



The dish on dining out this summer

By LORI HALL STEELE

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It's time for lighting tiki torches, firing up the barbecue and sharing meals outdoors on those balmy northern Michigan midsummer nights.

Al fresco dining up north is getting more candlelit and intimate, and residents are buying sturdier and more contemporary furniture for outdoor living, area experts say. Eating in the great outdoors also is getting more portable and convenient, with stores catering to hikers, beach-goers and boaters.

"People are spending more for better quality furniture, for things that are weightier and can take the winds and elements," said Barbara Nelson, showroom manager for DeKorne Ethan Allen in Traverse City. "Part of the trend is going back to some

ornate cast metal, that type of thing that holds up well and doesn't blow into the neighbor's yard."

Iron furniture and faux wicker — which looks like the real thing but is far more durable and wrapped around steel frames — are part of the heavy-duty, long-lasting outdoor furniture trend, Nelson said. Contemporary styles also are popular, with long-lasting stainless steel and teak combinations leading the way, she said.

"People are making more of an investment in outdoor furniture," Nelson said. "They're buying pieces that are not going to rust out in the rain."

Max's Service in Traverse City, which has a separate patio furniture store, sells a high volume of high-quality contemporary aluminum furniture and classic wicker, which is "your typical traditional heirloom hand-me-down-from-one-generation-to-another

type furniture," said salesman Gary Wittig.

The store also deals in high-end stainless steel grills — backyard cooking altars that run from \$2,000 to \$4,000 with infrared rotisseries and all the perks a barbecue connoisseur could ask for. The good news for grill aficionados who want upscale without going broke is that Weber is now selling a stainless steel grill for under \$600.

"Stainless is in," Wittig said. "It's not new but they're selling in bigger numbers."

A new grill caddy by Rubbermaid takes the kitchen counter outdoors to help with storage and food preparation, said Mike Keller, store director for Meijer Inc. in Traverse City. The gray and tan unit includes storage for tableware and cooking gear, plus a countertop surface for use grill-side.

OUTDOOR LIVING

Cookout tips



Intimate dining areas, whether on decks or in garden niches, are becoming more and more preva-

lent as northern Michigan residents head outdoors to dine on summer evenings. To illuminate these nooks, look for this year's hottest outdoor accessory: hanging glass globes for candles and tiki torches, Nelson said.

"Yard torches are always really big," Keller said.

Stringed hanging lights — like the kitschy plastic fruits of the 1950s — remain popular still, but today's interpretations have gone upscale, resembling everything from stained glass to hurricane lamps, he said.

"It used to be all you could get were plastic fruit, which goes well with a tropical party, but now we're seeing kind of classy looking lights," Keller said.

Fabrics for outdoor cushions are moving away from bright and bold colors to earth tones, like sage, that blend with the landscaping, Nelson said.

For al fresco dining on the road, Traverse City's Jordan River Store carries a line of picnic backpacks.

"We're having a hard time keeping them in stock," said store manager Shannon Cantrell.

"They're wonderful wedding gifts and they're fabulous for boaters and hikers, and we have a lot of people who do those things around here."

The four-person picnic backpack includes melamine dinner plates, wine goblets, a silver-plated wine stopper, wooden salt and pepper shakers, cheese block and slicer, and plaid green and beige napkins and tablecloth.

Two-person models and a gourmet coffee setup — silver spoons and all — also are available.

The store's gourmet section is designed with outdoor dining in mind, containing items that can go from store to beach, from crackers and jams to cheeses and breads.

Collapsible chairs and coolers and portable tables are selling like mad at Eastern Mountain Sports in Traverse City, said supervisor Molly Hoxie.

Lori Hall Steele is a local freelance writer.

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