

San Francisco Chronicle

FOOD // INSIDE SCOOP

Celebrity chef Michael Mina's SF restaurant group latest to be sued over labor law violations

Justin Phillips_

June 15, 2018 Updated: June 15, 2018 2:11 p.m.



Michael Mina, photographs original chef Jason Berthold as he leads the preshift meeting at RN74.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle
Photo: John Storey / Special to the Chronicle

Award-winning chef Michael Mina's acclaimed restaurant group, which last year launched Ayesha Curry's International Smoke restaurant chain, is being sued by current and former employees over various labor violations. The class action lawsuit alleges that within the last four years, the company did not properly compensate employees for hours worked.

The lawsuit involves an unspecified number of workers.

The workers, who filed the lawsuit against the Mina Group on Thursday in San Francisco Superior Court, claim that since June 13, 2014, management within the Mina Group routinely denied them meal and rest periods, rarely paid employees in a timely manner or provided

accurate itemized wage statements, and refused to pay accrued wages to employees who resigned or were terminated. The workers also allege the Mina Group was aware of its own labor law violations and attempted to conceal documents that showed “the magnitude and financial impact of its wrongdoing.”

Scott Cole, an attorney representing the workers, and the principal of Scott Cole & Associates, the law firm that brought the action, released a statement Friday morning on behalf of the workers and declined, for now, to comment further.

“The Mina Group is a fine company but, when you break the law, and your workers suffer, you don’t get special treatment,” he said.

The Oakland-based law firm specializes in litigation involving overtime pay, meal and rest breaks, minimum wage and expense reimbursement violations.

The Mina Group declined to comment on the lawsuit.

According to the filing, the workers are seeking damages in the form of one hour of pay at each worker’s regular rate of pay for each day they were denied a meal period or a rest period, and any economic losses associated with the company’s actions. The overall payment amount was not specified in the filing.

The lawsuit comes on the heels of a recent decision by the state’s Division of Labor Standards Enforcement to cite seven Bay Area restaurants for more than \$10 million in stolen wages. A focus in the aggressive crackdown was Daly City’s Kome Japanese Seafood, which according to the state denied 133 employees \$5 million in minimum wage and overtime pay over several years.

As for the accusations in the Michael Mina Group lawsuit, they bear a strong resemblance to those documented in a filing in April against San Francisco’s popular Zuni Cafe. A separate lawsuit was filed against Zuni in 2017 involving eight former bussers and dishwashers who claimed the business failed to provide meal or rest breaks and also withheld vacation pay. The restaurant won a James Beard Award in 2018 for offering the country’s most outstanding restaurant service.

Zuni Cafe owner Gilbert Pilgrim called the allegations “false and inaccurate” and said the cafe, which opened in 1979, “works hard to provide its employees with fair compensation and treatment.”

San Francisco’s Mission Beach Cafe was the focus of a lawsuit alleging wage violations in 2017, as was Tacolicious, a Bay Area Mexican food chain that paid roughly \$900,000 to settle similar claims from a group of employees.

The Mina Group is a global restaurant brand with more than 30 locations spread across several cities including San Francisco, Las Vegas, Miami and Dubai. The Mina Group's latest venture, International Smoke, seems to have ushered the company into a new era of popularity. After opening in San Francisco last year, International Smoke has opened locations in Houston, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Miami.

Justin Phillips is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer.

Email: jphillips@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@JustMrPhillips](https://twitter.com/JustMrPhillips)