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# Meat and Potatoes partnership dispute sparks lawsuit

Premium content from Pittsburgh Business Times by Tim Schooley, Reporter

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The partners of one of Downtown Pittsburgh's most respected restaurants are suing each other over Meat and Potatoes — a gastropub in the **Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's** Theater Square building Downtown that was recently named Pittsburgh's best new restaurant for 2011 by the Pittsburgh City Paper.

[Courtney Lynch-Crawford](#), the managing partner and half owner of the restaurant Nine on Nine, filed suit against the restaurant's other partner and celebrated chef, [Richard Deshantz](#), in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas on Dec. 12, seeking \$140,000 in damages related to Deshantz's opening of Meat and Potatoes last year.

According to the suit, Lynch-Crawford accuses Deshantz and partner Tolga Sevdik of conspiring to open Meat and Potatoes behind her back and misappropriating funds and resources from Nine on Nine to do so. Lynch-Crawford's suit is against Deshantz, who she terminated as chef of Nine on Nine in February, Sevdik, a one-time manager of Nine on Nine, and Rut Management Group LLC, the holding company under which Meat and Potatoes operates.

A lawyer representing Deshantz said the allegations in the lawsuit are false.

[Stan Stein](#), a lawyer who represents Lynch-Crawford, said the lawsuit was spurred in large part by alleged action by Deshantz that froze the bank accounts of the Nine on Nine business, threatening the restaurant's ability to pay its staff and other bills. While he argued in his Dec. 12 suit that interference by Deshantz put Nine on Nine's restaurant business at risk, Stein said a ruling last week by Judge [Christine Ward](#) to unfreeze the accounts and for Deshantz not to interfere put Nine on Nine, which ranks as one of Pittsburgh's 25 best by **Pittsburgh magazine**, back on solid footing.

Stein, himself a shareholder in the Cultural District restaurant Sonoma Grill, a short walk from both restaurants in question, said the matter between Lynch-Crawford and Deshantz is now expected to go to arbitration. His goal: negotiate Deshantz out of any ownership stake in Nine on Nine.

The suit accuses Deshantz of using financial resources of Nine on Nine to help open Meat and Potatoes, seeking to hire away kitchen staff from Nine on Nine for Meat & Potatoes, and for interfering with Nine on Nine's operations.

The lawsuit further argues that Lynch-Crawford asked Deshantz if he was interested in pursuing the restaurant space in Theater Square, perhaps by moving Nine on Nine into the location, as well as if he was interested in being a partner for her other new restaurant, A Taste of Dahntahn on Liberty Avenue.

[Ray Middleman](#), the lawyer representing Deshantz, said all the allegations against his client are absolutely false.

So far, he's filed a motion to get financial records for Nine on Nine, with Stein stating that Deshantz is free to meet with the accountant of Nine on Nine at any time. Middleman left open the prospect Deshantz also may seek damages from Lynch-Crawford, noting his client maintains a 50 percent ownership stake in Nine on Nine.

"I would expect that we'll have a response to her lawsuit that will include some claims that Rick has," Middleman said. "We're going to protect Rick's rights and his interests to the full extent allowable."

[Terri Sokoloff](#), principal of Ross-based Specialty Group, a restaurant services firm, characterized the situation as an ugly example of how partner relationships can sour.

"You have rarely seen it in this town where an owner goes after a chef," Sokoloff said. "I think partnerships are very difficult. We see more that do not work than those that work out."

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