

# HEMISPHERES

insight: **Denver** in the know

Worldly chef brings worldly tastes to Denver food scene

## Taste Sensation

**In November, chef Jennifer Jasinski** opened her own restaurant, Rioja, on Larimer Square, in the heart of downtown. The place is thriving, and this seems to be Jasinski's year. She was named best Western Regional Chef by The American Culinary Federation. In May, she prepared a meal—by invitation—at the James Beard House in New York, along with three other Denver chefs: Frank Bonanno of Mizuna and Luca D'Italia, Matt Selby of Vesta Dipping Grill, and Bryan Moscatello of AdegA.



"We were excited to get the word out that Denver's not a cow town," says Jasinski, who is affectionately referred to as Chef Jen.

Jasinski began cooking as a child

in California and graduated from the Culinary Institute of America at the age of 21. She then spent a decade working with Wolfgang Puck, cooking in his kitchens and helping him open new restaurants. Puck, whom she claims as her culinary role model, encouraged her to get some Continental experience at Ledoyan, the Michelin two-star restaurant in Paris. She refined her technique further at top restaurants in San Francisco and New York.

She moved to Denver in 2000 to simplify her life, taken with the city's beauty and proximity to the mountains, and because it wasn't overrun with excellent restaurants. "There was room to grow," she says. Plus, she found Denverites open and welcoming and their tastes more adventurous than she'd expected.

Before striking out on her own, she did a four-year stint

as executive chef at Panzano, a stylish Northern Italian restaurant in downtown Denver that won many accolades under her watch.

In her new home, guests are tempted with funky and imaginative Mediterranean cuisine. Rioja's décor is earth toned and casually hip, with an open kitchen and surprisingly affordable prices. To build her menu, Jasinski

combines fresh and slightly unusual ingredients such as morels, fava beans, and pea shoots. She prefers the goods and products of local artisans, purchasing goat cheese from Haystack Mountain, Colorado lamb, heirloom tomatoes, peaches and cantaloupes from the western slope.

"My style," says Chef Jen, "is pretty straightforward. Direct and clean."

Rioja menu favorites include a tasting appetizer of chorizo, air-dried duck breast, warm goat cheese, Italian Mountain gorgonzola, olives, truffle

fennel salad, and orange confit.

Homemade pasta and roast leg of lamb with spinach are popular entrées.

*by Juliet Wittman*

