

*“Kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose
To drive the shadows back”*

—Philip Larkin

Backyard Blaze: The Outdoor-Fireplace Lifestyle

By Lisa Wogan

Introduction

Even when a fire pit has more concrete than the Guggenheim, an open flame brings out the guitar-playing, rounds-singing camper in all of us. That’s because fire is not so much a thing, as an event—a self-perpetuating chemical reaction of oxygen and fuel that generates light and heat. It’s showy, unpredictable, and more than a little bit dangerous; so, like mosquitoes, we are drawn to it. A smoky, crackly blaze makes us giddy. We poke at a fire. We melt things in it. We stare at it like zombies.

As campfires in the wild outdoors and bonfires on beaches are being regulated into oblivion, some among us have fashioned homemade fire pits in our gardens or installed chimeneas on our patios. *Backyard Blaze* celebrates these little outposts of light and heat in the urban landscape. The backyard fire offers a break from our ordered, plugged-in existence. It’s where we resurrect childish kicks and spawn funky new traditions.

In *Backyard Blaze*, we define the fire-centric lifestyle and set out its parameters and origins—recognizing that anyone who boils coffee over an open flame in suburbia defies categorization. We look at the range of setups for backyard fires, such as rings, pits, and kettles, and provide the essential how-to’s of building and starting fires.

Because the unique properties of fire are central to its hold on us, we furnish a primer on chemistry, debunking certain oldfangled notions. A pocket history provides a nerdy excuse for drinking beer outside in January.

Although vegging out *is* the quintessential fireside activity, we recognize that whittling, drinking, storytelling, singing, and other customs deserve our attention. Finally, we stake new territory in the discussion of cooking over open flame. Today, too many

backyards are in thrall to giant, tricked-out gas grills. We take care of that with a strictly low-tech and individualistic culinary approach.

With tiny backyard bonfires, civilized humans throw off their modern trappings and step into something primordial and rich—without leaving the yard. It's worth consideration and even praise. After all, fire is what separates the ape from the hominid, the raw from the cooked, and my boring neighbors from me.