

## **The Hole Truth: Dunkin' Donuts Rhode Island Empire**

Dunkin' Donuts stores are everywhere in Rhode Island: on downtown streets, in strip malls, at Interstate exits, even in supermarkets and gas stations. Of course, Dunkin' Donuts is not limited to the Ocean State, and there are more than 5,500 stores in 29 countries worldwide, including Qatar, Bulgaria, Indonesia and Peru. Rhode Island does, however, seem to have a particular affinity for the chain -- there are an impressive 124 Dunkin' Donuts locations within the state's borders.

John Justo owns 20 Dunkin' Donuts outlets in the Providence area. He suggests the stores have become landmarks used as driving directions. I disagree; if someone tells you to turn left at the Dunkin' Donuts on Mineral Spring Avenue, your first question should be, "Which one?" Krispy Kreme may be the hot name in donuts these days--cultists camped out when they opened their first Rhode Island store in Cranston in February 2003--but Dunkin' Donuts has its tentacles everywhere; there's no need to line up around the block for something that's already on your block.

Dunkin' Donuts was founded in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1950, and is headquartered in Randolph, but the state of Rhode Island, and the city of Providence in particular, represent the de facto material and spiritual center of the empire. The first Rhode Island store was opened in Providence on North Main Street in 1956, and Providence now has 30 Dunkin' Donuts stores within the city's borders; that's one for every 5,700 residents. You could call it solidifying your base, or maybe just overkill, but in 2001 Dunkin' Donuts entered into a ten-year agreement with the Providence Civic Center for naming and marketing rights to the city-owned arena, now known as the Dunkin' Donuts Center. A wise move, considering that there are 110 Dunkin' Donuts stores within a ten-mile radius of what has come to be known as "the Dunk."

It's one thing to know a few Dunkin' Donuts facts (like that Dunkin' Donuts is a sister company to Baskin Robbins ice cream stores and Togo's sandwich shops, all part of the ADQSR conglomerate) it's another to make it your mission, as I did, to visit to all 30 Dunkin' Donuts locations in the city of Providence. And why did I do this? I suppose for the same reason some people climb the highest peak in all fifty states, collect Hummel figurines, or go see Star Wars 108 times: it's a sense of mission, of participating in something larger than oneself. I feel I should note that while I visited every Dunkin' Donuts in Providence, I did not eat at all of them, and I'll leave the gustatory aspects of my subject (and comparisons with Krispy Kreme, Honey Dew, Starbucks and such) to people better versed in donuts and blended coffee drinks than I. My investigation was more along the order of understanding Dunkin' Donuts as an urban experience, of grasping the spaces, physical and mental, these stores occupy in the Renaissance City.

And what did I learn from my Providence Dunkin' Donuts odyssey, voyages that took me from Wanskuck to Elmwood, the East Side to Olneyville? Firstly, that the stores are deceptively busy; they sell a lot of coffee and donuts, more than I imagined. People don't stay in Dunkin' Donuts restaurants for long stretches: they zip in and out of the drive-thru, or if they walk in, take their order to go. The number of people through the door in a ten minute period is shocking. There's good reason for this - most Dunkin' Donut stores are not places in which you wish to spend huge amounts of time. To start with, some of them are in tough neighborhoods where you'd just as

soon not linger. And, as a general rule, they aren't great places for hanging out anyway - the tables and chairs are bolted to the tiled floors, the decor is non-existent, and there are no bathrooms. To boot, seating is often limited and those locations folded into gas stations or Stop & Shop supermarkets have none at all. This is also the case with the store on Cranston Street in the West End: It consists of a drive-thru and a walk-up window for pedestrians; you can't even enter the place. I also observed one store with signs posted above its tables that read, "No Loitering 15 Minute Time Limit" (Plainfield Street, Silver Lake), and another (Pleasant Valley Parkway) that limits your stay in the parking lot to twenty minutes. Dunkin' Donuts is not trying to be a coffee house, café or a bistro. It's a place to get your donut and coffee and take your leave, not meet old friends, scout for dates or scribble poetry in a notebook.

So much for the physical spaces, but what about what Rhode Island Dunkin' Donuts mogul John Justo calls "product"? I learned in my travels that Dunkin' Donuts stores not only sell lots of coffee and donuts, they also move huge quantities of other caffeinated drinks including iced coffees, cappuccinos, lattes, and so on. These are beverages I had more closely associated with independent coffee houses and chains such as Starbucks, than with Dunkin' Donuts bread and butter (or should I say coffee and donuts) image. On the food front, Dunkin' Donuts has gone beyond traditional donut favorites such as the glazed, the chocolate frosted, and the old fashioned, and now also sells an array of bagels, muffins and breakfast sandwiches.

I didn't need to visit all 30 Providence Dunkin' Donuts locations to learn what they sell, or what the typical store looks like, but I did anyway. It was, you know, the mission thing. And based on my survey of local outlets, where in Providence should you go to get your regular coffee, your Coolatta, your glazed donut? There is no definitive answer to this question, and most people already have a preferred Dunkin' Donuts stop, chosen no doubt on the basis of its strategic position on the commute. If, however, you wish to expand your donut universe, consider the following awards as a short guide to the city of Providence's Dunkin' Donuts stores.

**Busiest Providence Dunkin' Donuts:** 78 Dorrance Street, corner Weybosset (Downtown). This award is based on a completely unscientific survey, a one-time visit that I made at 10:30 on a Wednesday morning. I can't say definitively that this store has the biggest sales in the city of Providence (a Dunkin' Donuts official couldn't tell me one way or the other), but I can state that the place was packed with students, business types and tourists the day I stopped in. Despite the store's healthy number of tables, I had to walk over to the Johnson and Wales campus to drink my coffee. There is a quieter location two blocks to the north, at 141 Westminster Street, opposite the Arcade.

**Best Window onto Providence's Industrial Past:** Tie between 760 Branch Avenue (Wanskuck) and 565 Atwells Avenue, corner Eagle Street. The Branch Avenue store is opposite the former Wanskuck Mill, a massive operation whose origin was in manufacturing uniforms and blankets for Civil War soldiers. The Atwells Avenue location is part of Eagle Square Commons, a controversial project which converted a former mill complex into a retail/office/residential development. This location not only has history, it also has a spiritual vibe: I saw a patron reading Alan Watts's 1966 primer on Hindi and Vedantic philosophy, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*.

**Most Culturally Diverse Providence Dunkin Donuts:** Tie between 315 Broad Street and 1082 Chalkstone Avenue (Mount Pleasant). The competition is extremely tough in this category as Dunkin' Donuts attracts nothing if not a cross section of Providence's increasingly diverse population. Both the Broad Street location (near Pearl Street just south of Central High and Classical High), and the Chalkstone Avenue store (just east of Academy Avenue), are in post-colonial jargon "contact zones" for white, black, brown and yellow Providence. These stores' neighbors are a good indication of the multicultural composition of their respective areas: the Chalkstone Avenue location is opposite Chuck's Barber Shop and is sandwiched between Thai Star Restaurant and Casa Linda; just down the block is Near Pretty B Fashions. The Broad Street location's neighbors include La Mocana Bakery, Meekong Seafood, California Nails and New Asian Market. Runners-up in this category included 818 Allens (near the Port of Providence), 552 Cranston Street (West End), and 860 Elmwood Avenue.

**Best Spot to Avoid if You Don't Want to Talk about Religion or Politics:** 251 Smith Street (Smith Hill). The State House is a few blocks to the east, and CNN plays on the TV that hangs just inside the store's entrance. Across Smith Street is the playground for St. Patrick's Parish School and the offices of Rhode Island Right to Life. Just a block to the west is the District Office for Senator MaryEllen Goodwin, Representative John J. McCauley Jr., and Councilman Terrence M. Hasset. A further block to the west is the Roger Williams American Legion Post.

**Most Comfortable Providence Dunkin Donuts:** 133 Gano Street, corner Williams Street, (East Side/Fox Point). This is free standing colonial style building with plenty of parking, a bright inside with lots of tables, and a bathroom (!). There is also a park across the street. Unlike some locations, with their tacit and often overt suggestions that you MOVE ON, it is conceivable that you would actually read your morning paper here while you sip a coffee and munch on a chocolate frosted. A strict neighborhood association prohibited a drive-thru, and demanded an exterior that would not clash with surrounding buildings as conditions for allowing this location to be built.

**Most Peaceful Providence Dunkin Donuts:** 119 Atwells Avenue (Federal Hill). Perhaps it is the contrast that it presents in relation to the frantic traffic outside as cars jockey for parking spots on Atwells, but I was calmed upon entering this location, which lies just inside the archway to Federal Hill. The store is small, dimly lit and has artificial flowers in planters on the inside windows. When I visited on a weekday morning just before noon, there was only one customer present and the place had none of the agitation typical of the fast food franchise.

**Best Bet When You Need to Get Your Hands on Some Dough:** 51 Manton Street (Olneyville). This store shares a parking lot with Manton Pawn Brokers. You get the feeling that anything could happen here, and it probably does, including the odd hold-up. Also in the running for most diverse clientele, not just in terms of ethnicity, but also for its mix of working poor, hipster poor, artists, and union workers. Pedestrians pay close attention here: you can't walk in the front door without crossing the fast moving drive-thru lane.

**Best Spot When You're Trying to Get Out of Town:** Tie between 200 Charles Street and One Bonanza Way (the Bonanza bus station). The Charles Street location is in a Mobil Station next to Kelly's Car Wash; shoot across a few lanes of traffic and you are on 95 North. The Bonanza

terminal and Dunkin' Donuts make a good fit. It's always wise to fuel up with a coffee before boarding your bus, particularly if your journey will take you far from Rhode Island where Dunkin' Donuts access cannot be guaranteed.

I wish I could leave the reader with a grand message or piece of wisdom based on my survey of Providence Dunkin' Donuts outlets. But wisdom, I've come to believe, is not acquired in one fell swoop, it comes incrementally, donut store by donut store, chocolate glazed by chocolate glazed. I'll suggest only that you get out and about and visit at least one Dunkin' Donuts store not on your usual circuit.

*This article originally appeared in [Providence Monthly](#) in November 2003 and subsequently on the website [Rhode Island Roads](#). Krispy Kreme closed its doors in 2007, and as of early 2009, Dunkin' Donuts had 169 Rhode Island stores (up from the 124 noted above).*