

RESTAURANT GUIDE 2007

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DINING EXPERIENCES EVERY DENVERITE MUST HAVE

There's got to be more to a restaurant than just food on a plate. Otherwise, why bother? Dining out is an occasion, even on a Tuesday night; it should indulge all of your senses, not just taste. There's the feeling you get when you walk into the room, the scent of flowers on your table, snippets of conversation from the next booth. It all adds up to an experience, and it's why we don't just settle for takeout every night of the week. With that in mind this year, we created the *5280* master list—our go-to restaurant guide packed with everything from tried-and-true favorites to the Mile-High's newest hotspots. No doubt some of your picks didn't make our final cut, but that's all the more reason to compare notes and compile a list of your own. Allow us to get you started.

EDITED BY AMANDA M. FAISON

CHIEF *of the* YEAR



JENNIFER JASINSKI

RIOJA AND BISTRO VENDÔME

by Carol W. Maybach

In 2001, *5280* named Executive Chef Jennifer Jasinski Denver's Top Rising Chef, just a year after she'd landed behind the burners at Panzano, a glossy Italian restaurant inside the Hotel Monaco. She came to the job primed with experience—11 years working with Wolfgang Puck and jobs at the Rainbow Room in New York City, Postrio in San Francisco, Ledoyan in Paris, and the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles—and ready to strike out on her own.

At Panzano she turned out dishes such as the carpaccio di tonno with sushi-grade tuna, crispy artichoke chips, and tuna tartare. That appetizer's balance of lemon, balsamic vinegar, olive oil, artichoke, and fish gave Denver diners a fresh take on Italian food—and insight into Jasinski's innovative style. Menu-wide Jasinski parlayed straightforward ingredients and fresh flavors into contemporary dishes: Tapanade came blended with sun-dried tomatoes; pizza arrived with figs, Gorgonzola, prosciutto, arugula; and Tuscan white bean soup was garnished with goat cheese. In paying attention to the details of each dish, Jasinski turned the hotel restaurant into a destination and began winning awards, including the 2004 Colorado Chef of the Year by the American Culinary Federation.

Seven years after making her mark at Panzano she's moved on—opening Rioja, her flagship Mediterranean restaurant on Larimer Square, in November 2004 and acquiring the cozy Bistro Vendôme across the street this past spring. At Rioja, Jasinski's Mediterranean fare met instant success in its simple, rustic approach to cooking. "People thought they had pegged me at Panzano as being some kind of Italian cooking guru that I'm not," she states modestly. "I'm very good at what I do, but I have picked up skills cooking all kinds of different styles of food in my life. I lived in France. I cooked in France. So I have a deep regard and understanding of the food of the Mediterranean." And so, when Bistro Vendôme came up for sale Jasinski was driven to save what she considered one of the true gems on Larimer Square. "I wasn't looking to do a second place," she explains. "I just couldn't bear the thought of someone else owning that beautiful little French bistro."

It was a brilliant business decision. With the restaurant directly across the street from Rioja, Jasinski can run between both venues at a moment's notice, allowing her to simultaneously keep an administrative eye on both. "I can walk over any time to check on the food and the customers, but I completely trust the person I hired there as chef to do a great job." She's referring to chef Matt Anderson, whom she brought on to give Bistro Vendôme its own identity. "I didn't want my guests to feel they were just experiencing a retake of Rioja's food."

Jasinski doesn't want to change the feeling of Bistro Vendôme; she simply wants to give it her personal touch. She does that by starting with a respect for the restaurant's previous executive chef, Eric Roeder. "I loved Eric's food. I just want to bring in more of the flavors I remember from when I was living in France," she explains. "I believe bistro fare should be straightforward, and it should carry a lower price point. It should be clean, simple, and well thought-out." She points to the steak tartare as the item on the current menu that best reflects her philosophy. "Under Eric, the tartare had some Asian ingredients like soy. I go back to the really old, traditional recipes, and replace those ingredients with things that are really French. Now, I think we have the best steak tartare in town."

Her enthusiasm doesn't waiver a bit when she switches to talking about Rioja. "People ask me what they should eat at Rioja and it's so hard for me to answer that question, because it's like choosing between my children: I love to make everything. Pasta, though, is really my signature dish at Rioja, because I make it with my own hands," she says.

The tactile aspects of cooking directly affect Jasinski's feeling about cooking trends. "It seems to me there are two big movements in this country right now," she says. "There are people doing science, and there are people who focus on what they do with their hands. I'm a hand person—I like the resurgence in all the handmade salami and sausages instead of doing things with foams and chemicals. At Rioja, we do everything we can in-house."

Since arriving in Denver seven years ago, Jasinski has shot to the top of the food chain. Her restaurants on Larimer Square—once somewhat of a culinary wasteland—are packed, her food has been written up in *Food & Wine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*, and she's cooked alongside esteemed local chefs Frank Bonanno and Matt Selby at the James Beard House. "Chef Jen" has carved out a niche with her cheerful demeanor and food that is bright and innovative, and above all approachable. And in a city that's long favored hearty steak, Jasinski has proven—not once or twice but thrice—that she's got the talent to tempt, educate, and delight Denver diners.

LOVE LOATHE

WE LOVE chefs who take pride in crafting unique vegetarian dishes. We especially adore Max MacKissock's outstanding winter squash lasagna at Vita, and Adam Mali's roasted butternut squash and goat-cheese agnolotti at Montecito.

WE LOATHE the oh-so-predictable dessert menu trifecta: bread pudding, tiramisu, and crème brûlée.

WE LOVE junk food with a fine-dining execution—cotton candy spun on site, creamy puddings, housemade doughnuts.