Top Toque

Jennifer Jasinski, the mastermind behind Rioja, Bistro Vendôme, and the city’s hottest new foodie hangout — Euclid Hall — is our 2010 Chef of the Year.

Teri Rippeto uses mixed beets, baby turnips, and arugula from three area farms in Potager’s amazing autumn salad.

100 Things to Taste
2010 Chef of the Year

Jennifer Jasinski
Chef-Owner Rioja, Bistro Vendome, and Enedic Hall Bar & Kitchen

It's our favorite time of year for one reason: We get to honor Denver's most influential culinary artisans of 2010. In the year since we founded this award program, the Denver dining scene has continued to explode—in numbers, sophistication, and national acclaim. This year, Denver Magazine's 2009 Chef of the Year, Friction's Alex Seidel was named a Food & Wine Best New Chef, one of the highest honors in the industry. While Seidel and others continue to make an unquantifiable impact on this city, we dubbed this feature Chef "of the Year," for a reason. Yes, we are looking for the artisans who inspire their peers and deliver consistently impressive food every time we dine. That's a must. But, we also want something else—chefs, mixologists, and, this year, bakers and street cart operators, who have done something extraordinary for Denver dining since this time last year. Identifying these tastemakers is an arduous job and not one that we take lightly. We started with an industry-only call for nominations. After all, who knows this business better than the chefs, farmers, sommeliers, bakers, and restaurant owners who are in it? We then exhaustively researched every nominee and are countless anonymous meals to narrow it down to the finalists featured here. (We know, we know, rough life.) The results of this months-long process? Turn the page to find out.

PRODUCED BY Stacey Brugeman • PHOTOGRAPHY BY Jeff Nelson
Chef of the Year

Jennifer Jasinski
Chef-Owner Rioja, Bistro Vendôme, and Euclid Hall Bar & Kitchen
riojadenver.com, bistrovendome.com, euclidhall.com

ROOTS: Santa Barbara, California

CLASSROOMS: Santa Barbara City College, The Culinary Institute of America

KITCHENS: Rainbow Room in New York, New York; Hotel Bel-Air, Spago, Eureka, Postrio, and Granita Restaurant in California; Spago in Las Vegas and Chicago; Ledovin in Paris; Panzano, Rioja, Bistro Vendôme, and Euclid Hall Bar & Kitchen in Denver

WHY SHE'S OUR WINNER: Jennifer Jasinski moved to Denver in 2000 following 11 years working with Chef Wolfgang Puck. She'd spent time at seven restaurants and in six food towns under his watch but "wanted to move somewhere where nobody knew me to see if I was good enough to be on my own," she says. A decade later, Jasinski has given Denver not one, but three of its most-loved restaurants. Since March, the 42-year-old (along with sous chef Jorel Pierce) has been testing Coco's dogs, Her of the woods poutine, blood sausage, deconstructed Philly cheesesteak, and other "favorites from the best tavern menus around the world" for the new Euclid Hall. While many think the menu mirrors food trends coming out of New York and Chicago in recent years, Jasinski's inspiration for the concept dates back to 1990 when she worked at Eureka, a Puck restaurant that employed a sausage master from Germany and was a nod to the celebrity chef's Austrian roots. "This is my boy restaurant," Jasinski says of Euclid Hall. "Rioja and Bistro are my girls. We love Jasinski for her obsessive commitment to the best possible ingredients and for bringing that ongoing quest to such an approachable, late-night, chef-friendly "bevy" — all while making sure her "girls" continue to produce at the consistent, high level we've come to expect.

Jeff Osaka

ROOTS: Los Angeles, California
CLASSROOMS: Diablo Valley College
KITCHENS: DC3, Tarpy's Roadhouse, One Market, Paris, Pitot Bistro, Joe's Restaurant, Chico, and Melissa in California; Chininos in Las Vegas; Restaurant Terrior and Kosha Wine Bar in Jackson, Wyoming; Twelve Restaurant in Denver

WHY WE LOVE HIM: Jeff Osaka took a chance on Denver (and on the Balcony neighborhood) when he moved here from L.A. to open Twelve Restaurant in 2008. Since this time last year, the Colorado newbie has gone from relative obscurity to being ardently respected by his peers. When we sent this year's call for nominations, Osaka was the single most nominated chef. He's a quiet about the kudos, however, as he is in his kitchen, "I'm still a bit of an outsider," Osaka says. And while he is working to change that by teaming up with renowned local chefs Alex Seidel, Scott Parker, and Justin Brunson for a quarterly dinner series, it might be precisely this introverted tendency that generates perfection. "I've only taken one day off since we opened. I like to touch every plate," the chef says. We continue to love what every Denver chef seems to have caught on to: Osaka's understated but impeccably executed food.

Tyler Ward

ROOTS: Manhattan, Kansas; Evergreen, Colorado
KITCHENS: Q's and Jan Fish House in Boulder, Windows on the Water in Morro Bay, California; El Rancho in Evergreen; Cliff Young's, Zeinth, Napa Café, Mel's Restaurant and Bar, Fourth Story Restaurant & Bar, and Elway's in Denver

WHY WE LOVE HIM: Tyler Ward grew up in Evergreen and has been cooking in the area for most of his adult life. This year, however, Denver has seen a new side of him. Since last fall, Ward has attended a Pork 101 seminar in Napa and an intensive, three-day beef course at Texas A&M University. "I always need to keep refreshed. I don't know everything about the cow," the chef says. A member of the group of chefs known as Five, Ward's done some 25 dinners, charity balls, and cook-offs this year. For most chefs, the travel schedule that comes with tenure like Ward's is a curse, but for him, it seems to be a blessing. While he has certainly shaken up an otherwise scripted steakhouse menu with dishes such as enchilada, it's at these out-of-town events where Denver gets to see an amazingly creative, artistic, inspired Ward. We love him for continuing to seek new lessons after so many years and for truly working for perfection in anything he touches.
Jeff Osaka

Why he’s quiet in the kitchen:
“I’ve always worked for chefs who were yellers and screamers, and I told myself in the beginning I’m never going to become like that. It’s unproductive.” Contender to join Osaka’s quarterly group as a guest chef at an upcoming dinner: Lon Symensma from ChoLon. Best bargain at Twelve: Eat dinner at the bar and get wine by the glass for half-off. The latest on his wish to open an authentic, true-to-his-roots izakaya: It’s still in the works. He’s looking at spaces in the Ballpark neighborhood and Highland.

Jennifer Jasinski

Her GPA at the Culinary Institute of America: 4.0. Why imported is as important as local: “I buy an ingredient because it tastes the best, not because it’s a ‘fad.’ Case in point: Tasmanian salmon ($17 a pound). Why the chef is not afraid of being called a restaurateur now that she has three spots: “I am a restaurateur. I don’t see what’s wrong with that. I’m always going to cook, though. I get artsy when I don’t.” Her management philosophy: “Good energy is contagious.” Love of her life: The Squeaky Bean chef Max MacKissock and their Labrador puppies. What’s next: A market that has ingredients from her restaurants — homemade pastas, stocks, sausages — for people who want to cook them at home.

Tyler Wiard

Denver chef who once worked under Wiard: Frank Bonanno. Important lesson from Boulder restaurateur Dave Query: “We’re not building bombs; we’re not saving lives. Take what you do seriously, but don’t take yourself seriously.”

Biggest risk he’s ever taken: Coming to Elway’s. Has it paid off? “Absolutely!” The next Elways: In the mountains, fall of 2011. Number of times he’s cooked at the James Beard House: Five. Chef he most respects: Nancy Oakes of Boulevard Restaurant in San Francisco. Why his thirst for knowledge is insatiable: “They say the male human being thinks about sex every three seconds. Well, food and sex are really close for me.”