

# Spreading the magic of fire and ‘hygge’

By JOYCE CORRIGAN

Barbecue love goes way back. Archeologists have dug up 30,000-year-old “earth ovens” in Europe, which were basically hollowed-out soil, carefully lined with stones and filled with hot coals. The better to slow roast and tenderize notoriously tough-to-chew bison (yes, the same humongous-horned creature seen cavorting in cave paintings).

Besides cooking, of course, the conquest and control of fire — keeping your shelter warm and lit at night — were foundations of civilization. When every waking moment was about survival, once you figured out how to manage fire, you could survive in comfort and style.

“Fire is life — and has been for thousands of years!” exclaimed Niels Wittus, who, with his wife, Alyce, founded the Wittus: Fire by Design company in Pound Ridge in 1978. For almost half a century, it has been a mecca for imported, premier European stoves, fireplaces, accessories and grills.

“Feeling the heat from a well-designed, exceptionally efficient fireplace or stove is functional, fashionable and ecologically responsible,” said Mr. Wittus. “And anytime we have a situation — bad storms, power outages — it helps us to get closer to wanting fire.”

What else can we call our two years of COVID-19 except “a situation”? So, it’s no surprise that with the social-distance, safer-outdoors protocols, the pandemic has, according to Mr. Wittus, been “huge for our business. We are up 70% from pre-COVID and still going strong,” he said. “People have wanted to be able to enjoy time together and feel cozy inside and out.”

Things only keep heating up for Wittus. In recent months, the proprietor noted, “Increased oil prices has also stoked the interest in wood burning.”

And yet the original spark that ignited Wittus’ success were the highly covetable, exceptional designs from Scandinavia, Germany and Italy you couldn’t find anywhere else in the area. Quality craftsmanship, premium materials and style have always been as essential to Wittus as state-of-the-art technology.

If there’s a signature to the most popular Wittus designs is that the fire itself is the focal point. “Viewing the fire is key,” explained Mr. Wittus. “Two of our best-selling outdoor grills, the Phoenix and the Firebird, are designed so that while you grill and cook, you can also enjoy the sight of the blaze, watching the flames dance. The heat and smell of burning wood is both magical and mesmerizing.”

The 6-foot tall Phoenix grill, created by award-winning Danish architectural designer, Bent Falk, is intended to be used as an outdoor fireplace, firepit and barbecue grill — or simply



PHOTO COURTESY OF WITTUS: FIRE BY DESIGN

Niels and Alyce Wittus of Wittus: Fire by Design with the 6-foot tall Phoenix grill.

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as outdoor sculpture. It won the 2008 Platinum ADEX Award for design and innovation.

Made of Corten steel, it arrives unoxidized, but will naturally form a rich reddish-brown coating that makes each grill unique. Its chimney allows for a strong draft that considerably funnels smoke up and away from chef and guests.

Another product, the Foculus Outdoor Ceramic Grill, is handmade in Italy, and is basically a gigantic ceramic bowl that’s glazed in whimsical pat-

terns and can easily pass for a piece of contemporary art. The bright yellow boxy Domino Maxi Cookstove, also from Italy, is fitted with a panoramic window so all the flames are visible. And the award-winning Shaker stove by architect Antonio Citterio is, as the name suggests, inspired by classic American Shaker furniture. It’s a matte black streamlined steel with a short bench for fireside seating.

“Most of our clients choose Wittus pieces first for how they look and second for the function — the heating,” Mr. Wittus admitted, before adding with a smile, “That’s how they choose furniture, so we call what we sell ‘warm furniture.’”

Growing up in Denmark, Mr. Wittus always envisioned his career around a stove — only at first, he thought it would be as a chef at one of Copenhagen’s top restaurants. But his father had worked for the famous Danish furniture designer Hans Wegner, and while accompanying him to

trade shows, the young Mr. Wittus fell in love with good design. Visionaries like Mr. Wegner pioneered the Scandinavian style that would revolutionize modernism and is very much the catalyst for today’s craze for mid-century modern furniture. Mr. Wegner once explained the phenomenal popularity of Danish design as “a continuous process of purification and simplification ... and [cutting] down [a chair] to the simplest possible elements of four legs, a seat and combined top rail and arm rest.” Mr. Wittus works in that tradition.

“Most of the iconic Scandinavian designs originated from simple practicality and cost,” he recounted. “And that spilled over into well-designed hearths and stoves. As people have wanted to upgrade their homes, they want cleaner and more modern looking fireplaces.” Top architects like César Pelli, Robert A.M. Stern and Drew Lang, not to mention design-conscious families moving up to the area from the city, now regularly incorporate Wittus designs in their plans.

Mr. Wittus also regularly evokes another Danish tradition: the concept of “hygge,” which he says is finally “hitting home” here in the U.S. Pronounced “hue-guh,” it’s the Danish word that describes the Danes’ ritual of enjoying simple pleasures like being with friends and family in order to bring about well-being. It’s an understandable impulse given that winters in the region mean temperatures hovering at freezing and the sun setting every day at 3 p.m.

A wood-burning fireplace is the ultimate hygge icon. It’s warm, cozy, economical and, Mr. Wittus would add, ecological. “The EPA continues to toughen their emission standards,” he remarked. “While 40 years ago a regular wood burning stove would produce 50 grams of particles, today we have one that produces under 1 gram.”

Wood-burning fire designs are also supplementing the green energy of air-source heat pumps. “We see many new homes being LEED rated,” he said, referencing the green building rating system known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. “Tighter homes require that all these fireplaces have outside air for combustion.”

With new families moving to the area and current homeowners looking for property upgrades, Mr. Wittus sees more homes with outdoor areas landscaped to allow for some kind of fire element. “It’s a great way to introduce the younger generation to the concept,” he noted. “I’ve taught my grandson the fine art of poking the fire.” Just like families did back in the Stone Age.

Wittus Fire by Design is located at 40 Westchester Ave., Pound Ridge. For more information, call 914-764-5679 or visit [wittus.com](http://wittus.com).