



Restaurateur to pay \$150K for hiring illegal immigrants

By Bill Scanlon

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The owner of a chain of popular Chinese restaurants plans to plead guilty to misdemeanor charges stemming from employing illegal immigrants.

Louie Li, a naturalized American from China, will pay a \$150,000 fine to settle the charges, said Dave Gaouette, spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Denver.

Li, also known as Ting Fu Li, will appear in U.S. District Court on March 6 at 1:30 p.m. He was arrested Dec. 21 on a complaint charging him with unlawfully harboring and transporting aliens.

Li, his wife and sister-in-law own the South Garden restaurant chain, which has locations in Denver, Parker and Castle Rock.

The restaurants remain open.

Workers said they worked for lower than minimum wage at the restaurants. They've since been deported to Mexico.

Neighbors complained that they saw numerous Spanish-speaking men go in and out of Li's homes — a house in unincorporated Douglas County and a townhouse in Castle Rock. Some complained the men were rude to neighbors.

Gaouette said the U.S. attorney agreed to a deal partly because Li had no prior criminal record and because "there were no aggravating circumstances."

"The individuals weren't chained or abused in any way," Gaouette said. "If they had been, we wouldn't have offered this plea.

"He allowed them to come and go, provided them with transportation to and from the restaurant. He gave them time to go, unfortunately illegally, back to Mexico and back here. They could take vacations.

"They weren't mistreated. Of course, they weren't put up at the Ritz or anything either."

Li's lawyer Michael Axt said the husband and wife worked long hours in restaurants before earning saving enough money to start their own.

He was able to hire legal immigrants, mostly from China, for most of the past 10 years, Axt said. But with a shortage of workers able to travel to the suburbs, Li hired illegal immigrants to work the restaurants in Castle Rock and Parker.

"Mr Li provided adequate housing at minimal expense for the workers," Axt said.

Through his lawyer, Li issued an apology: "Mr. Li apologizes to his loyal patrons and their respective communities for these lapses in judgement. Mr. Li also wants to assure the public that he is now in full compliance with all legal requirements pertaining to hiring practices."

Li remains free on bond.

CBS 4 contributed to this report.

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