

Food & Beverage

2011 FINE DINING HALL OF FAME

Rioja

Complex flavors draw customers to splurge in casual Denver

BY BRET THORN

One of the keys to running a successful fine-dining restaurant in a city as casual as Denver is understanding just how the people there like to splurge. And chef Jennifer Jasinski and general manager Beth Gruitch have done just that at Rioja, according to observers.

"I call Jennifer Jasinski the 'lamb whisperer,'" said Denver Post food editor Tucker Shaw. "She's an excellent chef by any standard, but fits particularly well in our Denver community because her sensibility — in terms of the flavors she uses and the techniques she employs — is very Colorado."

Amanda Faison, food editor of local city magazine 5280, agrees.

"Her food is so bright on the palate," Faison said. "I think it's such a reflection of chef Jen, because as a personality she's so bright."



Jennifer Jasinski, pictured right, chef-owner at Rioja, serves a popular "lamb two-ways" dish, above, with lamb merguez sausage and couscous pillows. The Colorado restaurant's beignets are pictured below.



RIOJA

ADDRESS: 1431 Larimer St., Denver, Colorado 80202

PHONE: (303) 820-2282

WEBSITE: www.RiojaDenver.com

YEAR OPENED: 2004

CUISINE: modern American with Mediterranean influences

PER-PERSON DINNER CHECK AVERAGE WITH BEVERAGES: \$65

SEATS: 125

AVERAGE WEEKLY COVERS: 1,800

SQUARE FEET: 5,000

BEST-SELLING DISHES:

appetizer, Thai scallops with lemon grass panna cotta, compressed pineapple, plantain tuile, coconut-kaffir lime purée and Thai red-curry vinaigrette; main course, Colorado "lamb two-ways" with grilled T-bone, house-made lamb merguez sausage, crisp couscous pillows, caramelized fennel, tomato coulis and preserved lemon yogurt; dessert, "Whopper" torte of crispy malted-shortbread crust, chocolate flan, caramel mousse and malted anglaise

CHEF: Jennifer Jasinski

OWNERS: Jennifer Jasinski and Beth Gruitch

There's a freshness and crispness that I really feel you see in her cuisine."

Jasinski came by her casual nature honestly, having been raised unpretentiously by a single parent in Santa Barbara, Calif. She and her siblings took turns cooking, but her natural aptitude meant that eventually she was in full-time control of the kitchen.

After culinary school, first at Santa Barbara City College and then at The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., Jasinski spent some time working at The Rainbow Room in New York before returning to Southern California.

Soon, she found herself under the wing of chef and restaurateur Wolfgang Puck at his Beverly Hills, Calif., flagship, Spago.

She stayed with him for 11 years.

"When I was working at the original Spago, Wolfgang only had Spago and Chinois (on Main)," Jasinski said. So she got to work closely with him, both in the kitchen and in the dining room, watching how good he was with the guests.

"That really impacted my style," Jasinski said.

She first visited Denver with Puck, who had been hired by members of the city's elite to cater some parties.

"I was kind of fed up with Los Angeles at the time," Jasinski said.

"And I had worked for Wolfgang for so long. That was wonderful, but I felt like I needed to challenge myself a little more — step out on my own and really see, without Wolfgang's name behind me, how I would do on my own. I just took a leap of faith, and it's been great."

In 2000 Jasinski started as executive chef of Panzano, the signature restaurant of the Hotel Monaco, a property in Denver run by San Francisco-based Kimpton Hotel & Restaurant Group LLC. There, she met Colorado native Gruitch. In 2003 the two decided to go into business together, and a year later, they opened Rioja.

Since then, Jasinski and Rioja have won acclaim throughout the city, including Jasinski being

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

RIOJA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

named Chef of the Year by Denver Magazine in 2010, and Rioja being named the best restaurant for an expense-account diner by local city paper Westword.

The Denver Post's Shaw said Jasinski's culinary style reflects the

city's style, "by which I mean aggressive, landed flavors that recall equal parts of the American West, Spain, Mexico and the Colorado mountains. Her food is complex, but always rounded; the edges may prick, but they never pierce."



General manager Beth Gruitch, left, partnered with chef Jennifer Jasinski to open Rioja in 2004.

Shaw said he especially liked the "lamb two-ways" that was on her menu a year ago, "which consisted

of a simply grilled loin alongside a house-made, merguez-like sausage patty wrapped in caul fat and sautéed until just barely crisp."

He added that Gruitch also plays an important role in Rioja's success.

"The room and service also straddle that line between sophisticated and casual," he said.

Other popular items currently on the menu include a scallop appe-

tizer with lemon grass panna cotta, compressed pineapple, plantain tuile, coconut-kaffir lime purée and Thai red-curry vinaigrette.

For dessert, Jasinski said customers are raving about her torte made with malted milk balls, shortbread, chocolate flan, caramel mousse and a malted anglaise. ■

bret.thorn@penton.com