

Fall 2002 Articles

Canadian Made

Some of the world's best manufacturers of natural gas fireplaces are right here in our own backyard.

By Pam Knight

Recently, a friend took me on a tour of his soon to be completed new home. In planning it, he has taken great pains to ensure that he and friends who come to visit will feel comfortable and welcome in every sense of the word. One of the most striking ways he's accomplished this is his inventive use of natural gas fireplaces. They've been included in traditional places like the family and living rooms, but as well, in other more imaginative locations, creating a true sense of sanctuary and relaxation throughout the house.

A guest room has been turned into a quiet retreat through the use of a small corner model, perfectly complemented with a décor of dark mahogany bookcases and a antique sleigh bed.

A fireplace with a distinctive European flair in the dining room evokes the ambience of an old French chateau, and the master bedroom and adjoining bath have been transformed into a private spa with a double-sided model fronting to both rooms.

The big upswing to natural gas fireplaces happened in the early to mid 80's when technology and engineering advanced to a stage that allowed manufacturers to create the feeling of an authentic wood-burning fire with the convenience of natural gas. Homeowners could have instant beauty and warmth with no wood to chop, store or carry, and no ashes to clean. Finding just the right mixture of oxygen and natural gas can make all the difference in the world, changing the flame from the blue we see in our gas barbecue and kitchen range to the warm golden tones of wood. Manufacturers became very adept at controlling the interaction of temperature, air, heat dissipation and burner design, and from that point on, it was all history as they say.

Given this obvious trend in Canadian home design, it's no wonder some of the best manufacturers of natural gas fireplaces in the world are right here in our own backyard. With that kind of a resource so close at hand, and my rekindled interest in natural gas fireplaces, I set off to get the goods on what's hot in the industry and where we're headed as a fireplace nation. First stop on my odyssey was with Colin Adamson, Chairman, CEO and co-founder of CFM, the manufacturers of CFM Majestic natural gas fireplaces. Colin and his partner, Heinz Rieger founded the company in 1982, focusing their efforts on producing natural gas fireplaces for the throngs of Canadians who were discovering their convenience and versatility. Through acquisitions and growth, the company has expanded into a diversified home products company with sales of more than \$416 million, and factories in Ontario, the United States, England and Korea.

Natural gas fireplaces still play a major role in the product mix at CFM, and Adamson continues to extol benefits they bring to modern living. "Today, a family can program their gas fireplace to be lit and heating the room when they arrive home from school or the office. It can sense the surrounding temperature, be scheduled to turn on and off at appropriate times and regulate itself to give the exact level of heat a family desires. Burner systems create flames of differing sizes; logs and embers look like the real thing. It's almost impossible to tell the difference between a natural gas fireplace and a real wood-burning fire."

One of the outstanding features of natural gas fireplaces is their direct vent capability, allowing them to be positioned in just about any room in the house. Venting can be through an outside wall or a roof, and piping can be accommodated in the most unlikely of places, including a closet.

As with so many other trends, the move to natural gas fireplaces started on Canada's west coast. For years, architects and designers there have incorporated natural gas fireplaces in their plans for high-rise condominiums and apartment buildings. According to Tony Woodruff, President of Fireplace Products International (FPI) in Vancouver, manufacturers of Regency Fireplaces, the investment in a natural gas fireplace ranks right up there with kitchen remodeling and adding bedrooms to recapture your investment when you sell your home.

FPI has dedicated itself to manufacturing high quality fireplaces for more than twenty years and considers it one of Canada's greatest success stories. Woodruff notes that although the company markets product throughout North America, he is still impressed with the acceptance of natural gas fireplaces by Canadians.

" During the infancy of FPI, it was the natural gas companies that helped us expose our products to the market. Once consumers realized a natural gas fireplace represented convenience, quality and choice, they hopped on the bandwagon in a big way. In Canada today, I imagine more than 60% of new housing starts have a gas fireplace as part of the package. It's become a popular inclusion, just like a dishwasher or clothes dryer."

Woodruff also has some advice for consumers considering a new home purchase. "Builders today tend to select a standard model, but it is possible to add your own touches later with additions like alternate facings, mantles, etc. Another useful idea is

to speak to the builder and request a credit for the fireplace planned for installation. Then, visit your local dealer and buy the natural gas model that suits you best. This way, you'll have exactly what you want from the beginning."

Like my friend and his new home, consumers across the country are utilizing gas fireplaces to accent their taste in décor and create a real sense of personal style in their surroundings. Nowhere is this more obvious than the fully decorated showroom at Napoleon Fireplaces in Barrie, Ontario. Napoleon is Canada's largest family-owned manufacturer of natural gas fireplaces, founded by Wolfgang Schroeter and his wife Ingrid in the late seventies. Initially they manufactured cast iron stoves, however the business grew and evolved into natural gas. Today, the company's distinctive natural gas fireplaces can be found across Canada, the U.S. and into Europe. On my recent trip to their factory and showroom, Ingrid, company Vice President and Greg Thomas, Napoleon's National Sales Manager led me on a tour of their facility and brought me into the world of the twenty-first century gas fireplace.

" The choice of styles and accessories is almost endless," notes Schroeter. Accessorizing and multi-sided models are definitely the two top trends. A natural gas fireplace can have the sleek look of stainless steel, or the rustic appeal of cast iron. You can begin with a bay front fireplace, add andirons (the metal supports for a logset), and then finish with a backdrop of herringbone-patterned red brick. You'll achieve something that looks so realistic it will be difficult to tell it's not a wood-burning fireplace. Or you might choose a model with reflective porcelain panels that mirror the flames and create amazing depth. There are webbed, arch-shaped doors, gothic styled ornamental inserts, even surround kits that lend a European crafted look. Pair these with a mantle in wood or stone and you can create a one-of-a-kind look that is exactly right for your décor. And in new multi-sided models you can position a natural gas fireplace as a focal point in a chalet, a grand entry hall or as a strong architectural feature that can enhance a cathedral ceiling."

All three of the manufacturers I spoke with identified how valuable a gas fireplace can be in home heating. Many people rely on them for zone heating, meaning you can target heat to rooms you wish to use, while leaving others at a lower temperature. Two gas fireplaces located on separate floors can comfortably warm an average size house during the early spring and fall seasons, or longer in a more moderate climate.

" There are important considerations when you're shopping for a gas fireplace," says Napoleon's Thomas. "If you set out with a checklist, you'll get the model that's right for you. Think about the size of room it will occupy and the activities that will take place. Is it to heat the room or to be used in an ornamental way? By answering these questions, purchasing will be simple."

An important advance in natural gas fireplaces is temperature control. With a wall mounted thermostat or a digital remote, flame size and heat output can be precisely regulated. You can utilize the fireplace for heat or simply as a comfortable place to stretch out with a good book.

Finally, a gas fireplace means you still have heat in a power failure. Built-in ignition systems don't rely on electricity, so when the weather has rendered a furnace useless, the natural gas fireplace will continue to provide warmth and comfort. It may be our northern spirit, our need to nest, or simply the pleasure seeker in all of us. No matter what, Canadians seem to love gathering around the warming glow of a natural gas fireplace, no matter where it's located. For us, home is where the hearth is!

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