She's the boss now.
The former dishwasher rises to head of the kitchen—and she even picked up a little French along the way.

By Kristen Browning-Blas
The Denver Post

Dana Rodriguez’s story is the classic American tale, via Mexico with a French twist.

She came to the U.S. got a job as a dishwasher at a hotel restaurant, rose through the ranks, and thanks to mentors and hard work, now runs the kitchen at Bistro Vendôme in Larimer Square.

These are the broad strokes of her life. But within the outlines of the last 20 years, the details add the drama and emotion.

From the elegant little bar in the Larimer Square restaurant, Rodriguez can sit for a minute, squint her eyes and fill in the splashes of color that earned her the “crazy” nickname “Loca.”

When she knocked on the kitchen door at Panzano in 1998, she just needed a job. This was not how she had planned her life. She grew up on the family farm in Chihuahua in northern Mexico. She went to Ciudad Juárez on the Texas border to study computer engineering. Her parents ran a grocery and a clothing store. She was married with three daughters.

But her husband left her.

So, at 22, with a baby and two toddlers, she came to Denver and stayed with relatives while looking for a job.

Dana hired me for one day, but then he said ‘You’re better than that, you can stay and cook,’” she recalls. ‘I say, I don’t know how to do pasta, but you teach me, I learn’

Davis, now the store director at Tony’s Market in Centennial, remembers her clearly.

“The dishwashers were mostly male. Hispanic. It was very rare you got female dishwashers. She spoke their language in more ways than one. She spoke Spanish and she understood the kitchen lingo. You could tell when we hired her she was a little different — she was paying attention to what was going on.”

Rodriguez speaks English with the hard “s” and the soft “ss” of a native Spanish speaker. She slips into her mother tongue when English fails her and emotion takes over: “I’m not good at talking, I’m good at cooking.”

When chef Jennifer Jasinski took over the Panzano kitchen, she immediately liked Rodriguez. “Not only was she this incredibly hard worker, she was willing to do whatever it took. She’s a natural in this business,” says Jasinski, now chef/owner of Rioja, Euclid Hall and Bistro Vendôme.

Jasinski pushed Rodriguez — hard.

“I saw a lot of potential in her, a lot of heart. When I see potential like that, I want them to be something great. I don’t want them to settle for a mediocre life,” says Jasinski.

So the executive chef began teaching her. How to make the Italian sauces and pastas that are Panzano’s specialty. Rodriguez worked her way through the menu and the military-style ranks of the kitchen and became a sous-chef.

Working in a restaurant kitchen involves more than knowing how to make the food. There’s a certain bravado, a machismo that emanates like heat waves from the cooking line. A girl has to be tough.

“When I was sous chef at Panzano, I cry every day,” says Rodriguez. “Jen, she teach me every single station and I say, ‘no, you’re pushing me too much.’ It was hard with the Latino guys, really hard. Even if you want to cry, you do that at home.”

She not only toiled at Panzano, she worked side jobs in other Denver kitchens. She ran the line at Tamayo under Sean Young.

“If you’re surrounded by very talented people and you’re smart enough to learn the necessary skills, whether it’s Mexican, steakhouse or French food. She knows a lot about cooking, I think Jen taught her very well,” said Young, now co-owner and executive chef at El Diablo.

When Jasinski and general manager Beth Gruenitz left Panzano to open Rioja, they invited Rodriguez to become a partner. She was Jasinski’s second-in-command in that kitchen for six years.

In 2011, when the chef de cuisine position opened up at Bistro Vendôme, Rodriguez was ready.

“I say, ‘Can I go over there?’ They say, ‘You’re really good. I tell them I can learn, I can learn. I’m ready for the next challenge. At Rioja, I was really comfortable. The first day here [at the bistro], I was shaking,” says Rodriguez.

She summoned all she had learned — managing masochistic line cooks, mastering the recipes, setting a service-first example for the servers — to motivate the Bistro Vendôme staff.

“Her’s got such strong leadership skills, and they really respect her. It’s a tough group over there,” says Gruenitz.

In addition to studying an entire cuisine, Rodriguez worked with the front-of-house people on being more welcoming at the

From Mexico, a success story extraordinaire

Dana Rodriguez, now executive chef of Bistro Vendôme in Larimer Square, has come a long, long way from her family’s farm in Chihuahua, Mexico, Cyrus McGregor, Th Denver Post

Dana Rodriguez will prepare a three-course menu (52g) for Bastille Day on July 14 (54g with wine pairings).

First course: Seared pork belly with cherry caramel and a fresh cherry tapenade

Second course: Pan-seared turbot with black mushroom puree, roasted purple potatoes and olive beurre

Third course: cherry chocolate soufflé

362 Larimer St., 303-825-5323, bistrovendome.com. Hours: 5-11 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 5-9 p.m. Sunday.