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WINNING WAYS

Former Santa Barbaran Jennifer Jasinski is the James Beard foundation best chef in the Southwest

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From Chargers' cook to taking charge: Former SB resident wins James Beard Award

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Before she had a medal draped over her neck as the James Beard Foundation award winner for Best Chef Southwest; before she opened the highly acclaimed Rioja restaurant in Denver; before she worked in kitchens across the country under the tutelage of the world-renowned Wolfgang Puck; and before she got her first real kitchen job in Manhattan's famous Rainbow Room, chef Jennifer Jasinski cooked for the faculty at Dos Pueblos High School.

Ms. Jasinski was honored for her accomplishments in a ceremony at the Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall in New York City on May 6, when the James Beard Foundation named her Best Chef Southwest at the James Beard Awards, a ceremony typically referred to as the Oscars of the culinary world. But her road to the main stage in New York started in her mother's home in Santa Barbara. It was here that Cheri Jasinski, who still lives in the city, first taught her daughter to cook, and where Jennifer fell in love with the abundance of ingredients available in the region.

"We have so much bounty (in Santa

Barbara)," Ms. Jasinski, 45, told the News-Press, referring in part to the produce. "I'm a very vegetable-minded person — and also the fish. I love sea urchins or mussels or shrimp — whatever it is we have."

It is a love still evident in the menu at Ms. Jasinski's Rioja restaurant, which she owns with business partner Beth Gruitch.

"There's a lot of different Santa Barbara wines that make it on our list," she added.

Ms. Jasinski, who will also be competing in Bravo's "Top Chef Masters" starting July 24, first trained in the kitchen at Dos Pueblos High School. She was a student



Homegrown: Jennifer Jasinski, of Rioja restaurant in Denver, was recently named Best Chef Southwest by the James Beard Foundation. She got her start at Dos Pueblos High School cooking for the Chargers' faculty two periods a day.

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KENT MILLER PHOTO

A lifelong obsession with food

■ **CHEF**

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at San Marcos but drove to DP every day as part of a regional occupational program (ROP) that had her cooking on-site for the Chargers' faculty two periods a day.

That started a lifelong obsession with food that was further cultivated at Santa Barbara City College, where she studied under John Dunn, whose name graces the gourmet dining room. It was a hard experience but one that she said prepared her better for the hard-edged world of restaurants better than anywhere else could have.

"At the city college, it was an awesome experience," Ms. Jasinski said. "I had a lot of good structure there. John Dunn was really strict. He really did a lot for that program. ...

"He probably gave me the best real-world experience of what it was going to be like. Nowadays, a lot of schools don't give the kids the real-world (experience), what it's going to be like in business. It's kind of a disservice."

A little more than a week after graduating from SBCC, and just before her 20th birthday, Ms. Jasinski was off to upstate New York and the Culinary Institute of America. She had little time to prepare herself for the harsher weather of the Northeast and stress of being away from home, so she had little choice but to immerse

herself completely in her work.

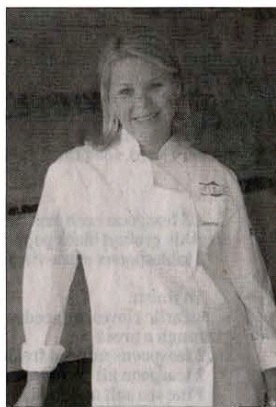
"I didn't realize that it rained anywhere else," Ms. Jasinski said. "I didn't realize most of the country has rain all the time and gray skies for three weeks straight. I was really depressed, but I took that energy and channeled it into my schooling so I didn't have to be outside. I also got odd jobs to keep myself busy."

Her hard work did not go unnoticed. One of the professors at CIA, vice principal Joseph Amendola, picked her out one day while she was waiting tables in a local restaurant and suggested she perform her externship at his associate's new restaurant in Manhattan rather than head home, possibly to The Biltmore in Santa Barbara.

That externship turned into a job at The Rainbow Room, and it introduced her to the world of high-end cuisine.

But New York could not keep the California girl away for long, and she returned to Southern California with the goal of working in one of Los Angeles' best restaurants. Her ambition was rewarded by Wolfgang Puck, who would eventually tag her as one of his protégés and led her around the country. Ms. Jasinski helped him open restaurants, design menus and generally gleaned as much knowledge as possible off of watching him do his job.

"He's a great influence. Besides that, he has a great work ethic, he



JENNIFER OLSON PHOTO

James Beard Award winner Jennifer Jasinski says her experience in the culinary program at Santa Barbara City College best prepared her for the real world of the industry.

cares about the people who work for him and he takes care of the guests," Ms. Jasinski said. "He's very service-oriented. Besides just the front of the kitchen, he takes care of the front of the house too. He's a whole restaurateur, not just a chef."

That experience proved useful when she met her future business partner, Ms. Gruitch, in 2000, when

Ms. Gruitch was then general manager at Panzano in Denver. The two formed a great working relationship, with Ms. Jasinski working as chef at Panzano, and decided to enter into business together. The result was Rioja, a Mediterranean-style restaurant that uses seasonal ingredients, which opened in 2004.

"As far as a person goes, she's super fun," Ms. Gruitch told the News-Press. "She's definitely serious about being a chef and serious about the kitchen and her food, but she really brings a lightness to the atmosphere that I think is awesome. There's joking and music and kind of people having fun. ...

"On the flip side of it, she's very direct and I think everybody knows exactly what she wants."

Ms. Jasinski's work ethic and talent have obviously paid off with her honor by the James Beard Foundation.

"It was real exciting after so many years of, basically, working my ass off!" she said with a chuckle.

It was a long, arduous trip that saw Ms. Jasinski work tirelessly through the ranks, often alongside some of the brightest stars of the culinary world. Now, as she emerges as an illuminating figure in her own right, there exists a glowing trail that winds its way back to where it all began — a simple, high school kitchen in Goleta.

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