

Convention center chef says his firing was race-related

The chef was told to stay in the back of the kitchen, he claims.

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Less than a month after its grand opening, the county's convention center needs a new head chef.

Jamaican chef Chester Campbell, though touted by the county as bringing "large-scale culinary sensibility and more than 20 years of professional cooking management experience," was fired last month.

Convention center officials said he wasn't a good fit. Campbell's attorney says the firing was race-related and made soon after Campbell complained he was discriminated against.

The allegations stem from a food tasting at the convention center in mid-December, when several women voiced complaints.

Ken Foster, general manager of the convention center, said the complaints were about the quality of the food and Campbell's "inability to articulate what he was presenting on the platter to them."

Campbell said the complaints were about conditions out of his



DAMON HIGGINS/Staff Photographer

DEBUT TOUTED: Chester Campbell, a Jamaica native, was praised for 'culinary sensibility.'

control, said Bill Julien, Campbell's Boca Raton-based attorney.

In an effort to save the convention center client, another chef, who is white, stepped in, Foster said.

Campbell was later told that the next time he should stay in the back of the kitchen because he was black, Julien said.

"I don't think anybody thought that Chester was being pushed back to the back of the bus," Foster said. "That was not the case at all."

Campbell later complained to the human resources department at Aramark, the firm hired by the

county to provide food service at the convention center, and he was demoted and fired, Julien said.

"Several days right before he complained he was getting positive feedback from his managers about what a great job he was doing," Julien said.

A discrimination and retaliation charge was filed with the state's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission against Aramark, Julien said.

Campbell was born in Jamaica and graduated from the Le Chef Culinary Institute in Texas and the Johnson & Wales culinary school in Rhode Island. He has studied in Japan, China, India and New York. He previously was the director of auxiliary food services for Central Texas College, where he was master chef and food and beverage instructor.

"I thought Chester was a very qualified chef," said Foster, the center's manager. "I pushed to hire him. When it came to being a chef within a large corporation like Aramark, he just wasn't the perfect fit for them."

David Bianco, food and beverage manager with Aramark, said: "The whole situation is very unfortunate. Certainly we thought that going in we had someone more than we actually had. The whole diversity factor was certainly not a priority, but a factor" in hiring Campbell.