



Former Kabab-ji Employee Files Employment Discrimination Complaint

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Washington City Paper
Jan. 11, 2010

A former employee of Kabab-ji Grill, the Middle Eastern restaurant chain that opened its first U.S.-based location in the District last year, has filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission saying he was discriminated against based on race, national origin, religion, and disability.

In the Dec. 23 complaint, **Abdelkader Nsiri**, 33, who worked from August to November as a manager in charge of hiring hosts and wait and kitchen staff, says Kabab-ji's human resources director, **Khal Risheq**, referred to Arabs as "stupid and ignorant," North Africans as "sensitive complainers and trouble makers," and African-Americans as "slaves." Nsiri, who is Tunisian but has lived in the U.S. for about 10 years, was allegedly instructed to shave his goatee, which made him look like a "Kuwaiti f****t."

The complaint says that the restaurant's management and corporate staff prevented the hiring of Arabs and other minorities for positions at the front of the restaurant—and that Nsiri was demoted after recommending an African-American for a hostess job. Soon after, he was terminated altogether, says **Peter Mina**, his lawyer. (Mina says the restaurant is challenging his claim for unemployment benefits; a hearing was scheduled for today.)

Reached at the restaurant by telephone Friday, Risheq said: "I would love to respond, but we have a lawyer who is handling this issue." Referring without explanation to "blackmail," he added that he himself is Muslim and that "we have plenty of Arabs here."

Someone from Kabab-ji who identified himself only as Sam later called *Washington City Paper* and said that, on the advice of the restaurant's lawyer, all he could say was: "All these allegations are totally false. Their lawyer is threatening litigation." **Sam Najjar** is the head of operations for Kabab-ji USA, according to the firm that handles local PR for the restaurant.

The restaurant opened in Dupont Circle in November and is too new to have much of an established following yet here, but its restaurants abroad (the chain is headquartered in Lebanon) have a good reputation. The local outlet attempts to plow the same ground as the local Lebanese Taverna group, which has dragged Middle Eastern cuisine out of its suburban kebab shops and given it the full-service restaurant treatment, complete with wine menus and cocktail service.

The EEOC complaint, among other things, alleges that Risheq refused to hire one job candidate of Tunisian origin, saying that he "was not attractive and with his beard 'would have Americans thinking he was a terrorist.'"

From the complaint:

Mr. Risheq required Mr. Nsiri and other managers to implement a hiring program that discriminated against anyone that was not a young, attractive, white female. Further, Mr. Risheq informed the staff that he did not want anyone over 26-years-old working at the front of the

restaurant. Mr. Rishq also ruled out any applications from African-Americans whom he referred to as "abeed" (the Arabic word for "slaves").

On October 9, 2009, Mr. Nsiri interviewed a black female applicant for a hostess position. When Mr. Nsiri referred her to Samer [identified as the corporate trainer] for a follow up interview, Samer rejected her and told Mr. Nsiri that he was ignorant and blind because he was "sending an ugly black girl with a hairy face," to him for an interview. Mr. Najjar added that he did not want to talk to her because he "had enough of those n*****s."

According to the complaint, Rishq also instructed the restaurant staff to change their names to sound more "American"—"Mac" for Majed, for instance, and "Sam" for Sameer. Employees, including Nsiri, were prevented from speaking Arabic even if they didn't know English, "forcing them to resort to hand signals as the only means of communication," the complaint says. Mina also says Nsiri's managers violated his disability rights by interfering with his ability to take medication for depression, anxiety, and a reflux condition, and to seek treatment for a work-related injury.

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