

Meet singles  
online and offline!  
**DenverSingles.com**



**Parker**  
16534 Keystone Blvd.  
303.805.4714

**Lodo**  
2245 Market St.  
303.292.0444

**University  
Hills**  
2468 South Colorado Blvd.  
303.758.8244

**Southwest  
plaza**  
9046 W.Ave.  
303.972.9393

CLASSIFIEDS \ AUTOS \ JOBS \ HOMES \ AD SEARCH \ YELLOW PAGES \ TRAVEL DEALS \

RockyMountainNews.com

**DINING**

SEARCH SITE FOR:

go

HOME NEWS SPORTS BUSINESS ENTERTAINMENT RECREATION LIFESTYLES OPINION

## ENTERTAINMENT

- Movies
- Music
- On Stage
- Dining
- Arts
- Events
- Books
- Television
- Nightlife
- Local Noise
- AP Entertainment
- Columnists

### Denver Dines

John Lehdorff's new book guides you to Denver's best eateries.  
[Order now »](#)

### Recipe Please

Buy a copy of Recipe Please, a cookbook with 166 popular recipes from local and national restaurants.  
[Order now »](#)

### Top of the Rocky

[PRINT THIS STORY](#) | [E-MAIL THIS STORY](#)

## Pressure cooker

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

December 15, 2004



Denver glass blower Kit Karbler, left, works on glass light fixtures that will adorn the walls of Rioja. Apprentice Dmitri Rudenko, right, assists at Blake Street Glass on Sept. 14, 10 weeks before the Nov. 22 opening of Rioja. Management at the restaurant wants to use local artists wherever feasible to produce unique pieces for the interior.

[All photography »](#)

'How much does it

We feature the best in dining, people, sports and more. Don't like them? Give us your picks.

[Full section »](#)

## Pressure cooker

Denver chef Jennifer Jasinski puts it all on the line as Lodo's hottest new restaurant is born.

[Full story »](#)

## 'How much does it cost?'

Managing a budget is exacting a price on Jasinski.

"Everything now is, 'How much does it cost?' " she sighs during a June meeting in Imbergamo's office.

Jasinski and Gruitch have just returned from a huge restaurant show in Chicago, where they looked at plates, silverware, chairs, fabrics and pizza ovens priced from \$7,000 to \$21,000.

But now Jasinski, Tom Cella from Spectrum General Contractors and others are concentrating on a floor plan. They agree on earthy tile in the entryway, wide-plank flooring in the bar and a lime-green

carpet. They consider using copper for the bar tops with an automotive clear coat that never has to be polished. "Copper is not a cheap material to work with," Cella says.

Staying within budget means stock items get preference over anything that has to be special-ordered.

Team Cava starts running the daunting gantlet of obtaining the permits that stand between them and opening day. If they alter the historic storefront that faces Larimer Square, for example, they have to deal with the landmarks commission. As they build doors and bathrooms, they have to assure handicap accessibility.

"Any delay in getting the permits could delay the opening until November," said Jasinski. "I really don't want to open during the holidays."

## Finding dishes with 'Jen taste'

Every dish on the menu will embody Jasinski's palate paradigm: "Jen taste." It involves a balance of flavors, often sweet and savory with bright, clear notes.

One appetizer she has started pondering involves wrapping peeled Comice pear slices with pancetta, an Italian smoked ham, and sautéing it in butter until lightly browned. She decides it will go well with barely bitter arugula tossed with lemon vinaigrette and garnished with shaved cheese.



Rioja server Michele Barbezat checks a piece of glassware for spots against the overhead lights as she polishes glasses just before the restaurant opens to the public on Nov. 22.

[All photography »](#)



## Video

**Part 2:** It's time to eat! Rioja's chefs prepare the first meals during "mock" services in the final busy days before the opening party.

**Click the picture to watch the video**

[Download Real Player](#)

[Quicktime version](#)

Videos: [Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Download Real Player](#)

---

"As I think of things, I write them in my journal. Eventually I'll break them down into files and start dumping them in 'lunch idea,' 'bar idea,' 'dinner idea.' It's hard to think about fall flavors right now," she says on a hot spring day. The menu will change seasonally.

Jasinski has been testing dishes at the Denver home she shares with her 36-year-old husband, James Oswald.

"It's been fun while she's been testing stuff," he says. "She woke up one morning and said, 'I think I know what the house salad is.' She dreamed it."

The dream became the Rioja House Salad: baby arugula with slivered Medjool dates, gorgonzola cheese and toasted almond vinaigrette.

Oswald had worked as a manager and general manager at Restaurant Kevin Taylor, Mel's Bar and Grill and other Denver eateries. When he met Jasinski, he was a partner in a music club, Dulcinea's.

"He really introduced



Jennifer Jasinski didn't look back when she imagined the debut menu at Rioja.

[A closer look at the menu »](#)

"He really introduced me to everyone in the restaurant community," Jasinski says.

"I know the business," says Oswald, who left it for a job with PraxAir, a company that installs and maintains oxygen equipment, when his wife began her project.

"I knew if Jen was going to do this project her energy had to be focused," he says. "I needed to get a good job."

His other job involves reassuring his wife.

"I tell her to try and not to focus on mistakes: 'You're doing awesome. It's your food that's going to bring people in.' Sometimes, I'm talking to her and she has that thousand-yard

stare. I'll say, 'Did you hear a word I said?' She's always thinking about the restaurant."

Other than a few catering gigs, Jasinski doesn't get back in the kitchen until late spring, when she does some consulting work for Crested Butte Mountain Resort because she needs the money.

She also is thinking of menu items and how to price them, which is more involved than just costing out ingredients and labor. "You have to look at the dish and say, 'What's the fair market value of it?' 'Would I pay \$6 for this bowl of soup?'"

"I put everything on the menu into a spreadsheet and it gives me an overall food cost. In general, you want a 30 percent food cost, but it varies from item to item. Salads have a lower food cost and entrees have a much higher food cost. You hope customers order both and it balances out."

Her test kitchen is in the basement of the old Champion Brewery Co. in the bowels of Larimer Square.

"It's dark. It's kind of a bummer. I've been so busy I haven't started testing my own recipes. Can you please make the day 26 hours long?" she says, only half joking.

### **By the way, the space is haunted**

Jasinski is no first-timer at launching eateries.

"I opened a lot with Wolfgang (Puck), but I

### **Color scheme**

"We wanted earth tones that would make you think of food and wine," says chef Jennifer Jasinski. Rioja's interior fabrics, chosen with architect Trish Mueller, reflect that natural theme.



didn't own them. If it got delayed a few days, you got delayed. It's not the same when your money is tied up."

That is becoming even more true by late June, as Cava's budget crunch is forcing some tough decision-making. "Kitchen equipment alone, including hoods and ducts, started at \$190,000. We've gotten it down to \$138,000," she says. "There is stuff I won't cut, like the pasta machine. You can do stuff really fast, but it's \$8,000 by itself."



- The striped, two-tone fabric was used in the bar booth.



- Suede pear (light olive green) covers the backs of the bar stools.



- The patterned, multicolor fabric was used on the backs of the banquettes.



- A solid copper-color fabric was used to upholster the banquettes and booths.

And that long-forgotten September opening now looks certain to be joined by October on the sidelines — maybe. "We're hoping for the end of October," Jasinski now says.

The good news on this late June day is that Josephina's finally has closed for renovation, so the wall between the two eateries has been sealed. Demolition has begun in earnest on the Cava space and the foundation for the new addition has been poured.

"They're tearing off layers of old plaster and strips of wood from 1900," Jasinski says in July as she leads a guided tour. "They've found pipes that the owner didn't even know were there."

With the walls stripped away, an old sign painted on the brick wall is now visible: "Chug A Lug contest every Tuesday."

The future restaurant smells dank. Dust flies as workers cut through a brick wall and nail guns fire, causing everybody except the workers to jump. The diminutive chef seems oblivious amid the rubble, a beatific smile plastered on her face. "I'm very excited. I can see my space," she says proudly.

Jasinski is told that Josephina's reportedly was haunted by a ghost named Amelia.

"As long as she loves good food she's cool with me," Jasinski says.

## Name that restaurant . . . again

An August phone call wipes the smile off Jasinski's face. The owner of Cava Greens, a made-to-order salad eatery in Republic Plaza's food court, insists she drop the name Cava to avoid confusion with his business.

Soon, the confrontation begins to accelerate toward a lawsuit. Unable to afford a legal battle, the partners reluctantly drop Cava and select Rioja as, they hope, the

### The right word

**What began as a brief exercise drags on for months**

- Two suggestions from Denver advertising agency McClain Finlon:

**Matrize**

"This is a

**Gusta**

"This word is fun to say

final name for the restaurant. It's not entirely a decision driven by creativity: Since Rioja has nearly the same number of letters as Cava, the name can replace Cava in the previously completed logo designed by McClain Finlon.

Other problems are less easily solved.

"We are over budget," Jasinski says. "We have to get the building costs in line. The wine wall alone is \$20,000. We figured out a way to pare it down to \$8,000."

And it's official: The new opening date is Nov. 15, but Jasinski has grown accustomed to, if not comfortable with, changing her plans. Then, on Sept. 21, new delays loom.

"The contractor says he won't give us the building until Nov. 15. We really want to open the week of the 15th but we have to be in there awhile before we can open."

## Dreaming of banana oat brûlée

It's September and Chef Jen is cooking.

"It's good to be back in the kitchen again," she says, checking on gougères (cheese puffs) in the convection oven.

Alone in the basement kitchen with its low ceilings, stainless steel equipment and black floors, she is a whirlwind. She tests batches of dough in the freezer and the refrigerator, seeing how each bakes out; she slices bacon, makes pumpkin sauce and checks her big sea scallops.

Jasinski tastes the sauce and then modifies it. There's no recipe yet, so she can play with flavor nuances. In constant motion, she wields tongs, sautés, spins, washes pots and runs back and forth in an eye-catching but awkwardly choreographed modern dance.



Restaurant employees, clad in their new avocado shirts, rehearse roles five days

This is a made-up word, a derivative of matriz, which is Spanish for 'womb.' Matriz is fun and easy to say."

This word is fun to say and evokes strong gastronomic sensations in many languages, from the Spanish gusta meaning 'pleasing,' to gusto which means 'taste' in Spanish and Italian."

- Restaurant consultant John Imbergamo's and chef Jennifer Jasinski's initial list of possible names included:

Artisan	Boule	Creme	Panna	Spoon
Fete	Brule	Dice	Pico	Tian
Anana	Caldo	Choux	Pinch	Tourage
Baba	Chew	Fino	Plum	Verdure
Azuki	Ceci	Flute	Riso	Cava

- McClain Finlon developed logotypes for Cava, but a threatened lawsuit derailed that name as well. Jasinski and Imbergamo then had the added challenge of conceiving a new name that would fit in the existing logo. They search through the Oxford Companion of Wine and 'Rioja' is born.



"I need a dishwasher . . . or maybe a servant," she concludes.

She makes cannelloni filling out of veal, pork, pancetta, sage, pine nuts and olive oil in the food processor. She tastes the truffle cream sauce for the sautéed and baked cannelloni, then adds salt.

before the official opening of the restaurant. Server Michelle Colarelli, left, pretends to grate pepper on a salad as she waits on fellow server Michael Hughes during the practice run. Only three days later, the staffers will be working with real food and drink, serving friends, VIPs and members of the media at a party to benefit Colorado Public Radio. Two days after that, rehearsals will be over and Rioja will welcome its first official customers. [All photography »](#)



Compiling a wine list starts with tastings and note taking. Rioja co-owner and general manager Beth Gruitch, right, tastes wine during October with Jen Olson, the front-of-house manager, at Brasserie Rouge. [All photography »](#)

"I need to find more truffle-y truffles," she says in the matter-of-fact way someone else might say, "I need to get some snow tires."

Gruitch, Rioja's general manager, stops in to do some tasting and to offer suggestions. Mostly she just sighs over how good the food is while discussing budgets, uniforms, ordering and hiring.

In a gleeful aside, Jasinski tells Gruitch: "The other night I dreamed I made a banana oat brûlée with pastry cream." The item will end up on the brunch menu.

"I have 18 recipes I like and some that I don't," Jasinski says.

Later in September the chef is joined by her sous chef and right hand in the kitchen,

Dana Rodriguez. Rodriguez worked with Jasinski at Panzano for four years, so they know each other well. So what happens when things start to go wrong?

"We just look at each other and go Ehhhh?" says Rodriguez, raising a quizzical eyebrow, laughing.

## Working at a feverish pace

It's a three-ring circus on Oct. 5.

Gruitch is tasting 20 white wines with reps from Southern Wine & Spirits of Colorado in Capital Grille, across the street from Rioja.

They start with Torres Viña Sol, a Spanish wine. Gruitch vigorously twirls the wine, pausing to sniff the bouquet before taking a sip. She works it around inside her mouth before pronouncing it a winner. That is, after she has spit it out in a bucket. Nineteen to go.

Jasinski and Rodriguez are nearby in the downstairs test kitchen, perfecting entrees. Jasinski works off a list of entrees written on a yellow legal pad. Once a recipe works, she'll type it into her laptop.

Wearing a Cava T-shirt ("It's a collector's item," she says with a laugh), Jasinski points out her computer screen saver, which scrolls the words "Be nice" across the screen.

Gruitch stops by after the tasting to join Jasinski for a walk across Larimer Street into Rioja. They show the wine reps where the building once connected to Josephina's, a restaurant whose food would never be compared to the fare at Rioja.

"People are always asking us if we are going to share a kitchen with Josephina's," Jasinski tells the group. "And I say, 'What? Do you think we're on crack? Of course not!'"

Later, in a conspiratorial whisper, she says: "We might be on crack, but we're NEVER gonna share a kitchen with them."



Line cook Kevin Chambers reacts quickly to stop a grease fire in an open grill, above, after oil from the fryer was accidentally spilled on the grill during cleanup at the end of an evening. Below, other kitchen staffers assist Chambers in smothering the flames with baking sheets. It was crucial the fire was quickly controlled: Had the fire extinguishers above the grill discharged during the emergency, the ensuing cleanup and recharging of the sprinkler system just six days before Rioja's first public event probably would have delayed the opening of the restaurant.

[All photography »](#)



[SKIP TO PART »](#) [PART ONE](#) | [PART TWO](#) | [PART THREE](#)

[ABOUT US](#)

[RSS FEEDS](#)

[ARCHIVES](#)

[SITE MAP](#)

[XML](#)

[FAQ](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

[TIP LINE](#)

[PHOTO REPRINTS](#)

[CORRECTIONS](#)

2005 © The E.W. Scripps Co.  
[PRIVACY POLICY](#) and [USER AGREEMENT](#)

Questions? Comments? [TALK TO US.](#)



**NO SHIPPING FEES\***

**July 4th fireworks!**

Shop now and save at [circuitcity.com](#), Sunday - Monday only!

[shop now »](#)