

Lifestyle

# The Mercury

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## TasWeekend: Rising from the ashes

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Hilary Burden finds the end of the fire permit season as much a marker of the season as medlars and mushrooms.

*Source:* Supplied

**I PUT lighting a fire in the great outdoors in the same bracket as eating an apple straight from the tree; knowing where the weather is coming from; seeing a wedge-tailed eagle in the wild before it sees you; and drinking fresh water from a mountain stream.**

It's primal. When you live in the city these are moments that don't necessarily come naturally, although Hobartians are luckier than most with a mountain habitat looming over the city.

Among the many joys of rural living are making garden fires as well as having the space to do so. I love it when fire permit season ends – as much a marker of the season as medlars and mushrooms.

Despite the letting go of melancholic autumn, there's a necessary confidence that goes with the process of decay. Decisions need to be made about tidying up, cutting back and pruning.

Building a bonfire and lighting it is great for your self-esteem, knowing the risk of it getting out of control is low.

True gardeners know their passion is not all about planting or the admiration of a bloom.

It's about editing, too – about what you do with garden rubbish.

What I can't compost, or be bothered turning into mulch, goes on the bonfire.

My couple of acres makes three bonfires a year – one for each three seasons.

I recall the paranoia of lighting my first bonfire. It was all the size of a car tyre.

I'd mown the grass first, had buckets and hoses on hand. Even so, it took forever to light it because the urge to control it was paramount.

Now I'm relaxed, my bonfires light up Pipers River valley and I try to picture how aborigines might have once danced and sung around night fires – the original "Dancing with the Stars".

I remember one of the first lessons of African dance being to feel how your feet connect not just on the ground, but down, through the ground, drawing a line to the other side of the world.

Thinking like this instantly makes you a better dancer. Who needs the complication of tango? I think of this around a bonfire, recalling D.H. Lawrence's poem about a mother kangaroo:

*"Wistfully watching, with wonderful liquid eyes.*

*And all her weight, all her blood, dropping sackwise down*

*Towards the earth's centre..."*

Bonfires go with stars, with being warm outside even when the temperature is below 8C and the wind chill factor is -1C.

As you stare into flames, memories of gathering around fires long gone get smoked out.

Of sharing sleeping bags under the Mussleroe stars with past loves; of the smell of toast grilling on a fork; of stories, songs and poetry shared when flames take the focus off people's pride.

How much more relaxed, creative and in touch with something outside ourselves we are around an outdoor fire, when the physical matter of a wall or a back door is no longer between us and the outside world.

Instagram friends have taken to sharing photographs of outdoor fires.

Estelle pictured hers with enamel kettle and skillet of baked beans. She wrote how her son, Ethan, had cooked his lunch over their vegie patch fire and decided "this is now the only way lunch will be cooked on the weekends".

Sean Keating starts his day early, baking bread at Phoenix and the Wolf Cafe in Perth.

Most mornings, he shares a mesmerising image inside the fire of his outdoor wood fire oven: "11C, lots of moon, lots and lots of stars. Last bake of the week."

It's more than the fire he conjurs. It's also the night sky, the feel in the air and the lure of harlequin flames, different every day.

A difference imbued in his bread.

As I write, fire is the subject of Dee Nolan's monthly newsletter (she's the author of *A Food Lover's Pilgrimage*).

“How hard it is sometimes to do well something that just a generation ago was second nature to us,” she writes.

“Some exceptional meals, most recently at the Franklin in Hobart, have made me eternally grateful for the chefs who are re-learning how to cook with fire.”

She mentions the godfather of the grill Victor Arguinzoniz, the Basque master of cooking over coals, whose earliest memories of food were cooked simply over an open fire in a house without gas or electricity.

It must be something to do with the time of year.

A friend who gardens for the elderly dropped in this week with an old barbecue destined for the tip.

He knew I was playing about with different ways of outdoor cooking and thought I might like to try an old beer keg, halved, laid on its side and mounted on triangle legs.

Within minutes we had it lit in the backyard, pulled up stools and started yarning over a glass of red.

I could have been inside wearing three jumpers and fat socks, planning on turning in early to read.

Instead, we watched the Southern Cross get higher in the sky, talked about how to find Celestial South, which I'd read about in *The Aurora Chaser's Handbook* by Margaret Sonnemann.

After a while, the little half keg had made enough hot coals to boil a billy of tea.

I remembered how to pour it without a drop, angled where the handle joins one side.

Later, I went to the fridge for leftover curry that got tossed into a wok with some bubble and squeak veg.

It's good for the soul to eat outdoors – it connects us with our very survival.

