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Pressure cooker

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

December 15, 2004

'Then he called me darlin' '

Sous chef Rodriguez is interviewing a kitchen worker in Spanish. Afterward she notes that working at Rioja would be his second job.

"He's crazy. He wants two jobs. I understand. I like to work a lot, too. That's why they call me Loca."

It's Oct. 20, a month from Rioja's opening-night benefit event. In an empty storefront in Larimer Square, the team will hire for about 22 positions in the kitchen, and 25 in the front of the house.

"Why do you want to be a line cook?" Jasinski asks a candidate, who has cooked at several Denver eateries, starting with the legendary Cafe Giovanni.

"It's the people. I love to cook," he says.



In his own dress rehearsal, Rioja cook Fausto Vasquez puts the finishing touches on "pansoti," a pot-bellied cheese and herb ravioli dish, during a mock service-training session on Nov. 16. Vasquez has worked with Jasinski several times in his career, going as far back as their days at some of Wolfgang Puck's restaurants in California.

[All photography »](#)

"It's nice to be back on the Square with a bunch of women," says assistant manager Jennifer Olson. A photographer by education, she previously worked at Cadillac Ranch, Tommy Tsunami's and Mexicali's, as well as at Panzano with Jasinski and Gruitch.

Olson is finishing an evaluation of a bartender she interviewed. The sheet notes he was "willing to take out his earrings if asked."

"This guy was really nice. He has a lot of experience, although he doesn't know wines very much. Then right at the end he started calling me 'sweetheart' and 'darlin.' That killed it."

'We're running out of money'

Jasinski stands in the middle of Rioja's prep kitchen where equipment, including a huge Baker's Pride convection oven, waits to be connected. Then she steps into the dining area and whispers so the workers can't hear.

"We're running out of money. We were going to have a desk built for our office downstairs. Now I'm just going to find something at a garage sale."

The attractive housing for the pizza oven will instead be replaced by a simple finish. Within days, a cash call is issued to the investors, and they must contribute a combined \$60,000 to make sure Rioja has the capital it needs to open.

The battle du jour on this late October day is the fire suppression system in the kitchen hood over the stoves.

"They put the nozzles in the wrong place. They won't pass inspection," Jasinski says.

"They said we'd have to pay extra to move them. We had to dig out the final plans to prove that they had made a mistake. So now they're going to fix it."

Then there's the dish room.

"They're bringing the wrong dish machine. They knew it was the wrong one but the right

A chef's life

Jennifer Jasinski's own road to Rioja

- April 24, 1968: Jennifer Jasinski is born in Los Angeles. She has a brother, Joe, and a sister, Jill.
- 1985-87: Attends the culinary program at Santa Barbara City College.
- 1987-89: Enrolls at Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.; later does a six-month apprenticeship at the world-famous Rainbow Room in New York City. She later works there and meets celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck.
- 1989: Jasinski moves back to California and begins work at the Hotel Bel-Air. She again meets Puck, who doesn't remember her. She lands a line-cook job at his soon-to-open restaurant Eureka, but first trains at Puck's celebrated Spago in Los Angeles.



Jennifer Jasinski and Wolfgang Puck celebrate a 1998 holiday party.

- 1991-99: Works as everything from sous chef to corporate chef for various Wolfgang Puck restaurants and enterprises including Postrio (San Francisco), Spago (Las Vegas), Granita (Malibu), Spago (Chicago), and Wolfgang Puck Food Co.
- 1996: Three-month externship (a nonpaying

one got damaged. They didn't call. They're just going to bring the wrong one," she says, shaking her head.

On the day before Halloween, Jasinski's face betrays a hint of a different horror.

"I've been having words with one of the construction guys about when we'd have the certificate of occupancy. We were guaranteed the 15th. Now he's saying the 16th. It really stresses me out."

job at a restaurant where a student gets to practice classroom skills in the real world) at Ledoyan, a Michelin two-star restaurant in Paris.

- 1997-99: Corporate chef at Wolfgang Puck Food Co., developing recipes for the restaurants and working on quality control.
- March 1, 2000: Moves to Denver, becomes executive chef at Panzano Restaurant in the Hotel Monaco.
- Oct. 12, 2001: Panzano earns an "A" in a Rocky Mountain News review: "It's love at first super-rich bite for the mascarpone cheese-infused polenta. It's so creamy and satisfying it should be illegal."
- Sept. 15, 2002: The 34-year-old Jasinski marries 34-year-old James Oswald, who was raised in Aurora.

John Lehdorff

Taste tests and orders

At 9:25 a.m. on Nov. 1, wearing a headband and a frayed old sweatshirt, Jasinski is back in the test kitchen with Rodriguez and her pastry chef, Shawn Cubberly. Cubberly and Jasinski are not satisfied with some practice loaves of levain bread and rye bread.

Two representatives from Sysco, the giant food-service supply company, arrive to discuss the hundreds of items Jasinski needs to run the kitchen. Cash-strapped until Rioja generates money, she wants to negotiate a great deal on the huge initial order. Jasinski and one of the reps have their laptops open on a folding table in the kitchen as cooks in the background make stock, bread and cannelloni filling. The Sysco account still reads "Cava."

Jasinski yells to Rodriguez: "You probably should start the consommé first," then tells the Sysco reps she needs skinned whole hazelnuts but not ones that have been blanched, as well as pine nuts, walnuts, dried cherries, figs, dates, currants and Medjool dates.

She calls over her shoulder: "Shawn. You doing those breads now?"

Then she shows the reps a cheese she tested. "This is not a good Gruyere. No nuttiness. No sharpness," she says, sticking out her tongue and wrinkling her nose.

A laundry list of problems

It's Tuesday, Nov. 9, and the lights still aren't on. Not much else is going right, either.



Rioja by the numbers: 4,400 interior square feet, 62 employees, 60 menu items...

[Full graphic »](#)

"We're still waiting for Xcel to hook up electricity," Jasinski says. "They said they were going to hook it up by now. I walked into the restaurant and (workers) had hung the wrong lights on the wall. The floor tiles are not finished and they were supposed to be. The stairs aren't done. The painters didn't paint the registers."

She pauses briefly.

"The landlord had their part of the work done long ago but we just discovered that a subcontractor didn't hook up the exhaust ductwork and didn't tell anyone."

Other than that?

"Things are going good."



Video

Part 3: Taste the excitement and tension of opening night as Rioja serves its first paying customers after long months of work.

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A reminder of mortality

Gruitch and some servers play an expensive game of musical tables six days before the opening party.

Olson, who is painting the basement office, joins them in the dining area. The chef's table, an eight-seater near the kitchen, is too large to allow servers to easily pick up food.

"No way this table can fit here," Jasinski says, after a look.

This could be a costly problem, because they might have to remove a four-seat table to make room. That means losing about eight people a night on Fridays and Saturdays, worth about \$40 each. Add at least four diners on a week night and it adds up over a year. So they keep trying to find room.

"I've hit a wall," Olson finally says, putting her head down on a table. "I've just hit a wall."

Finally, they give up and put the chef's table on a slant to fit it in, removing the four-seat table.

Jasinski answers her cell phone; it's an applicant looking for a cooking job. "This is Chef Jen. Hi. Yes, John Broening recommended

you. Can you come in and talk?"

Six days earlier Brasserie Rouge, a well-regarded year-old LoDo eatery, closed its doors after slightly more than a year in business. Brasserie Rouge is not alone. National statistics show an average of one in four new restaurants closes its doors within 12 months of opening.

Other recent Denver casualties of the restaurant war of attrition include Sean Kelly's Clair de Lune and Sean Yontz's Vega. It hammers home the reality that making a restaurant work is a chancy proposition, even for one that got the positive press that Broening's spot did.

"It made me very sad to hear about Brasserie Rouge," Jasinski says after hanging up. "I like John and he's a good chef."

Gruitch and Jasinski figure they probably can't afford to pay themselves until December, and any delay in opening will put that first payday even farther off.

"It's a slim Christmas at my house this year. I'm down to the bottom of the funds," Gruitch says.

"I'm nervous," Jasinski says. "I can't help it."



Only a few days before mock service starts and a week until the restaurant's grand opening, Jasinski feels the stress of a thousand details that still need her attention after nine months of planning and construction. Behind her, a worker lays paving stones for the patio dining area.

[All photography »](#)

'If we build it, will they come?'

There's a change in the air. Jasinski's problems from the previous Friday, which had driven her to tears, have been resolved.

So on Monday, Nov. 15, five days before the opening-night benefit party, Jasinski stands in the Rioja kitchen eating slices of heated-up frozen Freschetta pizza with the staff. This — and chicken fingers, green chile, fries and enchiladas — are the mainstays of the daily staff meal, not lobster and chocolate mousse.

Shipments of food have arrived: a case of Rocky Bird chicken, a case of Culver ducks. She sends back a 50-pound bag of buckwheat

flour that was supposed to be bread flour.

Jasinski pops into the dining room. She's wearing her white chef's coat with logo and signature for the first time. Chef Jen again. Smiling, the general gathers her troops — 10 cooks, chefs and dishwashers — in the prep kitchen. She makes eye contact with each. She seems taller, definitely louder. There is no doubt who's in charge.

"Hi, everybody. We're going to give you a tour and show you where everything goes. This is the pasta machine. It's an \$8,000 machine. Do not put any liquid on or near it. No drinks! It's a new kitchen. Keep everything nice. That's my theme. If you drop something, pick it up."

She leads the group to the line, pointing out the grill, sauté and pasta stations. Jasinski picks up a shiny new sauté pan. "Lovely new pans. I have to pat them."

Later, standing by her car in the garage behind the restaurant, she says: "Things are going well, don't you think? Now the question is: If we build it, will they come?"

A flurry of activity is evident throughout Rioja just before its doors open Nov. 22. Server Jimmy Cekanor carries a handful of glasses through the dining room as he sets tables for that evening's service. [All photography »](#)



'... I'm giving myself an ulcer'

Two days later, more than 20 green-shirted servers sit at tables tasting food and wine and taking a quiz, with prizes for especially attentive students. "We've downloaded so much information in the past few days it's overwhelming," says one.

On the line in the kitchen, Jasinski and staff are in full-speed panic trying to get the food out. Someday it will be second nature, but that day is not today. Jasinski stops to breathe for a second. "I've got this pain in my stomach and my back. I think I'm giving myself an ulcer."

It's Wednesday, Nov. 18, 24 hours until the first D-Day: Mock lunch service, followed that night by mock dinner service.

"Crises? We got crises," Gruitch says. "There's no music system yet. There's no host stand. We're still hooking up Open Table (the online reservation system). The phones are still being installed. There are no covers for the wine lists."

On the other hand, the dining room chairs have been unpacked and arranged. The awning is flapping in the breeze out front and Rioja logos adorn each window.

Up at the bar, Olson is talking Cosmopolitans with the bartenders.

"I want to make sure we're all on the same page," she says. "We all have our own twist on the Cosmo. We need to have a universal Cosmo, so if someone comes on Tuesday and Friday it's the same drink."



Dining-room staffers (in foreground) await pickup as Jasinski, right, works with the chefs and cooks as they prepare food on the line during a mock service four days before opening their doors to the public. Some staffers are longtime acquaintances of Jasinski from Panzano, where she previously worked in Denver, and elsewhere. Some are working with the chef for the first time and learning the rhythms of the new restaurant, which will stage two mock lunches and two mock dinners before they serve paying customers.

[All photography »](#)

Waiting on the liquor permit

It's 11 a.m. on Nov. 18 and Rioja is about to welcome its first diners for mock lunch service.

But there's a problem.

"License trauma," Gruitch says. "They won't give us a liquor permit because the plans for the restaurant don't exactly match the ones they have on file. Our lawyer and our architect are out of town.

"We'll have it by Saturday," Gruitch insists, but she looks uncertain.

"This is our first day," Gruitch says later to the staff, fanning herself with her notes. She smiles and launches into her spiel, part manager and part motivational speaker.

"We've got 55 lunches in the book. We'll see who orders what. It'll be good for the kitchen. I feel good, except for the liquor license. You'll do great. Let's shine," she says to a round of applause.

A security alarm blares at 11:20 a.m., causing servers to jump. The first mock customers, mostly friends and family, arrive at 11:30 a.m.

"So far, so good, but we have a ways to go,"



Jasinski says after lunch ends. Some of the problems are caused by a lack of menus (they have only six so far) and the kitchen and servers aren't moving fast enough.

As day two of mock service arrives on Friday, Gruitch admits to weariness. "My feet and my legs are killing me. But I got a manicure today. I'll get a pedicure tomorrow. I still don't know what to wear to the party."

At 3:30 p.m., the last piece falls into place: the liquor permit.

"Got it!" says Gruitch, with the broadest smile she's worn in weeks.

"That's about 40,000 pounds off my back. We can set up the bar and serve alcohol now."

More important, it means the 12 liquor distributor trucks and vans backed up in the alley can now deliver their orders.

The curtain rises

Practice time is over.

The tables in the main dining room have been moved to a nearby storefront, clearing the restaurant for tonight's party to benefit Colorado Public Radio. This is Rioja's introduction to the public — as well as to Jasinski's father and mother.

On the menu: a buffet that included prosciutto, fried goat cheese balls and grilled chorizo sausage, and passed samples from the menu including tuna tartare, lobster risotto, bourbon cocoa, pizza and beignets.

Jasinski and Gruitch are proud of the interior they helped design with architect Trish Mueller. "It had to be comfortable and warm, inviting and not stuffy. We wanted earth tones that would make you think of food and wine," Jasinski says.

The party goes nearly flawlessly. Late that night, the Avocado Army — the green-shirted servers — moves the tables back in for D-Day.



The lights of Larimer Square reflect off Rioja's front window as dinner patrons get a taste of the restaurant's Mediterranean-inspired cuisine. Jim Branum, above, of Boulder enjoys a glass of wine with Nanette Thompson (not shown) as they sample a few of the bar menu items on a recent night. It was Branum's first visit to the restaurant, which opened Nov. 22.

[All photography »](#)

Drinking in the
ambience at Rioja's
packed bar, friends
Erin Egan, left, and
Lori Filippini, right,
laugh as they wait
for a table recently.
Erin's husband,
Brian, and Lori's
fiance, Adam Sherry,
hold drinks in the
foreground.
All photography »



A restaurant is born

It's a beautiful, warm, sunny Monday in Larimer Square. After much time, money (they are now \$23,000 over their construction budget of \$850,000), name changes, opening-night delays and sweat equity, Rioja will open at 5 p.m. Nov. 22.

"I'm strangely calm and collected," Jasinski says. "Maybe it's because I finally got some sleep. I visited with my mom and we went out for dim sum at the Empress. I did laundry and paid my bills."

- 2:30 p.m.: Rioja has 55 reservations.

- 2:50 p.m.: Cubberly makes pencil-thin, buttery breadsticks that accompany the cheese plate. In the small prep kitchen at least eight people work. They turn sideways often to allow each other to pass. This is not a good place for the claustrophobic, but still, Cubberly says, "I've worked in tighter kitchens than this."

- 3:07 p.m.: Jasinski works her way from station to station on the line inspecting and tasting sauces. She tells one cook: "This pomegranate sauce is way too thick. You need to thin it out."

The cheap, tinny, sauce-stained kitchen radio blares out a Jethro Tull tune: "In the shuffling madness of the locomotive breath . . ."

- 3:17 p.m.: Gruitch stands near Rioja's front door, which now has lettering on it that reads: "Jennifer Jasinski and Beth Gruitch, Proprietors." She walks over to the bar to talk to the bartenders about the desserts and other items that will be served at the bar. Bouquets of flowers are everywhere. Now there are 60 reservations.

- 4:30 p.m.: Gruitch, Olson and Jasinski meet with the front-of-the-house staff.

"We'll have a lot of friends and notables here tonight. Try to learn their names and what they look like," Gruitch says. "Please put the wine glasses in their proper racks. Let's start out with great habits."

- Twelve minutes to opening: "You want to sell the sexy items, the pine nuts, the veal, the truffle sauce," Jasinski says to the waiters. "It's pancetta, not just bacon. Make it sound sexy."

The staff raises glasses of champagne. "I'd like to make a toast to our first night of bringing in cash. Here's to much success. Let's put Rioja on the map," Gruitch says.

"And put the champagne glasses back on the bar," Olson reminds.

- 5:15 p.m.: Rioja is born when its first three paying customers walk in the front door: Eric Howell, a Denver-based chef, his father, Ernie Howell and Muff Mackey.

- 8 p.m.: Eighty people have been booked for the evening, including a table of 15 20-somethings.

- 10:30 p.m.: The staff finally gets to eat, enjoying what's called the "family" meal — on this night chicken nachos with guacamole, roasted veggies, sour cream, roasted peppers and rolls. Jasinski and Rodriguez sit on milk crates in a corner of the kitchen as they wolf down dinner.

- 11 p.m.: Cooks wipe down the equipment on the line and in the pastry area. They are wrapping food and sweeping. It's closing time for them, but up front the bar is still rocking. In the final accounting, Rioja has served about 100 people on its opening night, including food served at the bar. The evening's take: about \$4,300.

Gruitch comes in to get a bite to eat. "There are no easy openings anymore. There are people out there that are hoping that you'll fail," she says.

- 11:33 p.m.: Jasinski is still on the line, but she's wearing a sweatshirt and carrying paperwork. Before she says her final goodnights and heads home to her husband, she offers a final bit of advice:

"Don't forget to lock the walk-in."



A relaxed moment after the kitchen closes on opening night gives Jasinski, left, and Rodriguez a chance to laugh along with co-workers in the kitchen while

eating a "family meal." Unlike the intricate menu items the cooks prepare for guests, the late-night fare for staff consists of chicken nachos with guacamole, roasted veggies, sour cream, roasted peppers and rolls.

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