

HOMEGROWN GOURMET

BY BRIDGET WEISS

COLD COMFORT

I live on six acres east of Austin, where the weather is less influenced by highways and buildings than in our big city. Rain, breezes and fog come more easily to the country climes. Like any nicely seasoned introvert, I've gravitated to the woods, preferring not to look into my neighbors' windows, or to dress appropriately for yard chores. In my spare time, I like to chainsaw dead trees, feed friends, rescue baby rabbits from the killer tabby and sit by fires.

I experienced last year's atypical winter intimately, in a drafty log cabin, like a child raised by wolves. The loblolly pine needles were spectacularly hung with ice and the winter grasses stood rigid with frozen, shining water. A female hummingbird had somehow missed the train south to Mexico. After fueling the fireplace on those frigid nights, I thawed out food for her, hoping she hadn't died from the chill.

The bird survived, and so did I. Plus, I learned a few things: One. Cook like there's no tomorrow. Two. Keep the home fires burning.

In winter, as a kid growing up in a rambling, two-story house a few blocks from the UT law school, I would whine to my parents that I was bored.

"Go outside," they'd bark in unison, winking at each other and causing me to hate them. Mum grew up during World War II in rural England, and Dad spent the same formative years in a tiny American coastal town. They were both self-sufficient types. And, so, forced grumpily into the East Austin wilds, I picked ripe persimmons and made small fires by my secret fort on Waller Creek.

Dad and I made brandy from the persimmons and crafted soap from the ashes. Mum would sometimes bake meat and potatoes in tinfoil packets, her eyes lighting up as she shared memories of being a hungry child. Some nights, I was allowed to stay up and read by the fire until I fell asleep.

And now, in winter, I think of evenings long past and drag them from the ashes. I cultivate the easy joy of roasting winter vegetables and meat over coals, not to mention sipping a whiskey before supper, or a brandy after. Lounging fireside in the dark and watching the moon rise sends a hard day's woes



south—along with most of the hummingbirds.

Try it once. Go outside, build a fire, and stay there. It will bring out the best—or the beast—in you, and either is preferable to the telly. Invite guests with imaginations adept enough to conjure up uncharted constellations or to tell you their secret dreams.

We'll feed them, too. Here's how:

To assemble a firepit, install a 2-by-4-foot base of concrete pavers or flat rocks. Use large stones set several inches above ground level to catch sparks. A fireplace grill set on the base allows oxygen to fuel the flames. Use loosely wadded newspaper and cardboard shreds beneath an armful of twigs to start the fire, or simply torch a compressed sawdust starter log. Be judicious in adding incrementally larger pieces of wood after the kindling takes. Cedar and oak

branches are wonderfully fragrant, as is the piñon wood sold in bundles at hardware stores.

If you don't care to build a firepit, get your hands on one of the freestanding clay vessels known as *chimineas* or *kivas*, or a lovely copper fire bowl.

Supply your guests with a simple snack and a glass of something divine with which to wait an hour or so, until red embers appear. Then add campfire meals—meat and winter vegetables wrapped in heavy-duty tinfoil—to the coals. Cook for 20 minutes or more, turning once with tongs. Let the pockets cool to the touch and eat them straight from the fire.

Cheers!

COLD COMFORT CAMP POCKETS

GROUND LAMB, FRESH MINT, ONION, PARSNIP

GROUND BISON, RED WINE, FRESH PARSLEY, POTATO

GROUND BEEF, FRESH ROSEMARY, ONION, TURNIP

TEXTURED VEGETABLE PROTEIN, FRESH
CILANTRO, ONION, YAM

(Cut root vegetables and onions into 1-inch cubes.)