

FASHION: COWGIRL PURSES

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Rioja

TOPPING DENVER'S DINING SCENE.



LEFT: Pomeginger cocktail. ABOVE: The main dining room at Denver's Rioja restaurant on Larimer Street.

Rioja is Spain's famous wine country just south of the Basque region. It's also one of *the* in places on the Denver dining scene. Annette-Bening-when-she's-in-town kind of in place.

It's a Sunday night at **Rioja** in Larimer Square, and the place is packed with gorgeous people. No Annette tonight, but plenty of bodies-beautiful in cowboy hats, jeans, little black dresses. But it's not an intimidating scene. "Because it's Denver, we accept you as you are," says co-manager Katie Anderson. Everyone's sipping the house Pomeginger cocktail—it's fruity like a Cosmopolitan and comforting like ginger ale—at the copper-topped bar as they wait for one of just 22 tables. Handblown-glass light fixtures, contemporary decor, and an exposed red brick 1800s wall make for modern-frontier chic.

Rioja chef Jennifer Jasinski—late of Wolfgang Puck's staff and San

Francisco's Postrio—fine-tunes Mediterranean-inspired fare with seasonal organic local ingredients. I start my meal with the goat cheese biscuits (flaky outside, just slightly creamy inside) and lavender sourdough (it hints of lavender in both taste and scent). The delicate tuna sashimi and tuna tartare duo with marinated apple and fennel, anise vinaigrette, and crispy apple chips (\$12.50) is light and flavorful. Then I graze on the fabulous Rioja Picnic—an assemblage of Spanish chorizo, air-dried duck breast, warm pine-nut-crusting goat cheese, Italian

Mountain Gorgonzola, olives, a salad of red onion and truffle and fennel, house-made orange confit, and roasted rosemary almonds (\$16.50). "It's an antipasto, but it's more fun—and it goes really well with wine," Anderson says, and indeed it does. And there's no lack of wine here to choose from.

A number of the bottles come from northern Spain's famed Rioja region, which produces many award-

Pomeginger Cocktail

4 ounces Skyy Vodka
2 ounces pomegranate purée
1 ounce apple juice
1 ounce ginger ale
½ ounce ginger syrup*
Twist of lemon

Serve shaken and strained like a martini.
*Available from www.gingerpeople.com.



winners. My “picnic” is a little hard to pair with, but the 2001 Rotallan Torra Reserva from the Priorat region in Catalonia—a simple middle-of-the-road fruit, not too dusty with a touch of acidity (\$14 a glass, \$56 a bottle, \$22 a bottle at the store)—proves as companionable as my knowledgeable waiter.

I finish with a dessert of beignets of sweet goat cheese and black mission fig with a ruby port-wine reduction scribbled atop (\$7). Like everything else at Rioja, the beignets are perfect in a pure, seemingly uncomplicated manner that actually involves a complex preparation. The meal leaves me supremely satisfied—like I’ve just had earthy handmade food of the highest order, and at a reasonable price.

As dusk falls, the tiny white lights crisscrossing Larimer Square turn on outside, striking a soft, romantic note. At first I think, We could be in Tuscany. No, make that Rioja. **U**

—Wolf Schneider

Rioja: 1431 Larimer St., (303) 820-2282; www.riojadenver.com.

GOAT CHEESE ROSEMARY BISCUITS FROM RIOJA

(Yield: 18 large biscuits)

1½ pounds all-purpose flour
1½ ounces baking powder
⅓ ounce salt
2 ounces sugar
6 ounces butter, cut into small pieces
8 ounces goat cheese, crumbled small
1½ tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary
10 ounces buttermilk
6 ounces whole milk

In a bowl mix together the dry ingredients, plus the rosemary. Add the butter and rub it into the flour with your hands so it is in small “specks.” Do the same with the goat cheese. Next add the milk and buttermilk all at once. Mix it in just to make it come together—*do not overmix.*



Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface and roll out to about 1-inch thick. Fold the dough over four times and roll out again to 1-inch thick. Fold the dough over three times and roll out to 1 inch again. The dough is ready to be cut or stored for later use.

When you do cut and bake the biscuits, brush tops of biscuits with a bit more buttermilk and sprinkle on a bit of salt. Bake at 425 degrees for about 18 minutes.