



**Wittus Phoenix/Firebird
Grill Rises from The Ashes
Danish Design with a Flare**

An interview with Niels and Alyce Wittus,
owners of Wittus: Fire by Design

Story by Sarah Fader

Design + Decor: Your company focuses on bringing premier European-designed hearth products to the U.S. Please tell us why. And how do European and American products differ?

Alyce: When we started in 1978, Niels, born in Denmark, felt there was a market for European-style products outside the U.S. We wanted to bring “hygge”—the Danish art of comfortable living and happiness—to this country. Hygge (pronounced “HUE-gah”) is a word you grow up with when you live primarily in Denmark. You can have a hygge evening, playing cards and drinking tea by the fire. You can have that nice older man or woman gazing out over the ocean—they can also be hygge. So it means a lot of different things, but every Dane knows what hygge means. For us it usually means candles—fire like outdoor fire in a Phoenix/Firebird grill. But it can also be wintertime inside, and having a hygge time. It’s not just coziness; it’s warmth and fun.

In general, U.S. products look old-fashioned or traditional, and a lot of people like that. They’ll have a squirrel or a reindeer on the side, like the old Franklin stoves back in the 1800s. There’s nothing wrong with our American stoves, but that’s not the design our clients want. Our clients want something sleek, contemporary and modern-looking. Today, I’d say that 90% of manufacturers in Europe, not just Denmark, hire designers to develop new products for them because they have an eye for design, and that makes a difference.

Design + Decor: How does the Phoenix/Firebird grill function as both a grill and a fireplace, and how does the design play into this?

Alyce: The Phoenix/Firebird grill is easy to use, and the shape of the grill enables any smoke to be diverted away from the chef. The units are conical in shape, so the whole metal part gets hot, and as it does, smoke wants to go up there. It’s warm air convection, and it’s nice when you’re standing there. You’re not breathing in the barbe- cue smoke and flavor, so it’s convenient that way. Most people have problems barbecuing and have to move around because the smoke is always getting in their face. One of the many advantages of using the Phoenix/Firebird grill is that you get less smoke in your lungs when you’re cooking.



These grills are easy to move; you can put them anywhere. Two people can lay them down and carry them into the yard, garden, back deck or wherever. That makes them really functional. This wasn't our design; this was a design from Bent Falk, a famous Danish architect whom we talk about on our website. He's done quite a few products for us. We make them at Focal Metals in Bethel, CT.

Design + Decor: Your Foculus grill acts as both a garden sculpture and a grill. What are the benefits of this piece when utilizing it as a grill?

Alyce: It's great for the whole family. Everyone can participate or watch as the Foculus is being used. This grill is an entirely handmade ceramic bowl where the fire is inside, and there is a stainlesssteel rim. It's made by the Italian company La Castellamonte, which has been making ceramic stoves for us for many, many years. The company's craftsmanship in ceramic is amazing, and each grill is unique. There's a different pattern to each grill, so you have your own—no two are alike. They're a bit pricey, but they're handmade, beautiful and functional.

Design + Decor: Where are you planning your next trip for sourcing European products?

We're probably heading to Verona, Italy, in 2024. Every two years, the city hosts the world's largest fireplace and stove trade show. We go there to meet all our suppliers and look for new products. It's a very innovative show; Americans are beginning to go to it because it has such a high design value. We're seeing more and more contemporary products coming to the U.S., not only in furniture but also in stove design. People ask, "What do you guys do?" We sort of jokingly say, "We sell warm furniture," which is true. People don't come to us only for heat. They come because they like the style; they want something to fit their mid-century house or modern kitchen.





Design + Decor: What three elements do you look for when choosing products to carry in your showroom?

Alyce: First, we look for great design with quality craftsmanship. We spend time with the company and look at their products. Most companies are certified by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), a standard of quality in manufacturing, which gives them a certain prestige and know-how. We just found a new product in Norway, and we're having it shipped over to take a look at it. We want to see how it's built, how easily it comes together, how it functions and so on, so it usually takes about a year or more. Once we like a product and go through the whole process of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) testing, it's a long process.

Second, we look for state-of-the-art technology and manufacturing. This means innovation.

We've had good luck finding interesting stoves that have a double-burner firebox. We have stoves that create electricity through cold water, a hot firebox type of system. The technology is very important because the EPA emission smoke standards are so demanding today. You must have the latest technology and innovation to meet those standards, so that's something we have to look at and meet.

Finally, we look for products that are environmentally sound. It depends on where you're coming from, but we say that burning wood is a good thing. It's renewable energy. It's the heat from the sun that gets stored up as you burn it. Trees give off carbon dioxide as they rot in the ground; we know that just by the process of rotting away. Of course, there's always a little bit of extra pollution when you're burning something. Overall, compared to fossil fuels, wood burning is still a good choice. Twenty-five to 30 years ago, we had stoves that put out 50 grams of particulates. Now, with the EPA's standards, we're down under one gram; it's amazing.

Resource:

Wittus: Fire by Design
Niels and Alyce Wittus, Owners
40 Westchester Avenue, P.O. Box 120
Pound Ridge, NY 10576
914.764.5679
wittus.com

www.dd-mag.com