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First Fire

When the temperature dips and nights turn chilly, few family activities are cozier and more heartwarming than sitting around a blazing fire.

BY **LORI NUDO** PHOTOS **ANDY LYONS**



Before the Web or TV, or even the novel innovation of four walls and a roof, the family fire was everything—a vital source of light and heat, the place where we prepared our food, and where we gathered at the end of the day to share our experiences, tell our stories, and grow closer together.

We're a long way from that dim spark of light in the caves, but fire still holds a special place in our hearts. We don't need it to survive, but a home seems so cold without it. Is it any wonder, then, the joy we get on that first crisp fall night when we open the flue, strike a match, and watch in silent satisfaction as those orange flames flicker to life?

Turn the first fire of the season into a family event, a few hours at the

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end of the day to do just what our ancestors did: sit around the fire, share food and stories, and enjoy the warmth that comes not just from the flames but from being surrounded by loved ones.

Most new houses have fireplaces equipped with gas jets, and if you want minimum effort you can simply ignite the jet and throw on an artificial log. But there's something

profoundly satisfying about the flames and warmth of a fire you've built yourself. If your fireplace is safe for burning wood, grab a pair of fireproof work gloves, an armload of stovelengths, and a box of matches.

Have a Fireside Chat

Telling stories around a fire is just about the oldest form of family bonding and entertainment there is. If you have some favorite family stories, there's no better time to tell them. Or make a game of it: Throw out a provocative opening sentence or question—"The most beautiful place I've ever seen was..." or "If I were to write an advertisement about myself, it would say..."—and see what happens. If you're feeling especially creative, start a round-robin story. One of you begins the story with a sentence or two ("It was

a dark and stormy night. Suddenly a shot rang out!") and let each person pick up the thread of the tale in turn, weaving it around the room until you get to an ending that's nearly always surprising—or hilarious.

Share Food and Fun

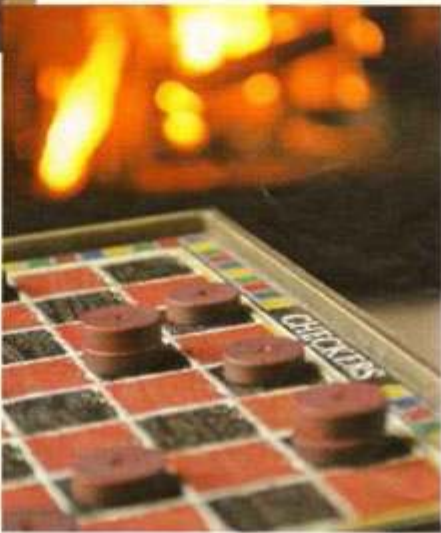
HEAT SOME TREATS Before ovens and even pot-bellied stoves, the family hearth was Food Central. You can always bring in snacks from the kitchen, of course, but for fun make a few goodies over the open flame. Enjoy your s'mores indoors: Marshmallows are just as tasty cooked over a hearth as they are over a campfire—just be sure to use long-handled roasting forks, available in most sporting goods



Treats such as marshmallows and popcorn are just as tasty cooked over a hearth as they are over a campfire.

stores or from online vendors such as pieiron.com or firepies.com.

POP IT UP Popcorn is easy and fun to make on most any fire. If that Jiffy-Pop handle is a little too short for comfort, though, you can still find old-fashioned long-handled popcorn baskets at antiques stores and flea markets. Newer models, such as Whirley Pop's Open Fire Popper, feature a 2-foot-long extensible handle that makes it simple and safe to whip up a piping-hot bucket of popcorn by hand: Just pour in the kernels, add a dash of oil, and take turns shaking over the fire until you hear the telltale popping. \$27 from popcornpopper.com or call 800/270-2705.



START A GOOD FIRE

From Boy Scouts to barbecue-grill veterans, everyone has a different opinion about the exact way to build the perfect fire. For our purposes, you just need a blaze that will set the wood alight without sending sparks onto the rug. Put your gloves on and get cracking:

Get the flue Look for the handle near the top of the fireplace—that's the lever that controls the damper inside your chimney flue. Move it to the open position; afterward, you may need to light up some wadded newspaper in the fireplace first to help the chimney draw.

Lay the foundation

Crumple some newspaper and place it in the center of the fireplace grate. Put kindling—four or five small pieces of wood—on top of the paper. Lay two large, split pieces of firewood on either side of the kindling. Light the paper.

Build it up As the kindling catches, make sure the flue is drawing smoke outside (if it's not, open your damper a little wider). Place a split log across the kindling so that it's supported by the larger logs on either side. Put the screen back over the fireplace and enjoy.

A NEW LOOK
TO AN OLD
FAVORITE.



living **FIRST FIRE**



KINDLE WARM MEMORIES

Instead of—or in addition to—story games, keep some scrapbooks by the hearth. Each child could make her own, or you could all work together on one that's just for fireside viewing. Make it themed around things you do together as a family—cooking, camping, whatever you enjoy. Spend your evening reminiscing about your adventures—or just gaze into the fire and make plans for the future.

Add Some Atmosphere

THROW ON A LITTLE COLOR Once you've finished eating, there are some safe ways to play with fire. At home improvement and fireplace stores you'll find treated wood products marketed under a variety of names—glow sticks, color flame crystals, fire-light pinecones. These nontoxic

products add a rainbow of colors to any fire. Different kinds of firewood may yield different colors too. For example, dried driftwood adds blue or purple flames to a fire. Throw them on the fire (grown-ups only, please) and enjoy the show.

ENHANCE THE AROMA

As barbecue lovers know, certain fragrant woods lend delicious flavor to food. When added to a fire, woods like apple, maple, and cherry can give your home a delectable aroma. Call local orchards to find out when they prune their fruit trees—if you're lucky, they may give away the wood to anyone willing to haul it. For perfectly aged aromatic wood, Minnesota-based Paul's Fireplace Wood ships an assortment of fragrant woods anywhere in the world. 800/347-3966 or firewood.com. ☺