



COOL SPICE:
Blender gazpacho
that really works »30

Food

DANA

◀ FROM 10

EATS IN THE SPRINGS Bring your appetite to these five new dining spots »80

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.

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

"Ben Davis 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 "ee" 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.



From Mexico, a success story extraordinaire

"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 protégé how to make the Italian pastas and sauces 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 gigs in other Denver kitchens. She ran the line at *Tamayo* under Sean Yontz.

"If you're surrounded by very talented people and you're smart enough to learn

you're going to pick up 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 Yontz, now co-owner and executive chef at *El Diablo*.

When Jasinski and general manager Beth Gruitch 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? Really?' I tell them I can learn, I am 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 macho line cooks, mastering the recipes, setting a service-first example for the servers — to motivate the *Bistro Vendôme* staff.

"She's got such strong leadership skills, and they really respect her. It's a tough group over there," says Gruitch.

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

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 McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

door. "I tell them, 'Customers are here to pay the check — to pay your rent — remember that,'" she says.

Some of those customers might have been a bit skeptical of her qualifications. "One customer said, 'I hope you don't put that spicy food on this menu.' I say, 'Thank you, enjoy your French fries.'"

She's not going to put jalapeños in the *beurre blanc*, but she did create a namesake cocktail for herself, the *Dame Folle*, a blend of Meyer lemon juice, smoked paprika, *St. Germain* (elderflower liqueur) and tequila.

Her three daughters are in high school now, and her parents live in town, too. She works 12-hour days at the restaurant, but they still eat together as a family.

"Back home, to eat, we kill a chicken and we grind the corn for tortillas," says Rodriguez. "When Daddy comes in, he orders medium-well lamb. He's a Mexican cowboy."

The menu at *Bistro Vendôme* is full of French words that Rodriguez struggles to pronounce, but that doesn't mean she doesn't know how to make the simple dishes — steak frites, poulet rôti, soupe à l'oignon.

"French food is already done," says Rodriguez. "It's really simple, you stick with that, plus a little twist with what's in season. White wine, butter, herbs, how can you go wrong?"

The team plans a visit to France next year, and, possibly, a Mexican restaurant.

"Jen asked me 'What is your dream, what are your goals?'"

"I say, 'This is America. I believe in this country. If you work hard, you can do whatever you want.'"

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Bistro Vendôme

Chef Dana Rodriguez will prepare a three-course menu (\$42) for Bastille Day on Saturday (\$54 with wine pairings).

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

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

Third course: cherry chocolate soufflé

1420 Larimer St., 303-825-3232, bistrovendome.com. Hours: 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 5-9 p.m. Sunday.