



Denver Food

# Reviews

Your guide to metro Denver dining including our complete listing of area restaurants Edited by Amanda M. Faison

For reviews of these restaurants, see the following pages:

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**PLUS:** Adam Mali goes to NYC; frosty suds; basil 101; the original Hard Rock Cafe; wild dining, and more.

## Hotspot

By Elisabeth True

### Rioja

1431 Larimer St.  
303-820-2282

★★★★ (out of four stars)

#### The Draw

Mediterranean-inspired cuisine in a sleek setting, good value, people-watching

#### The Drawback

Parking is tricky, so opt for the \$8 valet; don't even think about going without a reservation

#### Don't Miss

Toasted cannelloni, roasted beet salad with candied-lemon vinaigrette, beignets, risotto, rib-eye steak

#### Vegetarian Options

Vegetarian Four Squares (a tasting of four seasonal dishes), salads, tomato soup, baked mozzarella

As anyone who reads the tabloids will tell you, the public likes nothing better than to see a celebrity fall from grace. And Jennifer Jasinski, executive chef of Rioja, Denver's dining hotspot, is nothing if not successful. After a fruitful partnership with Wolfgang Puck, cooking at the likes of Spago, and fresh from a much-lauded stint as executive chef at Panzano, Jasinski was named Colorado Chef of the Year for 2004 by the American Culinary Federation. And so it was with great expectation that I first dined at Rioja. And I'm here to report Jasinski's success is richly deserved.

On a Wednesday night the restaurant is hopping. Jasinski herself darts in and out from the back to the open chef station, radi-



**WHAT A CATCH** Rioja makes a big impression on Denver diners with Mediterranean-influenced cuisine. Look for dishes such as sea bass topped with whole-grain mustard aioli atop a miso-like saffron broth.

ating excitement, telling customers about the specials, brushing butter over the spinach-pine-nut-feta turnovers that accompany the roast lamb, encouraging her chefs, calling out to servers. She has every reason to be enthused; the house is packed, with people in every bar seat and more people (me included) squeezed into a high-traffic zone at the exhibition station. The tables turn over again in the hour or so we're there,

and the staff is moving at high speed, but it's a party with clinking glasses and the "Mmmms" of gustatory pleasure. It's been said that the high volume Rioja experiences leads to inconsistent service—I, for one, never had anything less than charming and professional attention on each visit.

The food and the happy chatter stand out all the more against the understated, sophisticated autumnal decor. The earthy

#### ABOUT OUR RATINGS

What our ratings mean to you. **4 stars:** Outstanding. One of the very best of its kind. **3 stars:** Very good. A restaurant you'll want to visit again and again. **2 stars:** Good. Hardly worth a special trip, but, hey, you gotta eat. **1 star:** Fair. An eatery with serious flaws, be it in the quality of the food or the service. Or both. **0 Stars:** Don't bother.



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tones of Rioja's divided dining room are designed to make you (subconsciously) think of rustic cuisine—and it's gorgeous—but the interior is merely a backdrop for Jasinski's culinary talents.

When I first scanned the menu I felt there was a hint of pretension to some of the ingredients and descriptions such as "hand-selected young greens, extra virgin olive oil, and 25-year-old balsamic vinegar" (\$4.50). This reminds me of those places that tell you the olives were handpicked by monks on a Tuscan hillside by the light of a full moon, or that the cheese is made from the milk of meditating goats in Arizona. And so I ordered the hand-selected greens with their very special balsamic vinegar, and my whole attitude changed from, "I mean, really, come on," to, "Oh, I see!" The vinegar was like a cordial—deep, strong, and as complex as a good wine. It's a plate like this that shows Jasinski's attention to detail. It's just dressed greens, but the greens are fresh and the dressing superb. These standards of excellence are adhered to with every dish.

Even the bread is remarkable. Baking is big at Rioja, and a server brings around a large basket piled with assorted breads: chewy orange-fennel rolls, rough sourdough, buttery brioches, and, most tempting of all, warm, melting goat cheese and rosemary biscuits. Still at the starter stage, I had the toasted cannelloni (\$7, although the hand-made pasta dishes also come in entrée portions) filled with veal and pork and sitting on a pool of creamy black truffle sauce. Jasinski's varied background shines in this almost Asian dish. The toasted cannelloni is crispy like a won-ton wrapper, and the veal and pork flavors, although rich, weren't heavy at all even when paired with the luxe, nutty truffles. The half portion is small, but it's just the right amount to feel sated. In fact, I liked the portion sizes at Rioja. They were neither gargantuan nor tiny.

Even though this dish was a hard act to follow, I reveled in the rib-eye steak (\$29), a tender, flavorful cut of meat paired with goat cheese polenta and an aigre-doux (a reduction of old sherry wine and balsamic vinegar). The polenta was grainy with tangy goat cheese, and the sauce was deep and sweet. Each element on its own was a little overpowering, but eaten together they pulled together as one glossy flavor—a wonderfully finished product of complementary tastes and textures. And so it went with every portion of Jasinski's creations.

I am still thinking about the roasted beet salad (\$9.50), partly because of the sugary beets offset by crunchy candied walnuts, but mainly because of the candied-lemon vinaigrette, a marvelous concoction with the flavors of lemon gelato, marmalade, and lemon hard candy combining in an explosive citrus taste. On another occasion, the special pasta dish (\$13.50), a fresh linguine just coated with a gingery coconut butter and studded with firm but flaky sea bass, salmon, and scallops, was perfection in a bowl. I initially chose it because I wanted something light, but ended up slurping it up as if it were creamy comfort food.

I further forgot my manners when the beignets (\$6) arrived—tiny, light, hot ricotta-filled parcels that initially felt pillowy in my mouth and then collapsed in a sugary rush of flavor. These decadent morsels come with a ruby port wine-fig reduction that's equal parts puckery-tart and fruity-sweet, and I felt compelled to swipe up every last drop from the plate with my finger, gathering up undissolved sugar crystals along the way.

The food at Rioja slips down so easily that even fried beignets seem light and digestible. The juxtapositions of tastes and textures and the expert flavor blending make all the food seem airy and effortless. I've been thinking about the next time I can eat at Rioja since the last time, and that's what should bring you in and keep you coming back again.