

## HOME IMPROVEMENT GUIDE

# UPGRADE YOUR BACKYARD BARBECUE

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If the displays at Southwest boutiques Patina and Bibelot are any gauge, area residents are all thinking about one thing: getting outside. Since late April both stores have been assembling both essentials and extras for outdoor entertaining, from cocktails in the garden to steaks on the grill.

So what's the best way to update your outdoor space for the upcoming season of patio partying? We scouted out these Southwest stores and learned from the entertaining experts.



## GRILLING SEASON

Heather Ray, the display specialist at the Bibelot shop in Linden Hills, doesn't even bother with the term "summer." Instead, it's "grilling season," and with good reason. With the grill the focal point of most outdoor parties, many hosts are looking to upgrade from hot dogs and burgers. She suggests the Outset **grilling wok** (\$26.95), a nonstick metal basket that turns the grill into the perfect place to stir-fry an array of meats, veggies and seafood for a nontraditional spin on barbecuing.

Patina's senior visual merchandiser, Libby Hegtvedt, is similarly grill-minded and also recommends accessories by Outset. A set of four **mini steak thermometers** (\$16.95) lets the grillmaster control which cuts of meat end up well, medium and rare, while a **magnetic light** (\$15.95) that attaches to barbecuing tongs and spatulas helps chefs see better in the twilight.



## COME BEARING GIFTS

Being a guest at an outdoor soiree means the pressure is on someone else's shoulders — until it's time to think of a hostess gift. According to Hegtvedt, such gifts are trending toward the utilitarian rather than the frivolous thanks to the economy. "People like to buy hosts things they can actually use, that are helpful," she explains.

Hegtvedt directs shoppers to Patina's display of Stonewall Kitchen specialty foods, which include **gourmet marinades** (pomegranate or roasted apple grille sauces for \$8.95 apiece) and **salsas** (pine-apple chipotle for \$6.95). Hegtvedt also likes the **Built six-pack tote** (\$24.95) which lets partygoers bring a beverage offering while leaving the host with an insulated carrier to use in the future. Swinging the neoprene tote by the handle, Hegtvedt adds, "Even the guys don't mind bringing something like this for a gift!"



## TABLETOP TRENDS

Striking a balance between stylish and sturdy can be tough when it comes to outdoor dinnerware — dropping a plate on a concrete patio is a death sentence, but there's nothing chic (not to mention environmentally friendly) about paper or Styrofoam. Enter Zak's line of colorful confetti **recycled melamine plates, cups and bowls** (\$5.50–\$35), which meld style with durability and eco-consciousness. "If you drop a bowl nothing happens, you can even leave them out in the rain," says Ray. "And it's all recycled, down to the salt and pepper shakers." Ray also likes the store's array of maple trivets — made from circular sections of actual maple trees, bark included — which add a woody feel to outdoor tabletops.

Similarly functional and environmentally friendly are the Cool Shooters **silicone shot glass molds** (\$10.95) available at Patina. Simply fill the molds with water, freeze, and you have solid-ice shot glasses on a hot summer evening. "It's a great way to keep drinks cool in a fun way," says Hegtvedt.



## SET THE SCENE

The same yard that hosts afternoon T-ball games and lemonade stands can quickly convert to party mode with well-placed lighting accents. At Bibelot, Ray points to a series of teardrop-shaped woven **metal tealight holders** (\$39.95) that can hang from trees or decks to cast a subtle glow over a meal, while Patina's Hegtvedt highlights her store's brightly-colored **recycled metal lanterns** (\$16–\$28) for a more whimsical feel.

Fans of the popular large fire bowls that dot Southwest yards will like Bibelot's miniaturized version, called a **Firepot** (\$24), which features a stylish hand-glazed ceramic bowl that burns a fuel gel for a small twinkling flame at each table. "These are one of our most popular items right now," adds Ray, who plans to add one to her own shopping basket when more arrive in stock.

## TIPS FROM THE PROS

Laura Mullen of Laura Mullen Event Design in Minneapolis has helmed more than 250 events, some with guest lists upwards of 15,000. While few Southwest yards will see that kind of traffic this summer, Mullen says her party tips are applicable to any size event.

1. **Have a plan B.** "In Minnesota things can go awry weather-wise and bug-wise, so have an action plan ready," suggests Mullen. "Even at night in the summer it can get cold, so I like to keep a few cheap wraps on hand."

2. **Make your house noticeable** — especially if you're inviting guests who have never been to your neighborhood. "Line your walkway with luminaria so guests can recognize your house. They set a festive tone as well," says Mullen.

3. **Rent plates and linens**, instead of using paper. Even if you just need four plates or a set of tablecloths, rental companies like Aarcee can typically outfit small orders.

4. **Class it up with candles.** Mullen says you can't go wrong — even with the citronella kind. "Real candlelight makes a party very adult," says Mullen. "Set up pillar candles and votives throughout the yard."

5. **Keep the peace.** Because homes in Southwest are close together, Mullen recommends setting a time at which a party either moves indoors or to an alternate location, like a neighborhood pub. Or, if you like your neighbors, "Definitely invite them!"

6. **Skip the bottles.** Save on recycling by picking up several growlers from local breweries and putting them out in tubs of ice. Guests can then choose from a variety of local brews, and you're not left rounding up bottles.

7. **Guests, bring flowers in a vase.** "If you just bring the flowers then the host has to stop what she's doing to put them in water." Or, be practical: "A bag of ice is always a favorite gift to bring because parties never seem to have enough."