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Goats greeted me with fluffy tails bobbing up and down, waving hello. In a distant field, horses trotted and pranced as the sun was setting. The heels of my black platform sandals dug into the gravel road; next time, I'll choose more practical shoes for a ranch-style dinner. It was my first night at Paws Up Resort in Greenough, Montana, with my mom. Our first event on the agenda, a welcome dinner, was hosted in the resort's outdoor dining space called The Shed. Large wood beams were arranged in a classic house shape in rows with open-air slats between them so you could see the blue sky above and the scenery all around. The smell of smoked meats beckoned us inside, and we could see the chefs preparing dinner as they poked at the coals in fire pits and hovered attentively over meats and vegetables. After cocktail hour, Mom and I took a seat at a long table, and the waiters emerged with trays of family-style Mexican food. Chicken, fish, beef, chorizo, tortillas, salsas, fire-roasted vegetables, everything cooked to smokey perfection. Then dessert was served: chocolate lava cake with homemade graham crackers and marshmallow creme. When the sky had turned dark and twinkling stars were popping out, I sighed contentedly, and we returned to our cabin. Just a few hours into my vacation, and what a refreshing weekend this was already turning out to be.

The following day, I opened the curtains to towering pine trees framing my view of the mountains. I checked my agenda to see that the dinner was a river experience. Around 5 pm, a shuttle arrived at our cabin to pick us up and take us to dinner. We drove over a bridge and down a dirt road. When the shuttle came to a stop, we stepped down the stairs to a beautiful outdoor dining experience. There was live country music and games to play. A bar was set up in the middle of the woods. The chefs were grilling dinner over an open flame. Tomahawk steaks were searing over the fire, their juices dripping. Pink fillets of salmon

were nailed to cedar planks. Brisket and ribs were sliced into as their juices glistened.

We took a walk to the river. The water was crystal clear but we could see our reflection. Up the river bank, large trees were jutting toward the sky that was slowly turning to dusk. Lights glowed as they hung from tree branches above. The pink sunset faded to purple and then to grey night sky as we sat around the fire and ate berry crisp. We mostly talked about this incredible experience while we were gazing at the fire. It was really something special.

These experiences made me feel connected and refreshed. It was like I went to dinner and a show, but the show wasn't a comedian or a musician; the show was nature. Every minute was different than the last. The people, the food, and the music all contributed, and nature painted an ever-changing background that played out like a movie. From the bright blue sky to the golden hour and streaks of colors in the setting sky. Sounds of the river reverberated throughout the evening, and coyotes howled in the dark. Embers from the fire glowed, and the sparkle of the lights in the night illuminated the darkness.

Recently, I came across a video of the Tasmanian cookbook author and chef Sarah Glover. She was cooking an entire feast outdoors over a fire. In the frigid winter, giant bone-in ribeyes hung with hooks. Chickens were strung up on a steel dome frame. Veggies hung with twine over hot coals. Primal and simple: meat cooked over a fire. It was so cool that she had prepared this feast in the dead of winter. I love to grill, but had considered that to be more of a summer activity, but there was something about cooking with fire in the winter that intrigued me. Cold weather. Hot fire-roasted food. I had to try.

I designated Thursday nights as fire night and asked my husband Colten to be my fire starter. You want to do what? He was surprised. Montana winters are chilly, and he wasn't expecting to be prepping for a cookout. Our good friend Wayne gifted us a fire pit as a housewarming gift. It came with a grill grate, which would be perfect for cooking my first winter open-fire meal.

My sister-in-law Sarah and her husband Jeremy drove over the passes from Washington to visit us this year for Christmas. They brought a huge prime rib for the family to have for Christmas dinner. It was so large that it didn't even fit in my oven. They cut off some ribeyes and froze them for us to use at a later time. Now, a few months later, it was time. I seasoned the meat generously with kosher salt on Thursday morning, and it spent hours in the fridge soaking up all that salty goodness, the fibers softening and melting into delicious flavor. I decided I'd serve the steak sliced and in tacos, like that first meal at Paws Up resort. Casual and delicious.

While cooking over the open flame is nothing new, in this modern era of indoor kitchens and gadgets, getting back to the basics felt like a breath of fresh air. And getting outside and breathing the fresh air...was a breath of fresh air. I carefully placed each ribeye on the grate. The pine clippings that Colten had collected from our property curled up into swirls with a hot orange glow, then quickly turned to ash. The sky grew dark, and the flame became enticing; we couldn't take our eyes off it. Sitting around the fire bundled up, our kids jumped on the trampoline in their warm hats and coats. I placed a few corn tortillas on the grate to warm them up and to get a kiss of fire.

When it was time to eat, I sliced into the ribeyes to see the most beautiful charred and crusty edges and pink centers. The steak had so much flavor from the smoke. So much flavor! Earthy, toasty, and a bit of sweetness. The fire had transformed the meat. Everyone agreed it was the best steak they had ever had.

Cooking over fire reminds me of my childhood. I spent many camping trips around a fire, grilling hot dogs and toasting marshmallows. I remember listening to the adults chat as they sat in folding chairs with beverages in hand. Late nights were spent playing cards, and then I'd climb into my sleeping bag, waking up in the morning with my sweatshirt smelling of smoke. One time, my mom and I packed up for the weekend and took a spontaneous camping trip together, just the two of us. She didn't bring firewood, so we bought some from the ranger and hauled it to our

site. She did not have any kindling, so we ripped up pages from my Cinderella coloring book to get our fire going. We roasted smores and watched our little fire flicker in the night before curling up in our sleeping bags in the back of the truck that we had borrowed from my grandfather.

Now, all these years later, I hope that my kids will remember mom cooking over a firepit in the front yard while they try to jump on a trampoline covered in snow. We had such a good time (and good food) with our first fire night that I had to do more. Thursdays became devoted to fire cooking throughout the winter. I kept those meals pretty basic. Chicken and root vegetables. Steak and baked beans. Now it is spring, and I'm excited to experiment with new and fresh ingredients on the firepit and share more meals and conversations with the people I love. Food over a fire is more than just sustenance. It's a timeless way to connect. The fire draws people in to pause and gather together. To inch closer and feel the warmth on our hands. It's a break from the routine and demands of the modern world and indoor living. Instead of phones or televisions, the flame is a glow that leaves room for long, quiet pondering or heartfelt conversation.

The daylight lasts longer as we head into April, and the weather has finally warmed up a bit. Today, we started the firepit up to roast some steaks for steak tacos. Local family members joined us, and we sat around the firepit in our front yard in folding chairs. A delivery driver pulled up to drop off a package for us, and I offered for him to join us for a few tacos. His name is Jay. New to the area, he shared a bit about himself and where he came from. One of my favorite parts of cooking is that food makes friends. It draws people in. And food cooked over a fire, well that's just irresistible.



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## MACKENZIE KRAUTER'S STEAK TACOS

Two bone-in ribeye steaks (about 1 in thick)

kosher salt

Corn tortillas

Toppings: low moisture mozzarella, cilantro, lime, white onion, salsa, avocado

1. Season each steak liberally with kosher salt, about 1 ½ tsp per steak. Cover them and refrigerate for 3 hours.
2. Start a fire in a fire pit and place the grill grate over the fire. Allow the fire to burn for about 30 minutes so that there are some hot coals. You want to obtain a medium heat.
3. Place the steaks on the grate and cook until they get golden brown (about 4-5 min each side and a temperature of 135 for medium rare).
4. Remove the steaks from the grill grate and allow them to rest for about 10 minutes.
5. Slice the steak thinly and prepare your toppings.
6. Assemble the tacos and enjoy.