

# Fire – a reason to visit a bar or restaurant

By Susan Wood

In terms of warmth and ambiance, Lake Tahoe's best fireplace, aka woodstove, sits in my house. There's something about plunking down on a cushy sofa with clinking glasses of wine in dim light and watching the dancing wood fire through the glass while the house stays at a toasty temperature. After all, fireplace is Latin for hotbed.

When I'm out, nothing annoys me more about paying for a meal or overinflated drink (see hot drinks in *Lake Tahoe News*) than feeling as though I need to wear my jacket inside.

From Stateline to the Y, I found many South Shore restaurant and bar fireplaces (most use gas) emit limited heat – adding fuel to the debate whether they're more of a mood enhancer than heat source. The same debate could be made for the more than 32 million fireplaces in U.S. households, according to the Census Bureau.



Fire pits at the Village at Northstar overlook the ice rink. Photo/Kathryn Reed

But back to business – I would say the fire pits in the Northstar Village in Truckee rate high on my list as the most desired experience in front of a fire. Kae and I had just finished skiing on a glorious sunny day, ordered a few hot drinks and collapsed on the comfy sofas about a foot away from the ornate fire pit. The fire radiated enough heat that I took off a layer and my boots to curl my feet under me. We weren't alone. A yard sale of sorts could be found on the other sofas. A few bars flanked the village area surrounding the ice rink, where we enjoyed entertainment for our R&R.

All the right elements for a good time – yes, the North Shore has it down. And on another Northstar note, check out the Ritz Carlton bar at mid-mountain. They have a few fireplaces with cushy chairs I could easily spend the night on.

On the South Shore, the Blue Angel Café on Ski Run Boulevard does a lot of things right, including food, service and atmosphere. The fireplace is an extra amenity. If you're lucky enough to get a front row seat on the sofa at the fireplace, you'll definitely know why it's busy in a bad economy.

A block down from the restaurant, the Black Bear Inn has the kind of fireplace to sit in front of for hours. If you're ordering dinner there, you'll be treated to a grand-scale fireplace that is the closest to resembling my all-time favorite – the one in the main lobby of the luxurious, historic Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park. If you think the Black Bear's lobby fireplace makes you warm and fuzzy inside, try staying at the Snowshoe Thompson cabin where the dual-sided fireplace provides the utmost in heat and ambiance.

As bars go, one table in front of the fireplace at the Riva Grill at the Ski Run Marina offers an ideal backdrop two ways. Out the window you get a view of Lake Tahoe. Inside, a large hearth measuring at least 4-feet across sets a relaxing mood. I backed my chair next to the fire for full-scale warmth.

Otherwise, other tables would seem to provide a basic experience.

For view, ambiance and a little extra warmth, Edgewood Tahoe's Brook's Bar in Stateline has the best-kept secret for those who usually believe the golf course is for summer use only. The bar is now open in winter, and this means staff may light at least one of the outdoor fire pits on the deck and put chairs around them. I recently went there for lunch and witnessed a few women enjoying standing in the sun next to the pits with glasses of Champagne in hand. That's decadence.

On the North Shore, nothing comes close to the fire pits – yes, on the beach – at the Hyatt's Lone Eagle Bar and Grill in Incline Village. When there's a nip in the air, nothing beats sitting in the large Adirondack chairs with a beverage in hand watching boats soar by on Lake Tahoe.

The fire pits at the Fire and Ice restaurant and bar in Heavenly Village get a crowd surrounding them, but the chairs are not comfortable.

It's true – location, location, location is key. Another example where picking the table will make an experience can be found at the Fresh Ketch at the Tahoe Keys Marina. The Fresh Ketch bar often lures me to the high tables to play Backgammon. However, I sometimes fantasize about grabbing the table in front of the fireplace. It's a nice touch situated within inches from the hearth.

The proximity from table to small fireplace is what I liked once about the Brewery on Highway 50, but getting that table may demonstrate it's easier to win the lottery.

Lake Tahoe Pizza's bar west of the Y could get the table-to-fireplace location hint. We actually moved the high table two feet over to the gas unit. This fireplace left me baffled because it was chilly one minute and warmed up another. It gets points though for a touch of decor. With the two large

fireplace tools to the side, it became obvious that the insert was placed in a very large wood fireplace space.

It's also an added plus Zephyr Cove Resort's restaurant has a built-in fireplace unit, but the open-air environment and bar forcing patrons to face the other way misses the mark on the experience.

Kae and I agree bar patrons over the restaurant crowd are more apt to enjoy a fireplace based on the level of comfort. Let's face it. You're not going to take your shoes off, slouch in your chair and turn your body slightly away from your dinner companion. Nonetheless, the fireplace gets a few marks for having a mantel much like you would at home.

The National Association of Home Builders rates a fireplace as one of 12 factors that significantly raise the value of a home.

The homey feature started with the cave dwellers and has been used by some form of culture for cooking and heat in the last million years. Cave men and women dug holes in the ground until fireplaces evolved into wall units in the 1100s. They rose to second floors of homes in the 1500s and became more of a design feature 100 years later in England. In 1678, designers raised the grate to improve airflow, thus fueling the fire.

One notable inventor, Benjamin Franklin, came up with his namesake stove that sat in the middle of the room in Philadelphia in the 1740s. The idea caught on and woodstoves joined fireplaces as household words.

