

'How Do We Have Black People Selling Pasta?' Restaurant Owner Asked: Suit

By [Maya Rajamani](#) | May 25, 2016

CHELSEA — The owner of an Italian restaurant at the [Chelsea Market](#) asked an employee, “How do we have black people selling pasta?” and only invited Italian employees to his Super Bowl party — which he made non-Italian employees cater, a new lawsuit claims.



Ravioli at Giovanni Rana Pastificio & Cucina inside Chelsea Market.

DNAinfo/Rosa Goldensohn

Three former employees of [Giovanni Rana Pastificio & Cucina](#), inside the market at 75 Ninth Ave., claim management at the eatery favored Italian employees while targeting non-Italian staff "for abuse," according to the charge.

The suit, filed in federal court on May 18, names the restaurant, CEO Gian Luca Rana, global director of restaurant operations Antonella Paternò Rana and director of operations worldwide Pasquale Sorrentino.

Management made “disparaging remarks” about non-Italian employees, and

Sorrentino often called Italian employees who made mistakes “idiot American[s],” the lawsuit charges.

“It is so much better when we have Italians in the restaurant because Americans don’t understand,” Sorrentino once stated, according to the suit.

Antonella Paternò Rana “would expressly inquire with the restaurant’s management as to what [it] was going to do in order to bring more Italian employees into the restaurant,” it adds.

Gian Luca Rana even asked a manager to move an African-American employee out of customers' sight, the suit claims.

“How do we have black people selling pasta?” he asked one of the plaintiffs before making the request, according to the suit.

The suit also claims a visiting Italian executive once criticized a restaurant cleaning crew made up of mostly black employees of Dominican descent, saying, “Look at these black guys — how can we trust these guys?”

In February, Gian Luca Rana threw a Super Bowl dinner party and only invited his Italian employees, the suit adds.

Non-Italian employees were required to make food for the party but were not invited, according to the suit.

Management made hiring decisions based on whether applicants were Italian or of Italian descent and let Italian employees “without proper authorizations and under aliases” work at the restaurant, the suit claims.

Even customers were subject to discrimination by the restaurant, the suit says. Antonella Paternò Rana added a feature to the eatery's cash register that allowed employees to “flag the tables with Italian customers... for preferential

treatment,” according to the suit.

Plaintiff and ex-employee Roberto Bellissimo, who is partly of Italian descent but was born in Canada, worked as the restaurant’s director of operations between September 2012 and February 2016, the suit says.

The two other plaintiffs — Christopher Thireos, a Greek American, and Tara Cohn, a Jewish American — worked as senior managers at the restaurant until February and May of this year, respectively, according to the suit.

When Bellissimo expressed frustration with the restaurant’s treatment of non-Italian employees, Antonella Paternò Rana “laughed and said flatly, ‘But they are Italian,’” according to the suit.

Bellissimo and Thireos were fired because the restaurant “lost confidence” in them and accused them of misappropriating funds, which the two former employees refute, according to the suit.

Cohn left the eatery after conditions became “intolerable” once management discovered she’d joined Bellissimo and Thireos’ legal action, the suit adds.

After Bellissimo and Thireos were fired, Italian employees in the restaurant’s accounting office “were heard cheering, celebrating and exclaiming ‘Viva Italia!’ and ‘Thank God there is one less American in this place,’” the suit claims.

“In addition to addressing the damage done to their own careers by the restaurant’s unlawful discrimination, our clients want these practices to stop, and for the company’s American and non-Italian employees to be treated the same as its Italian employees,” Lawrence M. Pearson of Wigdor LLP, who is representing the plaintiffs, told DNAinfo.

Gian Luca Rana, Antonella Paternò Rana and Pasquale Sorrentino did not immediately respond to requests for comment left at the restaurant Tuesday.

The restaurant told the *New York Post* that the suit was “wholly without merit.”