

# Food Around the Fire

## MAKING THE MOST OF THE COOLER SEASONS WITH OUTDOOR COOKING, SOCIALIZING AND FUN

Courtney H. Diener-Stokes

I USUALLY START HAVING AN ITCH TO BUNDLE UP by an outdoor fire as early as October. That's also when I'm craving apple fritters paired with the start of cooler nights and shared with extended family to join in on the fun.

For those fall outdoor fritters, my family sets up a large cooking tripod next to a big bonfire and gets a smaller fire going that's just big enough for a cast iron skillet. Once the oil sizzles in the iron skillet, I begin adding the thick apple batter I've made in advance.

As the fritters cook, the aroma of warming spices — cinnamon, mace, nutmeg — merged with apples wafts through the open

country air. But it's the taste of the fritters, along with the warming, crackling fire that feels like a celebration of the changing seasons.

For our November outings, we like to have friends over for a lantern walk, then a soup or chili potluck. Again, we get out the tripod, but this time we use it to hang a large metal pot to heat up apple cider. Adults gather round the fire to stay warm and talk, while kids are off running and playing. We set up a long table near the



Fireside ambiance with wine and cheeseboard



Courtney cooking outdoors in a wood-fired cob oven

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fire for crockpots filled with soup and chili, along with crusty bread and cornbread. One of my favorite recipes is a friend's bulgur wheat-based vegetarian chili that includes lots of tasty topping options.

This past December, a few weeks before Christmas, I got together with family and friends for a holiday bake at my sister-in-law's farm, where there's a bakehouse with a wood-fired brick oven. Everyone brought different things to cook, resulting in a potluck feast of focaccia, pizza, flatbreads and pies. As each item came out of the oven, we'd add it to the outdoor table so everyone could get a taste.

Come January and February, if we're lucky enough to have snowy days, we invite friends and their kids over to sled and toboggan. In between downhill runs, we gather around the fire pit to snack on things like s'mores and maple popcorn, balanced with a hearty cheeseboard.

Read on for some of my favorite recipes to enjoy fireside, whether indoors by the fireplace or out by the fire pit. The outcome is just as good when cooked indoors, but there's a whole other dimension of pleasure added when eating outdoors in the crisp air by the warmth of the blazing fire.



S'mores aren't just for summer

### Two-Cheese Prosciutto Flatbread with Arugula and Balsamic Glaze

*When I spend a crisp winter afternoon cooking in a wood-fired outdoor oven, I feel most in my element, surrounded by three loves: spending time in nature, feeling the warmth of the fire and smelling woody aromas, and cooking flatbreads — they get a uniquely crispy crust from the high heat of the oven. As each flatbread finishes cooking, it's placed on a large cutting board for final toppings, seasonings, oils and glazes. Next, cut the flatbreads into pieces and call friends and family to dig in before starting to bake the next one. This two-cheese prosciutto flatbread pairs nicely with red wine.*



Serves 4 to 6

- 1 standard round of flatbread or pizza dough, divided in half (homemade or store-bought)
- 1½ C. shredded mozzarella cheese, divided
- 2, 3-oz. packages of prosciutto
- Olive oil
- 1 C. shaved Parmesan cheese, divided
- 1 C. packed, standard (or micro) arugula, divided
- Balsamic vinegar glaze (pre-made/store bought), to taste

If not cooking in an outdoor wood-fired oven, preheat an indoor oven to 450°. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Flour one dough ball and stretch out thin to form a round or oblong shape and place on the lined baking sheet.

Sprinkle the top evenly with mozzarella. Then evenly place pieces of one package of prosciutto (keeping the pieces whole).

Bake for 11 minutes (likely less if cooking in a wood-fired oven that's at a higher temperature), then remove from oven (close door to retain heat) and brush the entire crust with olive oil.

Return to oven and cook an additional 1 to 2 minutes, until edges are golden brown and cheese has slightly browned.

After fully cooked, remove from oven and drizzle the top with olive oil. Sprinkle arugula evenly over entire flatbread. Next sprinkle with fresh Parmesan. Drizzle with balsamic glaze, left to right in a zigzag across the entire flatbread. Top with salt and freshly cracked pepper to taste.

Repeat process with second dough ball.

Refrigerate leftovers in an airtight container for up to three days.

**Note:** If you want to streamline the process and bypass making homemade dough, you can find fresh dough balls sold at grocery stores in the refrigerated area by the cheese section or buy a dough ball from your local pizzeria.

### White Chocolate Raspberry S'mores

*A friend's housewarming gift a few years ago opened me up to a whole new world of s'mores combinations. She gave me several gift bags, each with a different s'mores recipe and the ingredients for it. Her creative gift covered our dessert needs all week, and it was so much fun trying the different flavor combinations. I loved learning new ways to reinvent this beloved fireside tradition.*



Serves 8

- 8 whole graham crackers (standard or chocolate), cut in half
- 8 T. raspberry preserves (or fresh raspberries)
- 2 white chocolate bars, broken into squares
- 8 marshmallows

Lay out eight graham cracker halves on a tray.

Place a dollop of preserves on top of each, followed by two white chocolate pieces.

As each person finishes toasting their marshmallow, have them rest it on top of the pre-assembled stack (the marshmallow will rest on top of the chocolate bars).

Place the second half of graham cracker on top of the marshmallow and press down gently as the roasting stick is removed. (The soft and gooey marshmallow will hold the sandwiched s'more together.)

Store any leftover ingredients separately in their own resealable bag or sealed container.

## Sweet & Salty Maple Popcorn

The moment I spotted an open-fire popcorn popper in Terrain unlike any design I've ever seen, I knew it had to be mine. I love the comfortable wooden handle and bowl-like cooking vessel with a detachable lid. We make buttered popcorn often in our home, so to make it special at a fireside occasion, our family makes a sweet and salty version using maple syrup. The kids can safely help with the popping process given the long handle of the special popper. This recipe works just as well to pop inside at the fireplace as it does outdoors at the fire pit. Pairs nicely with hot chocolate.

Serves 4 to 6



2 T. butter  
2 T. maple syrup  
½ C. popcorn kernels  
Salt, to taste

In a small saucepan, melt butter and add maple syrup. Stir and heat on low just until it begins to bubble (1 to 2 minutes). Take off heat and set aside.

Once the kernels have popped, place popcorn in a large bowl. Drizzle the warm butter-syrup mixture all over the popcorn. Toss to coat evenly. Add salt to taste. Serve immediately.

Serve in mugs or small bowls for ease in holding it around the fire. You can make this popcorn just as easily on the stovetop or air popper (minus the oil). Storage not recommended for leftovers.

## Chili Sans Carne with Bulgur Wheat and Toppings

Featured in the vintage Keeping the Hearth cookbook, written by parents, teachers and students of Kimberton Waldorf School in Chester County, this hearty chili is simple to make and is adored by meat eaters as much as vegetarians. The bulgur wheat adds a textural layer that nicely complements the beans. Triple the recipe if you want to fill up a

standard crockpot. Pairs perfectly with a selection of toppings, such as sour cream, avocado, shredded cheddar cheese, broken tortilla chips and chopped fresh cilantro.

Serves 4 (bowls) to 6 (cups)



¼ C. olive oil  
1 medium onion, chopped  
1 large green pepper, chopped  
4 cloves garlic, sliced  
1 tsp. salt  
1 tsp. chili powder  
½ C. bulgur wheat  
2 C. cooked kidney or pinto beans  
2 C. chopped tomato  
1 T. soy sauce  
1½ C. water (½ C. reserved)

Heat oil in a large pot on medium heat and saute onion until translucent. Add green pepper, stir and saute for an additional minute. Next, add garlic, salt and chili powder. Stir briefly.

Add bulgur wheat and stir a minute more. Next, add beans, tomato, soy sauce and one cup of water.

Bring to a boil. Then reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Add a half cup water and stir to incorporate. Cook for another 15 minutes (the chili thickens significantly as the bulgur wheat expands while cooking). As you stir, scrape the bulgur on the bottom of the pot as it tends to stick.

Refrigerate leftovers in a sealed container for up to three days or freeze.

## Hay Creek Apple Fritters

Adapted from the recipe used for fritters served at the annual Hay Creek Apple Festival. These fritters aren't greasy since the apples aren't deep-fried, making them perfect as a handheld dessert. This is one of my favorite ways to use apples, and I love watching people bite into the hearty fritter covered in the brown sugar and butter topping — it's a reward beyond

the taste. These can easily be made on a griddle or stovetop if cooking over an open fire isn't an option. Pairs well with a warm beverage, hoppy beer or milk.

Makes 8-12 fritters (depending on size)



### Batter Ingredients:

2 C. ripe apples, diced  
2 eggs  
½ C. brown sugar  
½ C. milk  
2 T. butter, melted  
¾ tsp. each of salt, nutmeg, cinnamon and mace  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
1 tsp. baking soda  
3 C. whole wheat flour  
Canola or vegetable oil (to cover pan when frying)

### Topping Ingredients:

1 C. brown sugar  
¼ C. butter, cut into small pieces

### To make the batter:

After peeling and dicing the apples, place in a small bowl and set aside.

In a medium bowl, combine eggs (slightly beaten), brown sugar, milk, butter, spices, vanilla and baking soda. Stir to combine.

Add the diced apples to the mixture and stir to combine. Next, add flour (one cup at a time) and stir until all ingredients are incorporated and begin to form a very stiff batter.

Grease a cast iron skillet or griddle and place on medium heat. Spoon ⅓ C. batter at a time onto the skillet, evenly spaced.

Flip over each dollop of batter and press down with a spatula to flatten the thick dough. Cook 10 minutes per side, flipping often, until dark golden brown and fully cooked in the center (the outside of the fritters may appear that they're fully cooked inside when not, so turn down the heat to low, if needed, to keep

them from burning).

When the fritters appear firm and no uncooked batter is visible, test doneness by cutting one fritter in half. Or use a toothpick to poke the center until it comes out clean.

Once finished, top with a generous spoonful of the brown sugar/butter topping and serve immediately. Store leftover fritters and topping, each in their own airtight containers, for up to three days. Fully wrap in foil and reheat at 350° for 10 minutes.

### To make the topping:

In a small bowl, combine brown sugar and butter with your hands, just enough to break down the butter into smaller pieces. ♦

Courtney Diener-Stokes is an award-winning journalist, author, food writer, photographer and food stylist. Most recently she co-authored the Kimberton Whole Foods Cookbook and Farmhouse Manna: Nourishing Recipes and Rituals for Head, Heart, Hands & Soul. She lives in the Oley Valley countryside with her husband, three children, two Babydoll Southdown sheep, a flock of bantam chickens and a Bernedoodle named Daisy.



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