

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART(H) IS

BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

Think the entertainment center / theater has become the heart of a modern home? Sure, it's an exciting locus of focus, but the hearth still holds that distinction (in Latin, *focus* originally meant hearth and, interestingly, the French word *foyer* means fireplace). From the earliest times, humans have associated home with a place that sheltered life-giving warmth. Once just an open fire around which cave-life revolved, today's heating options provide not only warmth, but also elegance and personal expression. "Fire Art" can be created with a traditional or masonry fireplace, a wood burning or pellet stove—even on a radiant heat panel. While central heating can be convenient, nothing compares to the charm and ambiance provided by the crackle of burning wood and the flicker of dancing flames.

The earliest fireplaces were made of stones, had a hole in the roof to allow smoke to vent skyward, and spewed dirt and ash. In the Middle Ages, the banquet hall housed the fire, which was laid on the floor in the center of the room. Smoke from blazing logs swirled upward, escaping through that hole in the ceiling. The evolution of the modern fireplace dates from the Renaissance, when the fire was moved close to the wall, was framed with masonry jambs to protect it from drafts, and sported a mantel. A projecting hood of stone or brick carried smoke away. In the Victorian era, stonemasons, blacksmiths, artisans, and craftsmen created hearths of stone, wrought iron, wood, and other materials.

During his many evening socials, Benjamin Franklin noticed that much heat was lost through adjoining walls, so he built a freestanding firebox for the center of the room. This pot-bellied "Franklin Stove" was made of cast-iron, which stored heat that radiated even when the fire died down. Smoke vented from the bottom, leaving no way to draw in fresh combustion air. Fellow Philadelphian, David Rittenhouse, invented the stovepipe, directing the smoke up and out a chimney.

Mark Twain didn't think much of the American woodstove, calling it "a terror that requires more attention than a baby...and when your bill comes you think you have been supporting a volcano." Of course, today's woodstoves are much better behaved, burning efficiently and leaving almost no mess to clean up. Direct ventilation systems utilize a sealed combustion chamber to preserve indoor air quality and prevent problems created by negative air pressure.





The role of the hearth in the American home has been evolving for eight decades: in 1927, Heatilator invented the manufactured fireplace. When the baby boom began in 1946, they launched a factory-built fireplace system that became the standard in post-war suburban building. Another industry innovation allowed “zero-clearance installation”; combustion materials were constructed right up to the firebox. Today’s homeowners are increasingly demanding a “clean-face” appearance, and new techniques allow even finishing materials to be applied up to the edge of the firebox opening so there is no visible black steel.

Mentioning that zero clearance gas fireplaces are currently in vogue, Missoula’s Grizzly Fireplace owner, John Rice, points to his “Kuma Sequoia,” a giant gas stove named after the largest tree on the planet. Like most of the newer models, it has an efficient tunnel design with a catalytic combustion burn system and, at 2.2 grams / hour average emissions, is also one of the cleanest stoves on the planet. Surrounded with stone, it is built flush to the wall; finish choices are pewter, black, nickel or gold plate.

Rice also sells pellet stoves, which offer clean, efficient, economical heat. Operation and loading are quick and easy, affording up to 55 hours of continuous warmth. Many models come with wall thermostats and “fast-fire” igniters. Bozeman’s Shadow Hearth and Home doesn’t carry them—

owner Pat Mowen calls them “power dependent, noisy industrial machines.” Nevertheless, they have been popular at certain times. “A couple years ago, when oil prices rose I couldn’t keep pellet stoves in stock,” says Rice. “Now I’ve got a couple sitting around and you can’t sell them; pellet prices have risen from about \$50 per ton to \$185 / ton. Things sell in cycles.”


Heatilator’s Kathy Repp agrees: “The market is shifting from wood burning to gas, mostly for convenience,” she said recently. Environmental emissions laws are also influencing the shift to gas. Several smoggy states (including Montana) have begun to ban traditional wood burning fireplaces.

Gas fireplaces add ambiance as well as warmth, usually at the touch of a button. Most now have fully sealed combustion chambers with no pollution spillage. Designs offer everything from a traditional kiva fireplace (Heat & Glo’s “Bravo”) to their “Cyclone™,” which features a mesmerizing, spinning tower of fire encased in a free-standing glass cylinder, offering a 360-degree view of the fire.

According to Ron Pihl, President of WarmStone Fireplaces and Designs in Livingston, traditional fireplaces may offer ambiance, but afford little in the way of meaningful heat output. “Although the sheer beauty of the flames is seductive, most conventional fireplaces are ineffective when

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Tripolye culture. The “peasant” oven was used at least 4,000 years ago in Rumania, Poland, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and elsewhere, not only for cooking and heating, but for sleeping. “The architectural quality of some later ovens—massive affairs with one or more ovens for baking, stairs leading to a sleeping platform, cooking areas, spark hoods, candle niches, drying could be outstanding,” he writes, noting that some were beautifully decorated with tiles, while others had elaborate designs painted on them. When the mini-ice age began in the late 1500s, stoves once again became the center of the home.

Pihl uses soapstone exclusively from Finland for his masonry heaters. “It’s soft enough to carve, yet it’s nature’s heaviest, densest stone.” Options, which include mantelpieces, benches, bakeovens, and decorative serpentine or roughface stone make it easy to customize any of the basic models. “We have an intense relationship with our customers,” relates Pihl, who also carries Max Blank stoves from Germany. “Many people revert to the habits they had with other wood stoves—with a Tulikivi you want to keep it open and not damper the fire down; it can be non-intuitive.”

Whether you choose a Tulikivi soapstone work of art, an updated wood, pellet or gas stove, a radiant heating system, or a centralized forced air unit, heating capacity corresponds to fireplace / unit size. Choosing the right model depends on the size of the space you want to heat, how your house is insulated and laid out, as well as average seasonal temperatures in your region of the country.

For years, modern Americans have enclosed fire in a furnace lodged in a basement or closet, where it runs automatically,



perhaps attended to yearly by a plumber. Alternatively, we've obtained fire from electricity sent along wires from a monster "hearth" at a utility plant. In this nuclear age, maybe it's time to regain some control over an element central to our lives—to restore some of the attentiveness and respect for fire that our ancestors knew. It might even divert family and friends from the distraction of a multi-media room and foster a return to the lost art of conversation.

3



~ Cynthia Logan is a freelance writer whose work has been featured in regional, national and international publications. She is the Managing Editor of The BoZone Arts & Entertainment magazine, and is currently working on her first non-fiction book. Originally from Santa Barbara, California (where she started a newspaper in the sixth grade), she now lives in Bozeman with her son, Ryan.

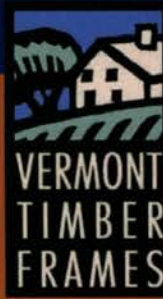
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