's 12,000 inhabitants were Hispanic; a third, non-Hispanic white; and a fifth, non-Hispanic black.

But since 1999, the real estate boom has pushed the price of top-end homes above \$900,000 and fueled the conversion of apartment buildings to condos. The resulting exodus of blue-collar residents can be tracked through the increasing number of sport-utility vehicles and BMW sedans popping up in driveways of houses that once rented as group homes.

Ironically, many Anglo professionals say the racial and economic diversity was what attracted them to Mount Pleasant in the first place. "It reminded me of so much that I had left behind in Texas," said Eugene Stevanus, 42, who moved to Mount Pleasant in 1987. "You could walk down the street and see guys in mariachi outfits singing these incredibly sentimental ballads."

Still, the neighborhood had a seedy side. Many new arrivals were young, single men who had difficulty finding jobs and no solace beyond a bottle of beer. "The public drunkenness was constant," said Ken Goldstein, a retired teacher and supporter of Don Juan who has lived across the street since 1980.

More than 20 establishments served alcohol well past midnight, said Collins, the Alliance president, and when residents called police to complain about rowdy customers, the response was unreliable.

In 1991, after a police officer shot a Salvadoran man just across from Don Juan, Mount Pleasant erupted in three days of fire, looting and fighting. In the aftermath, a host of government-sponsored and nonprofit organizations formed to provide local Hispanics with services ranging from alcohol counseling to employment and business development assistance.

About this time, residents created the Alliance to improve the quality of life. Collins, who also has served on an Advisory Neighborhood Commission and the Alcohol Beverage Control Board, said no restaurant was pressured into giving up live music.

But several owners remember the process differently.

"They said I couldn't say no, because otherwise they would protest my liquor license," recalled Jaime Carillo, the Bolivian-born owner of Don Jaime's, a restaurant and bar across the street from Don Juan. Under city rules, protests might have delayed Carillo's license by more than a year. Carillo said he couldn't afford to wait.

Haydee Vanegas, 38, owner of the nearby Haydee's restaurant, said Alliance members made frequent calls to fire, health and alcohol inspectors until she gave in and signed a voluntary agreement.

Between the declining Latino population and the inability to offer customers live music on weekend nights or for parties, restaurant owners say business has declined by as much as 50 percent.

Most galling, three of the newer restaurant/bars on the block -- Marx Cafe, Tonic and Radius -- recently negotiated agreements that permit them to host live entertainment during Sunday brunch and 12 evenings a year.

"It's clearly a question of racism," Ferrufino said. "They give us a much harder time than the gringos."

Market forces might have the last word: Ever more of Ferrufino's weeknight customers are Anglo. Carillo has replaced the Spanish-language menu at Don Jaime's with one in English and modified it for Anglo tastes.

If he wins the right to host live music, Carillo mused, "I don't know that it should be mariachis anymore. I was thinking I want to put some jazz in my restaurant, a piano and maybe a guitar player so people can come by and enjoy a bottle of wine."



PHOTOS BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

**Don Juan owner Alberto Ferrufino says there is "a question of racism" in how the Mount Pleasant Neighborhood Alliance works with entrepreneurs.**