

cafe

Take Two

Rioja
1433 Larimer Street
303-820-2282
www.riojadenver.com
Hours: Dinner nightly, lunch Wednesday-Friday, brunch Saturday-Sunday

I'm sitting at **Rioja** on a Monday night. A full book Monday night — rare for the best restaurants in the best of times, bordering on miraculous for this day and age, this city.

I have one of the weird tables: a lonely deuce stuck between two four-tops, sitting, essentially, right in the maw of one of the arches that divide the main floor from the overflow side room. There are parties on either side, having what, for them, passes for fun. At one table, four men — leathery and wrinkled like old wallets, wearing tailored suits and watches that probably cost as much as I make in a month — are putting away bottles of wine like Paris vintners watching the Nazis roll down the Rue Saint-Jacques. At the other, two couples seated boy-girl/boy-girl are talking about Fruition and TAG and the Olive Garden — the last behind their hands, tittering and whispering like they're being naughty, like they're discussing heavy bondage or insider trading.

"I still go there, you know?"

"I go for the breadsticks."

"Oh, but this is obviously better..."

Solemn head-nodding all around.

To my right, the men discuss the menu and golf and boats. To my left, "*Olive Garden!*" and a sudden explosion of high, fluttering laughter like a riot of small birds escaping toward the ceiling. But I have my head down in my own bubble of private joy, a dopey smile hung crookedly on my face, smelling cardamom and curry, the comforting, savory blankness of a bean purée and the salty, sweet-sour tang of pork belly, perfectly seared, hot from the kitchen. I have bacon, and in my world, everything is just fine.

Two months ago, when the International Association of Culinary Professionals was in town, I'd tried to get a walk-in spot at **Rioja** and was told that the wait would be two hours. Maybe more like three. There was foodie royalty in the house, and he and his big party and all his hangers-on weren't going *anywhere*. A week ago, I'd stopped in for brunch — doughnuts and ham and melted cheese and olives. Even though the sangria was weak and the hot raspberry mascarpone inside that first doughnut burned the shit out of my tongue, everything else was brilliant. **Rioja** chef/owner Jen Jasinski was in the house during this ham-and-doughnuts breakfast, cooking first, bossing the line, then eating a family meal with her crew in the lull between services.



Jen Jasinski has reason to smile at **Rioja**.

I see Jasinski out a lot — at events and demos, in her kitchens (a few years after opening **Rioja**, she and partner Beth Gruitch also took on *Bistro Vendôme*), a minor titan in chef's whites with a button nose and a big, half-crazy smile so wide that when she lights it up, it looks like the top half of her head might fall right off. A couple of days before I was turned away at the door, I'd stood back a pace or two and watched her work a table at the Denver Art Museum — buttoned up tight in her jacket, doing take-away plates of ravioli for a few hundred LACP conventioners and talking with every single person who found her, tucked away in a corner, smiling and laughing and actually behaving like this kind of thing was *fun*. I went back twice myself. Had a friend pick me up a third plate — the ravioli were that good. And watching Jasinski work (standing off to the side, just out of sight, one step shy of peeking at her through a fern like some kind of creepy stalker), it occurred to me that maybe — *maybe* — I'd done her wrong a few years back.

I've done this job for close to seven years now and reviewed more than 400 restaurants in and around Denver. And believe it or not, I don't have a lot of regrets. I sleep just fine at night. But the review I wrote of **Rioja** back in May 2005 has always hung with me as one that was...incomplete. It was a not-entirely-rosy picture of a restaurant still struggling with its image and trying to get back off its heels after a massive opening, the stress of huge crowds and a first menu change. I'd waited six months before writing that review, and even though that was double the traditional three-month buffer, I've always suspected that it wasn't enough. Some restaurants take longer than others to grow into their spaces. Four years ago, **Rioja** was not quite ripe.

I can't tell you how many times I've been back to **Rioja** since then. Ten? Twenty? And with each meal (most good, some merely middling, all depending on the night, the crew, the season), I came closer to this point:

a new, full review of a restaurant with the same owners, the same staff, the same chef, the first I've done since starting this job. I knew it was probably time after stalking Jasinski at the DAM, watching her laugh, stuffing myself with ravioli. And now, sitting under the arches, sniffing my bacon, I know for sure.

Kurobuta pork belly, seared on the surface, rubbed with cardamom, properly rested so that it isn't wet with fat, and mounted atop a chunky

mound of curry-spiced garbanzo-bean purée, green like smashed peas, smooth as whipped potatoes. It's a singularly delicious plate — the best of a whole long stretch of them that kept mounting with each meal at **Rioja**. The doughnuts; a plate of house-made mozzarella wrapped in smoked prosciutto, topped with a roasted-tomato jam, served with a green-olive pistou; a tall pilsner glass of cold Fat Tire and a plate of scallops over a peanut-and-coconut risotto cake with Thai green curry — all of them had been ordered and eaten in an attempt at chasing down that moment, that rising point, at which **Rioja** is at its best. I've always suspected that every now and then, this room and this kitchen have the rare power to come together into something greater than their parts. Like an anthropologist, like a deep-jungle explorer, I've wanted to experience one of those moments for myself.

The bowl full of bacon is it. I live briefly in the moment, the laughter and boat talk falling mute on either side of me as I dig in with my fork and split the slab of pork belly in half.

Before the bacon, there'd been a too-busy bowl of candied lemon gnocchi piled with Dungeness crab, grape tomatoes, summer squash, fava beans, greens and an olive oil emulsion. The gnocchi themselves — tiny things, no bigger than the first joint of my pinkie — were wonderful: seared quickly in a hot pan and tasting of nothing more than the butter they'd been browned in and the clarified butter the crab had been poached in. But the rest of the dish was overkill.

I'd had Jasinski's trademark artichoke tortelloni — the plate for which she is justifiably famous, a perennial inclusion on every one of her menus. Handmade tortelloni, stuffed with a goat-cheese-and-artichoke

mousse, set adrift in a deeply savory, warm and comforting artichoke broth touched with white truffle and topped with a slice of queso de mano, peeled thin as a sheet of paper so that it melts over the pasta, into the broth. It's excellent, but it's *always* been excellent. Ditto for the **Rioja** picnic — a garde-manger master's exercise offering olives and fried balls of goat cheese and sliced meats (prosciutto, salami, speck) and fennel salad and orange slices and everything else good in the world, but more an example of artifice and design than of actual cooking. The flatbread breakfast burrito with shrimp and chorizo? Guilty-pleasure good, all hot and eggy and addictive in its way (I'll be back for another as soon as I can manage), but not really indicative of the galley's true intentions.

No, the bacon is it. The bacon is what I've been chasing, on and off, for more than four years.

And then it is gone and the waitress is clearing the plate. She asks about another drink (but of course...) as the tables on either side of me carry on with their evenings. Then my main arrives, ideally timed. And because I am a good boy — because I was sitting there in an attempt to clean up my karma, because the food gods love me and want me to be happy — I get something even *better* than the bacon: a too-classic fast return on my wishes.

Halibut is an ugly fish. Gray and greasy and heavy on the oily fish flavor. But this kitchen has made halibut beautiful — pure white, cooked in butter, seared gold on top and tasting like maybe two or three or four other pieces of fish have tasted in my life: light and chewy, absolutely fresh, moist and, in texture, like a cross between a lobster and a marshmallow. One perfect filet, laid atop a nest of shredded, smoked prosciutto fried like bacon (more bacon!), with quartered artichoke hearts, a touch of romesco, a dab of compound pine nut butter.

One composed plate, showing both excess and restraint, balance and creativity and an absolute sense of technical control.

I have had a lot of meals at **Rioja** since I wrote that first review. Each of them approached excellence but missed by a hair — some vital edge of brilliance lacking or falling away at the last moment. But this is the meal I've been longing to have for years. Two plates, both the best the kitchen has ever served me, stacked one after the other like a one-two punch. Sitting there in my bubble of happy, my own little world of bliss, I'm pleased to know that, finally, I'm going to be able to give **Rioja** the review it deserves.

To see more of **Rioja**, go to westword.com/sldeshow. Contact the author at jason.sheehan@westword.com.

Rioja	
Bacon	\$9.50
Picnic	\$16.50
Mozzarella	\$9.50
Gnocchi	\$22
Artichoke tortelloni	\$18.50
Halibut	\$26