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Pressure cooker

Chef puts it all on the line as a restaurant is born

By **John Lehndorff, Rocky Mountain News**
December 15, 2004



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Video

Part 1: Co-owners Jennifer Jasinski and Beth Gruitch scramble to keep food and wine plans on schedule in the midst of construction chaos.

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It's 10 a.m. on Nov. 12 and Jennifer Jasinski stands in the middle of Rioja, her long-awaited and very unfinished new restaurant in Larimer Square, talking to the construction crew.

"I'm just not happy," she says, "but it's not your fault."

In 10 days, paying customers are supposed to walk through the door of 1431 Larimer St., expecting to be dazzled by one of Denver's hottest young chefs. But on this morning, events are making that Nov. 22 opening date seem nearly impossible.

The 36-year-old chef stands with hands on hips, rocking slowly back and forth. Dark circles hug her eyes, although the stress of opening a restaurant isn't the only reason she's going sleepless.

"I was up late," she says. "My husband was sick as a dog from stomach flu."

Within the hour, Jasinski learns that two kitchen workers she had just hired are no-shows already. The company that guaranteed delivery of a custom wine wall and a host stand now says they won't arrive for a week — only 24 hours before a crucial opening party for 100 guests. An inspector who was supposed to grant the electrical permit has taken the day off.

And the \$860,000 in start-up money is quickly running out.

Jasinski is in midsentence when the Denver Fire Department decides to test the alarm system, its eardrum-blasting whistle accompanied by bright, strobelike lights.

"Oh, this is great for my stress," she says with a short laugh, before walking off to give the contractor a \$106,000 check.

"I feel pretty good," Jasinski says, unconvincingly, a little while later. "I can't control any of this."

But after more than 18 months of dreaming, planning, building, cooking and fund-raising, everything that can go wrong is going wrong.

Jasinski is a hardened, 15-year veteran of the kitchen wars, including a decade opening and running restaurants for super-chef Wolfgang Puck, feeding the likes of David Bowie and Denzel Washington. In her previous job, she elevated Denver's Panzano from just another Italian hotel restaurant into one of the most sought-after meal tickets in town.

But on this day she walks silently past the \$9,618 pizza oven and the \$8,000 pasta machine, her pride and joy, slipping into the fluorescent-lighted dish room.

Chef Jen — overwhelmed by frustration but unwilling to let her troops see her wall of self-confidence quake — begins sobbing alone in a corner.



A borrowed 60-quart stockpot in hand, Rioja executive chef Jennifer Jasinski attends to details in a Nov. 15 phone call as she crosses Larimer Street to her new restaurant.

[All photography »](#)

'When we have our own restaurant'

Rioja started as a running joke in 2000 between Jasinski, then Panzano's newly hired executive chef, and Beth Gruitch, its general manager.

"For at least two years, when something would go wrong at the restaurant, one of us would say: 'When we have our own restaurant . . .' We'd kid about it a lot," says Gruitch.

The joking turned serious in 2003, around Jasinski's third anniversary at Panzano. Work began in earnest after she worked her last day at Panzano on Jan. 31 of this year.

Since then it has been 11 months of high drama and low moments. Of visits to Boulder goat farms and visions of big investors. Of silverware and sauté pans. Of lawsuits threatened and lime-green carpet. Of tension and test menus.

And, when it finally got fun, of food.

The Rocky Mountain News was along for the ride, documenting endless meetings, construction dust and a chef's dreams of banana oat brûlée and house salads with Medjool dates. There were the inevitable crises, occasional arguments and hit-the-wall exhaustion on the way to birthing Rioja.

Along the way, there were behind-the-scenes lessons about the world of food.

"People think all chefs do is schmooze," Jasinski says. "It's really yelling about the arugula and managing people."

A cook by necessity

Jasinski's journey to Rioja began out of necessity when she was 11.

"Nobody likes to come home after a long day and cook," Cheri Jasinski says of her life as a single mom after she and husband Joe divorced when Jennifer was 3. "I said: 'You guys have to start cooking. Everybody takes a turn, including me.' "

Mom felt "kind of guilty" about making a cook out of her youngest child, Jennifer, so she bought some kids' cookbooks. Jennifer loved them.



Rioja co-owner and executive chef Jennifer Jasinski listens on a July afternoon during one of the weekly meetings with architects and others involved in construction of her restaurant. In the foreground is a stack of plans for the restaurant space — plans that will change because of budgets or space needs in the 41/2 months prior to the restaurant's opening.

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Jasinski walks out the back door of the old Josephina's space, which is being gutted to make way for her restaurant. The chef was completing a weekly walk-through to check on construction progress. Behind her is Darby Wing of Rocky Mountain Equipment, who was consulting with Jasinski about buying a used, industrial-size dough mixer.

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"She was so excited that she read them cover to cover," Cheri says. "The other kids (older brother, Joe, and older sister, Jill) might make frozen pizza, but she tackled complex recipes like Paper Bag Chicken. The older kids would invite their friends over when it was Jennifer night."

Jennifer was just doing what came naturally in those early days in Santa Barbara, Calif.

"I was a chubby little kid, kind of a tomboy. I was a bored latchkey kid so I started to bake and cook. I loved to cook."

After a high school training program in food service, she got her first cooking job at Taco Bell. That was followed by a three-year culinary program at Santa Barbara City College. After that, Cheri Jasinski says, "the writing was on the wall."

Joe Jasinski, an insurance broker who now lives in Glendora, Calif., wasn't thrilled. "I wanted her to have a more establishment career, but she was insistent.

"Jennifer came to me when she was 14 or 15. She had no doubt. She said, 'Dad, I want to be a cook or chef.' She was practical. In that one area, she took after me."

And she had energy for any job, says Cheri, a microbiologist-turned-communications consultant who still lives in Santa Barbara.

"Jennifer was the kind of kid, my mother said, who walks into a room and the pictures just fall off the wall. They give up."



With the help of muriatic acid, Edgar Ibarra of Spectrum General Contractors cleans the exposed brick on the walls of the restaurant as construction progresses on Sept. 1, more than 2 1/2 months before the grand opening of Rioja. The restaurant space is a combination of the former dining room of the adjacent Josephina's and new construction.

[All photography »](#)

Funding the dream

Before leaving Panzano, Jasinski got a taste of the roller coaster ahead.

"I talked to this one gentleman. He filled me full of rosy promises. I thought, 'OK. We've got an investor. We can figure this out.' Suddenly, the investor was nowhere to be found," she says with a sigh.

So the chef-who-would-be-owner decided to do something she wasn't comfortable with: Ask for money.

"I started talking to people. Everybody wanted to give me money. My mom and dad are investors. They were so cute. I'm an investor, too, along with a lot of other people."

Jasinski sold the small home she owned in Malibu, Calif., for \$400,000 to come up with the \$165,000 for her share of the business. That's a big personal gamble when one in four restaurants fail in the first year.

The final deal made Jasinski and Gruitch managing partners, each owning a third of the new business, 1431 Jen & Beth LLC. The third partner is Jeff Hermanson, managing partner for Larimer Square Associates and a 30-year veteran of the restaurant business, who sold the duo on moving into Larimer Square.

In all, the partners initially raised \$850,000 for the opening. But the spending didn't stop there. In addition to being remodeled, the space selected at 1431 Larimer St. — the dining room half of Josephina's, the long-standing Italian eatery and bar — needed an addition to house the new kitchen. That cost, up to \$500,000, was borne by Larimer Square Associates, the partners' landlord.

By February, though, all Jasinski knows is that her restaurant, tentatively named Fino, will boast an open kitchen and serve coastal

Mediterranean cuisine with her personal twist. Her goal is a \$38 to \$42 check average per person for dinner and she wants to open in September.

And she knows a lot of work awaits the all-female management team: Assistant manager Jennifer Olson and sous chef Dana Rodriguez will join Jasinski and Gruitch. No problem.

"I want it to be all-new and all my own," Jasinski says.

Puck had urged Jasinski to open a restaurant as soon as she moved to Denver. Instead, she took her time.

"I wanted to be sure about Denver, and now it's my home. This is where I want to make my mark."



A goat entertains Jennifer Jasinski and other Rioja staffers visiting Haystack Mountain Goat Dairy outside Boulder on Nov. 1. Jasinski was at the dairy to sample goat cheeses and to see how the operation is run. In the background, from left: Haystack Mountain employee Margaret Hollander, Rioja co-owner and sous chef Dana Rodriguez and Antonio Rangel.

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You have to break a few eggs . . . and Jennifer Jasinski does so Sept. 1 in a basement test kitchen in the former Champion Brewing Co. in Larimer Square. She has spent the bulk of the preceding seven months planning and overseeing construction, so she is thrilled to be refining recipes for her Mediterranean-inspired restaurant.

[All photography »](#)

Out of her comfort zone

"This doesn't come naturally; I'm really having to work at all this stuff," Jasinski says.

For a person most at home with a sauté pan in her hand, interviewing architects, kitchen designers and general contractors is a challenge. By mid-April, Spectrum General Contractors of Denver has been hired to construct the restaurant.

"We put in for the construction permit and we should get it in 21/2 to 3 weeks. Whenever we get the permit we start construction," she says, beaming with confidence. That schedule will get dented soon enough.

During an April meeting at McClain Finlon, Jasinski and restaurant consultant John Imbergamo talk through dozens of possible names. The Denver-based advertising company has offered its services for free, except for materials, because one of the firm's owners knows the chef and was intrigued by the project. The name Fino is chosen, only to be rejected just as the meeting ends because it sounds too much like Josephina's. Cava becomes the new name.

The name isn't the only thing in flux — so is the September opening. Until Josephina's closes for its renovation, no construction can start on Cava. As of May 16, Josephina's is still selling pasta.

"Now it's going to be a much longer process," Jasinski says. "That kind of bums me out, but it's not the end of the world. It means we'll open in October."

Jasinski has hired Tom Port to help design and build her kitchen. Port is well-regarded in Denver for the kitchens he has installed at notable eateries such as Adegá, the new Racines and Mirepoix.

"We have to get the design of our restaurant by June 20 and we want to be building by July 15," Jasinski says. "Because we are starting from scratch, we can make it the way we want. I don't have a Bryan Moscatello (the chef behind the nationally acclaimed Adegá) budget, but I have enough to do something nice."

No room for crybabies

Jasinski's career took off when her boyfriend talked her into applying to the most prestigious cooking school in the United States, the Culinary Institute of America, when she was 19.

"We went there together, but we broke up before we got there," she says. "It rained every day in Hyde Park (New York). I cried for three weeks."

She says her big turning point was a six-month unpaid "externship" working for legendary restaurateur Joseph Baum at the newly opened Rainbow Room in New York City.

"We lived in a railroad flat in Hoboken, N.J., coming into the city every day. I saw this crazy, exciting, cool life that was very different from school. It was very fast-paced, not touchy-feely like California. New York was harsh and it helped me to be tougher. If you're a crybaby you

Women take the lead

Chef and co-owner Jennifer Jasinski might be the focus at Rioja, but she's by no means the only woman in an important role. The restaurant is run by an all-female team — all of whom worked with Jasinski at her previous job at Panzano — an anomaly in a traditionally male-dominated field:

Beth Gruitch

- Position: Co-owner, general manager
- Age: 35
- Birthplace: Colorado Springs
- Restaurant experience: 20 years
- Favorite menu item: Beth's Favorite Pizza with Italian Mountain gorgonzola, black mission figs, arugula and prosciutto
- Favorite junk food: "Doritos. I don't allow myself to have them in the house. I love those stupid things."



don't make it."

The Rainbow Room was where Jasinski met a man who would dominate her career for a decade, celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck.

"Wolfgang came in for a wine dinner. I was awestruck. He said, 'You come back to California, you look me up. I give you a job,' " she says, imitating Puck's Austrian accent.

But when she went home to L.A. and called on Puck, he had no memory of their meeting. No matter: Jasinski landed a cooking gig at Eureka, a new Puck restaurant, before working at his celebrated Beverly Hills eatery, Spago.

"I worked there when they had the big Oscar parties. I remember sitting on the roof looking at all the stars coming in . . . My favorite was Sean Connery. He came into the kitchen once wearing a kilt and carrying bagpipes. It was his birthday and he wanted to surprise the guests."

She did more than star-watch while with Puck. "He was running all of his restaurants on a much higher level than even most fine-dining restaurants. Then I started to watch him cook. People think he's just a name, but he's the man.

"He treated me well at a time when there weren't that many women in the kitchen. Over time, I started to watch how he ran his business and how he treated his customers, how you have to do whatever it takes to make people happy."

Hardest thing about opening a restaurant: "You have no control over what other people do. People don't do what they say they will do. You have to do more follow-up and then more follow-up. It's time-consuming and frustrating."

Dana "Loca" Rodriguez

- Position: Sous chef, co-owner
- Age: 30
- Birthplace: Juarez, Mexico
- Restaurant experience: 7 years
- Favorite menu item: Colorado Lamb French Dip on goat cheese biscuits with rosemary lamb jus
- Favorite junk food: "Quesadillas and chilaquiles with spicy sauce . . . but it's not good for my diet."
- Hardest thing about opening a restaurant: "I don't know the people I'm going to work with and I don't know how they work. You don't know if they will love it."



Jennifer Olson

- Position: Assistant manager
- Age: 30
- Birthplace: Salinas, Calif.
- Restaurant experience: 10 years
- Favorite menu item: Grilled Diver Scallops and Shrimp with roasted mushrooms, sunchoke and mache salad with candied lemon vinaigrette
- Favorite junk food: Chocolate-covered Gummy Bears
- Hardest thing about opening a restaurant: "I'm a perfectionist. I like things to go as planned. When the espresso machine arrived and it didn't fit where it was supposed to go it had to be moved. We had to adjust and step outside the plan. It's accepting the small and big mistakes."



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