

SANTÉ™

FOR RESTAURANT PROFESSIONALS

VOLUME 10.9
HOLIDAY 2006

10th
Anniversary
Issue!

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10 
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Denver's Peak Experience:
DINING AT

rioja

"It just made us *more determined* to make [the restaurant] happen," chime Jennifer Jasinski and Beth Gruitch, co-owners of Rioja restaurant in Denver, Colorado. They're both referring to the sudden disappearance of an investor the women had counted on to finance the opening of this first joint venture. Jasinski, who is also the restaurant's chef, recalls, "*It motivated us.* We had already gotten excited about the project and [the need for a new investor] *spurred us to get moving.*"



Rioja owners Jenifer Jasinski (left) and Beth Gruitch met on the job at another Denver restaurant.

John Imbergamo, their friend and a Denver-based restaurant consultant/publicist, was an important ally in the process. He advised the partners on how to legally protect themselves and whom to approach or avoid in the restaurant business. "We call him our *consigliere*," Jasinski quips.

Before creating Rioja, the female team had met and worked together transforming Panzano, an Italian restaurant located on the street corner of Denver's chic Hotel Monaco, from a simple eatery to a notable destination-dining venue. Jasinski—who was named 2004 Colorado Chef of the Year by the American Culinary Federation—holds a hotel and restaurant management degree from Santa Barbara City College and trained at the Culinary Institute of America. She launched her career at the Rainbow Room in New York City, followed by ten formative years opening and running several of Wolfgang Puck's restaurants. Jasinski eventually rose to the position of corporate chef within Puck's organization.

Gruitch, the general manager at Rioja, came to the restaurant with twenty years of restaurant experience, including management at Levy Restaurants in Chicago as well as a solid knowledge of wines and certification for the first-level Court of Master Sommeliers. The third partner in the initial venture was Jeff Hermanson, a managing partner for Larimer Square Associates and a thirty-year veteran of the restaurant business who sold the duo on moving to the city's historic block known as Larimer Square.

Hermanson, who makes an aggressive effort to bring regionally exclusive, chef-driven restaurants to the square, is dedicated to transforming the historic area into *the* Denver dining venue. Amid cafés, Champagne bars, and sushi bars that line this downtown pedestrian artery, a contingent of white-tablecloth restaurants have moved in, including Richard Sandoval's Tamayo, the Capital Grille, and Bistro Vendome, which Jasinski and Gruitch took over in May 2006.

Rioja
1431 Larimer Street
Denver, Colorado 80202
303-820-2282
www.riojadenver.com

Owners Jennifer Jasinski and Beth Gruitch
General Manager Beth Gruitch
Seats 150 (dining room and bar); 19 (outdoor patio)
Employees 7 management; 24 kitchen; 20 dining; 6 bar
Executive Chef Jennifer Jasinski
Sous Chef Dana Rodriguez
Pastry Chef Eric Dale
Food Style Mediterranean
Average Dinner Check \$49
Average Number of Dinner Covers 1,200/week
Beverage Manager Beth Gruitch
Wine List Focus Spain
Wines on List (number of selections) 125
Wines by the Glass 12
Wine Cellar 2,000 bottles
Average Bottle Price \$45
Cases Sold per Month 62
Bar Focus innovative cocktails using seasonal ingredients
Signature Drink Pomeginger
Average Drink Price \$6.40



For Starters

To finance Rioja, Jasinski sold her Malibu home to contribute her \$165,000 share of the \$860,000 initial budget; Larimer Square Associates agreed to pay up to \$500,000 for construction of the addition that houses a new kitchen. They also provided a test-kitchen in a vacant restaurant where Jasinski was able to develop her Mediterranean-inspired menu, though the chef admits that some ideas she literally dreamt up. After one particular dream, Jasinski recalls, "I awoke to the certainty of the house salad: baby arugula with slivered Medjool dates, gorgonzola cheese, and toasted almond vinaigrette."

Before the restaurant made its debut, there were the usual untimely delays: construction and inspection problems, worker no-shows, and over-budget issues. The partners had to



To stay within their start-up budget for Rioja, Jasinski and Gruitch did much of the restaurant's design themselves.



Rioja's seared diver scallops, crispy bacon, pumpkin-thyme cream sauce and potato gratin (\$18.50).

lower kitchen equipment costs from \$190,000 to \$138,000. Likewise, when the wine wall was projected at \$20,000, they eliminated a pair of custom doors, shrunk the size of the storage, and simplified the materials and design to reduce the cost to \$8,000. Jasinski and Gruitch did most of the interior design themselves, which includes a copper-topped bar, exhibition kitchen, and exposed pizza oven in a setting of soft earth tones.

Rioja's success seemed assured from the moment the first guests arrived on November 22, 2004. "Our opening-night take was \$4,300," Jasinski states, "and with the December holiday business, we blew away our numbers in the first month of operations." Critics raved, national magazines took notice, and three local publications named Rioja the top new restaurant for 2005.

From the start, the partner's pricing goal was a \$38 to \$42 per-person check average. In general, Jasinski tries for a 30 percent food cost, but she admits, "It varies from item to item. You have to look at the dish and say, 'What's the fair market value of this? Would I pay \$6 for this bowl of soup?'"

The chef notes other cost considerations: "We tried to keep the price point stable, but as vendors raised their prices, we had to cover delivery charges or minimum orders." As for procuring food, Jasinski explains, "We had created really good supplier relationships at Panzano and those we kept . . . but we are always looking for good sources." Rioja's purveyors include Growers Organic, which delivers local organic produce to the door six days a week, and four fish purveyors—Honolulu

Seafood, Norpac (also in Hawaii), Northeast Seafood, and Seattle Fish.

Dana Rodriquez, sous chef and new part-owner, is responsible for the ordering. Rodriquez had been part of the Panzano team for four years; at Rioja, she sources provisions, manages Rioja's 14-person kitchen staff, and works the line. Dishes typical of Rioja's culinary concept include Artichoke Tortelloni, stuffed with goat cheese and artichoke mousse and served with artichoke broth, truffle essence, and queso de mano cheese (\$15.50 entree/\$9.50 appetizer); Roasted Colorado Leg of Lamb, served with cheese polenta, bacon wrapped treviso, Roma tomatoes, and a lamb rosemary jus (\$19.50); and Muscovy Duck Breast, accompanied by delicata squash stuffed with wild mushroom risotto, rapini, and pomegranate glaze (\$26.00).

The kitchen also serves a popular Artisan Cheese plate (\$13.50), with selections guided by the cheesemonger at The Truffle, a Denver cheese shop. Another best seller is the Rioja Picnic platter (\$14.50), layered with Spanish chorizo, air-dried duck breast, bresaola, warm pine-nut-crust goat cheese, Italian mountain Gorgonzola, olives, truffle fennel salad, orange confit, and almonds. Shared by two or more people, it works as an appetizer at dinner, a lunch entree, or a snack at the bar.

Working on Wine

The global wine list at Rioja is the work of Gruitch. She offers mostly small boutique wines, about one-third of which are domestic. According to the manager, 15 to 20 percent of wine sales come from lunch, almost 30 percent from brunch, and the remaining from dinner sales, seven nights of the week. Twenty wines are offered by the glass (\$8.50 on average), and these selections are changed every other month. Gruitch looks for deals in the marketplace, especially on exceptional Spanish wines. Her markup depends on each bottle, but in general she applies an inverse relationship to cost and wine-list price—the more expensive the bottle cost, the less the markup.

To keep staff up to date about the wine selection, tastings are held regularly. "Our Friday tastings start 20 minutes



The Pomeginger, Rioja's signature cocktail, blends fresh ginger syrup with pomegranate.

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Co-owner and chef Jennifer Jasinski with her kitchen team, who do about 1,200 covers a week.

before shift," Gruitch comments. "We have classroom-style tastings on Mondays and Tuesdays when the restaurant is closed for lunch."

In addition, she is starting a staff wine education program, Basic Wine 101, focusing on specific regions and grapes that are indigenous to various locales. Purveyors who specialize in certain areas will teach more advanced classes. "We hope to move into categories, perhaps with pairings, and offer two-hour classes every three weeks," Gruitch adds. "We don't want the classes to become a burden on their time, but we want to make them interesting enough for the staff to want to be there."

At the bar, Rioja's signature drink is the Pomeginger (\$9) which blends pomegranate juice and vodka with house-made ginger syrup. Gruitch and Jasinski give bar staff a free hand to create. "Our bartenders are mixologists who want to have fun with cocktails," states Gruitch.

Supporting Staff

Overseeing the front of the house, Gruitch works with two assistant managers, Colleen Carr and Jeff Kingsbury. Carr contends that the staff at Rioja are close and supportive of each other. "Positive energy keeps everyone—from dishwasher to manager—feeling like family, and that's something I've never felt during 11 years of working in other well-regarded family-owned restaurants." When asked about her own development of management skills, Carr claims she has learned the hard way: "Experiences at other restaurants taught me how *not* to be a manager, and how to treat people. When Rioja first opened, I kept waiting for someone to freak out. It's damaging and counterproductive when there is a power problem . . . but this is a happy place to be."

Building staff collegiality is an important aspect of that "family" atmosphere. Management meets weekly, on Saturday

afternoons, and, as Gruitch explains, "We all try to grab a bite to eat just to talk about things." For staff, there are daily preshift meetings before lunch and dinner that begin in a deliberately relaxed manner. As Gruitch notes, "We usually spend 15 to 30 minutes just chatting. I try to praise the staff and focus on some issues of the day." After that, the chef talks about specials and introduces new dishes for the staff to eat. "The staff is very well informed because they try everything and I give a written test on the details of a new dish," she states. "I might ask them to describe all the ingredients in the gnocchi dish, or how many ounces of lamb are in the lamb burger, or what spices are used in the pork dish." At other times, questions may be related to a food allergy issue or the timing of a dish.

The management also emphasizes the correct pronunciation of foreign words, often using the instruction of their multilingual staff. "We have two people who speak French, and at least 15 to 20 who speak Spanish," Gruitch notes. Beyond articulation, there's a strong effort to teach the staff the origin of a dish. Rioja maintains a four-page booklet with extensive menu descriptions and the meanings of words. Along with the history of the original dish and how it is served, it describes the Rioja version of the dish.

Educating staff on these details embodies the uncompromising philosophy of Gruitch: "It doesn't matter if you're working in a diner or a five-star restaurant," she contends, "it's all about being proud of the product you put out." And to that end, she finishes, "I have no tolerance for shortcuts."

► Irina Lew is a food and wine writer, based in Long Island, New York, whose work appears in various trade and consumer publications.

