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Opening Extract from...

Norwegian Wood

Chopping, Stacking and Drying Wood
the Scandinavian Way

Written by Lars Mytting

Published by MacLehose Press

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Building a fire to warm your home is incredibly satisfying.

Splitting logs, stacking and seasoning the wood, and then building a fire is the height of self-sufficiency. *Norwegian Wood* is a practical and inspiring book that teaches you how to do all of those things. A runaway bestseller in Europe, the book provides in-depth information about tree types, wood-stacking methods, tools, and stoves; it also examines the history of man's longstanding need for warmth and his passion for open fire.

And who better to impart wisdom on these subjects than an expert from Scandinavia, where the cold and extreme climates have obliged generations to carefully hone their knowledge of axes, logs, and heat.

Lars Mytting's *Norwegian Wood* is the definitive handbook on the basics of this renewable energy source, imparting valuable lessons from a rustic, self-sufficient, and simple way of life.

PREFACE: THE OLD MAN AND THE WOOD

I can still conjure up vividly the day when I realized that a wood fire is about so much more than just heat. It wasn't a cold winter's day. In fact, it was late April. I had put the summer tires on my Volvo weeks earlier, and scraped my skis clean of last year's wax, and I was all ready for the Easter holidays.

We had moved out here to the little town of Elverum, in southeastern Norway, just before Christmas. With the help of a block heater for the car and a couple of fan heaters in the house, we had made it through the last half of a not particularly arduous winter for the Østerdal region. A couple of retirees lived in the house next door: decent people of the generation born before the Second World War, hardworking and cheerful. Ottar, the man of the house, had trouble with his lungs and hadn't ventured outdoors much that winter.

On that particular spring day, with a gentle breeze blowing across the fields and water from the winter's thaw glinting brown in the ditches, nothing was further from my mind than thoughts of the winter now behind us.

A tractor pulling a trailer stopped outside and backed into the neighbors' driveway. Revved up the engine, tilted the trailer—and dumped an enormous pile of birch logs in front of the house.

Enormous? The load was gigantic. You could feel the ground tremble as the logs came thudding down.

Ottar appeared in his doorway, wheezing. He looked tired and unwell. This was a man whose most extensive outing since last November had been the walk down the path to his mailbox by the fence and back up again.

He stood there, studying the birch logs. Then he changed from his house slippers into outdoor shoes, closed the inside door behind him, and headed over toward the pile, navigating his way carefully around the muddy puddles. He bent down and picked up a couple of logs, weighing them in his hands, and began chatting to the farmer, who had by now turned off the engine.

Firewood *now*? I thought. When what everybody else is looking forward to is that first glass of beer out on the veranda?

Sure enough. Now was the time. I learned that later from Ottar. Wood should always be bought in April or May. Unseasoned wood. That way the drying process can be properly controlled, the price is lower, and you can get hold of as much of it as you need.

I stood watching from my kitchen window as the tractor left, and Ottar began to shift the wood.

He began to stack it.



DSC_0068 Caption TK

In the beginning each log seemed to exhaust him and he rested frequently, wheezing and panting for breath. I went over and we exchanged a few words. Thanks anyway, but no, he didn't need help. "Good wood this year," he volunteered. "Feel this one. Or this one. Beautiful white bark. Evenly cut, they've used a well-sharpened chain saw, you can tell from the way the chip here is square. I don't use a saw myself anymore. I'm too old. This has been neatly chopped too. You don't always get that now, not now that everybody's using a wood processor. Anyway, I must get on."

And Ottar went back to work, and I went back inside. Not long afterward I took a drive around the area and I noticed how buying wood in the spring was something that everybody here seemed to do. Especially in front of the older-looking houses: always a woodpile. Stocking up, like buying your ammunition in preparation for the elk-hunting season. Or canned food before you set off on a polar expedition.

A week went by and Ottar's pile of wood wasn't looking any smaller. Not until another week passed did I notice the top of the pile was slightly flatter now. And wasn't there a change in him too? Didn't he seem to have a bit more of a spring in his step?

We began talking. He didn't really have that much to say about what he was doing. Words weren't necessary. For a man who had suffered his way through a long winter, struggling against age and ill health, a man who had once been able-bodied and up to the challenge of any physical labor, here at last was a job where things made sense again. Once more he was able to enjoy the feeling of doing something meaningful, and the sense of calm security that comes to the man who knows he is well prepared, he is early, he has time on his side.

I never tried to get Ottar to talk about his feeling for wood. I preferred to watch him in action, peacefully getting on with the job. It was basically so simple and straightforward and yet, in the way *he* did it, there was also something almost noble about it.

Just once, he mentioned something that was not strictly practical: "The scent is the best thing of all," he said. "The scent of fresh birch. Hans Børli—my favorite poet—wrote a poem about the scent."

Ottar spent a month on his woodpile. Stopping now and then, but never for too long, to savor the smell, and the smell of sap from the smattering of spruce logs that came with the load. Until one day there was nothing left but the twigs, chippings, and bark, which he gathered up for use as kindling.

I've never seen a man change quite the way he did. Old age and infirmity were still there, but with this sudden flowering of spirit and energy he was able to keep them in their place. He started taking short walks, he stood more erect. One day he even powered up a bright yellow lawn tractor and cut the grass.

Was it just the activity and the summer warmth that made him better? I don't think so. It was the wood. All his life he'd chopped his own firewood. And although he'd put away his chain saw for good now, he still enjoyed the feel of each log in his hand, the smell that made him feel he was at work inside a poem, the sense of security in his stack, the pleasing thought of the winter that lay ahead, with all those hours of sitting contentedly in front of his woodburning stove. In much the same way, I suppose, that no one gets tired of carrying bars of gold, he knew that what he held in his hands was his insurance against the cold to come.

That's how this book was born. In my rear-wheel-drive Volvo 240, my quest took me to some of the coldest places in Norway to visit the burners and choppers of wood. I have stopped at crossroads to listen for the buzz of a chain saw or—best of all—the faint creaking sounds of an old man at work with a bow saw. Made my careful approach and tried to bring the conversation around to the subject of wood.

The factual material in this book represents the distilled wisdom of my encounters with people who are passionate about wood, enthusiasts as well as professional researchers. I have benefited greatly from my conversations with

experts in the fields of combustion and silviculture. And, not least, from the series of research reports published annually under the modest title *Proceedings of the Norwegian Forest and Landscape Institute*.

Along the way I've tried out most of the techniques I've been introduced to. I've dried finely chopped oak in our kitchen oven, struggled to build a beehive woodpile, miscalculated the trajectory of a felled pine. And I've been on a quest to discover the soul of the wood fire. But wood people don't always like to put their passion into words. This is something you have to discover for yourself, in the tall, elegantly shaped woodpiles, in the fresh layer of caulk applied to an old black woodburning stove, in an open woodshed with its long wall angled south (don't worry, all will be explained later). Thus much of this book is concerned with *method*, because it is about feelings that are communicated through method. On publication it attracted a surprisingly large readership throughout Scandinavia, selling in excess of two hundred thousand copies in Norway and Sweden alone. Firewood enthusiasts from all parts of the world wrote to share their own experiences, and the most useful and important of these have been included in this new edition. For the English-language edition, an appendix has been added listing TK.

I hope the concentration on method will also make this a useful book, because if it omitted all mention of tree felling, soapstone stoves, how to sharpen chain saws, and different ways of stacking wood, it would amount to little more than a scholarly treatise on the subject for people who neither chop nor stack nor burn wood themselves.

Wood isn't something much thought about or talked about in Norwegian public life, at least not until the larger connections are made to the goal of a society based on bioenergy. Yet wood will always resonate at some deep level inside me and my compatriots, because our relationship to fire is so ancient, so palpable, and so universal.

That's why this book is dedicated to you, Ottar. You remembered something the rest of us keep forgetting: that winter comes around each year.

Elverum, -24°F (-31°C)
Lars Mytting



CHAPTER 5

THE WOODPILE





It took a while, but that didn't bother them, as long as it turned out the way they wanted.

—Nilas Tuolja, a Sami, speaking about Sami who had grown too old for any work other than stacking dried spruce

You know exactly where you are with a woodpile. Its share price doesn't fall on the stock market. It won't rust. It won't sue for divorce. It just stands there and does one thing: It waits for winter. An investment account reminding you of all the hard work you've put into it. On bitterly cold January mornings it will bring back memories of those spring days when you sawed, split, and stacked as you worked to insure yourself against the cold. There's that twisted knot that just wouldn't surrender to your ax. And isn't that the log you pushed in at the wrong angle, making the whole pile collapse? Yes, that's the one all right. Well, winter's here, and now it's your turn to feed the flames.

And on the subject of woodpiles, let's hear from Thoreau once more. "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts" was his mantra, but his most famous words on the subject of wood are probably these: "Every man looks at his wood-pile with a kind of affection. I love to have mine before my window, and the more chips [around the chopping block] the better to remind me of my pleasing work."

Here is the majestic result of all your hard work. And the sight of a woodpile is the sight of security itself. A lot of people like to build it on a spot where it can be seen from the kitchen window. It makes a marvelous view. Like

a geological layer on a mountainside, the pile is a reminder of the work you did last year, with the colors of the rarer sorts of wood showing up in lateral stripes, and unsplit wood from small trees tracing small, circular patterns within the expanse of wood chopped from the more common trees the previous year.

Good to look at a woodpile may well be, but its primary purpose is the essentially practical one of ensuring that the wood dries, and remains as dry as possible. In the final analysis it is the stacking of wood that dictates its quality, in regard both to moisture content and to appearance. For this reason many enthusiasts ready their wood in two distinct stages, first drying it in the open air and then, sometime in the autumn, moving it to the woodshed. Whichever it is, the lapse of time between the standing tree and the chopped and split logs in the woodpile should be as short as possible.

Wood is best (meaning driest and least exposed to fungi) when dried *quickly*. Wood that has been dried quickly also seems to absorb less moisture in the autumn. Actually, a great deal depends on the first month. The methods employed to dry timber intended for use as building material and in furniture making often focus on the need to *prevent* the wood from developing cracks and so are of little interest to the woodcutter. As much surface area as possible should be exposed to wind and sunlight. This is best achieved by positioning the pile so that the wind blows freely through it from all angles, ensuring at the same time that it is sheltered from the rain. Just letting the logs lie on the ground and hoping for the best will not do. Compare it with how you deal with the washing: You would never put it out to dry rolled up in a ball on the ground. If there is a choice between storing the wood somewhere warm or somewhere well ventilated, the latter is the preferred option. It is wind that gets wood really dry.

You hear rumors of wood so densely stacked that you could hardly slip a cigarette paper between the logs, but such stacking should be done only with wood that is already dry. In fact the ideal way to dry wood is to pile it as loosely as possible short of collapse. The old-timers had a rule for this too: Unseasoned wood should be stacked so loosely that a mouse could run through the tunnels. If wind and sun are allowed to do their work, it will dry quickly. In the late

PAGE 110 A low square pile is a good choice for short wood.

PREVIOUS LEFT At the Kuremäe monastery in Estonia, the nuns build these round stacks, which are six and a half feet (six meters) tall. The wood is twenty-four inches (sixty centimeters) long, and they use ladders for most of the process.

PREVIOUS RIGHT Erling Gjøl, from Ådalsbruk in Norway, with the result of his springtime work. He built a standing carousel (which you can see in the background), a method also used by the Sami people in northern Norway.

summer it can be transferred to a shed that will provide shelter from the rain and snow, and there you can stack it as densely as you like.

Pallets or poles laid in parallel along the ground will protect the stacked wood from moisture rising from below, but protection from rain is also needed. Black sheet iron is ideal for the purpose. The sheet retains the heat, helping to speed up the drying process, and can be positioned so that the upper layers of the wood are aired. Plastic or tarpaulin can also be used, though these will never allow as much air to circulate as a hard roof. Under no circumstances should the wood be wrapped, because the air within gets so damp that the wood is exposed to attack by mold and fungus and will not dry. Many firewood enthusiasts leave their wood without a top covering in spring, because there is more moisture that needs to get out than the small amount of water that might make its way in during the spring after a few showers. Some people actually expose their split logs to rain or water for a short period at the very outset of the drying process as a way of washing out the sap or the tannin in oak, or to get the wood to swell. The logs are then dried normally and develop large splits. Generally speaking, however, the risk of fungus is so great that this procedure is not recommended save for those who enjoy trying out new things.

It is possible to stack unseasoned wood in a woodshed, but provision must be made for air to circulate easily around it. A large pile of wood in a shed that is not well ventilated will take an age to dry and is more susceptible to mold and fungus.

Avoid anything that might seem like a *temporary solution*. Typically this might be a tentlike structure made of plastic or a tarpaulin. These invariably collapse and your wood will end up moldy and rotten.

The basic requirement for a loose construction and a well-ventilated site need be no hindrance to the aesthetics of your woodpile. And it will be a practical aestheticism, because a well-assembled stack makes for dry wood that in turn makes for good heat in your stove. It will also be able to withstand the buffeting of the winds. Hard work and imagination are called for, so results can reveal something about the builder's own character. But there are dangers: Good sculptural ideas can turn out to be trickier than you had expected, twisted wood creates instabilities, and shrinkage has to be taken into account. From unseasoned to bone-dry, the volume of the stack will shrink by between 7 and 20 percent (the exact figure depends on the kind of tree), and with the passing of spring this can cause it to sag and collapse. Wood piled in the winter can give you a nasty surprise when spring comes along and one fine day you discover your beautiful woodpile collapsed in a jumbled heap. Suspecting the neighbor of sabotage usually turns out to be a dead end; the more likely explanation is that the ground frost has melted, causing the foundations to move.

Stacking is an aesthetic and a practical challenge, so much so that in the late nineteenth century, in the heavily forested state of Maine, young American women considering a potential husband were advised first to consult a piece of folksy wisdom that revealed the young man's character based on the way he stacked his wood. In all Scandinavia it is also common wisdom that you can tell a lot about a person from his woodpile. For those looking to marry, the following list may be used as a rule of thumb.

Upright and solid pile: Upright and solid man

Low pile: Cautious man, could be shy or weak

Tall pile: Big ambitions, but watch out for sagging and collapse

Unusual shape: Freethinking, open spirit, again, the construction may be weak

Flamboyant pile, widely visible: Extroverted, but possibly a bluffer

A lot of wood: A man of foresight, loyal

Not much wood: A life lived from hand to mouth

Logs from big trees: Has a big appetite for life, but can be rash and extravagant

Pedantic pile: Perfectionist; may be introverted

Collapsed pile: Weak will, poor judge of priorities

Unfinished pile, some logs lying on the ground: Unstable, lazy, prone to drunkenness

Everything in a pile on the ground: Ignorance, decadence, laziness, drunkenness, possibly all of these

Old and new wood piled together: Be suspicious: might be stolen wood added to his own

Large and small logs piled together: Frugal. Kindling sneaked in among the logs suggests a considerate man

Rough, gnarled logs, hard to chop: Persistent and strong willed, or else bowed down by his burdens

No woodpile: No husband

The Small Arts of the Woodpile

The first rule is to ensure that the pile you build is appropriate for the kind of wood you are stacking. Twisted wood is best stored in low piles, drying bins, or at the center of circular stacks, but there is no limit to what you can do with straight logs. And the longer they are, the easier they are to stack. Short firewood under 10 inches in length will collapse as soon as you look at it and should be stored in a sack or piled up against a wall. If your stove can take it, logs between 14 and 16 inches long are a lot easier to build up into a freestanding woodpile,

whereas 24-inch cordwood will give you a stable construction regardless of height, shape, and wind conditions.

The most stable constructions are achieved using logs that are roughly the same length. Learning to build a pile may take some time, and it is not a job that can be rushed. Each log needs to be thought of as a brick. You will need to become familiar with the factors governing the inner stability of the stack, see the way quartered and halved logs slot together, and continually check the pile for instability and unevenness. Any unevenness will be reproduced as the pile rises, and special account will have to be taken of logs with knots and other irregularities by, for example, placing logs with similar irregularities upside down on top of them. Logs that have been cut in half are the most stable, and these are particularly recommended for use in a crisscross pattern at the ends of the pile.

Logs dry best when the surface contact between them is minimal, but as the stack moves while drying, the logs will tend to sink down, with the attendant danger of the construction listing. To give an example, quartered logs that balance each other with their ends pointing downward can prove very unpredictable and it is advisable to pile these so that they rest on each other on two surfaces. Many people use the so-called crossbar, a log stacked sideways on the rest of the pile, as a way of adjusting for a potential irregularity. The practice is frowned upon by aesthetic pedants partly because it disturbs the lines of the stack, but mostly because it reveals the presence of an unstable section lower down in the pile.

In Norway, discussions on the vexed question of whether logs should be stacked with the bark facing up or down have marred many a christening and spoiled many a wedding when wood enthusiasts are among the guests. In the autumn of 1998 the correspondence columns of *Østlendingen*, a local newspaper in Hedmark County, hosted a heated debate on the subject. The bark-down faction maintained that bark turned upward acts as a roof that hinders the escape of moisture from the logs. A scientific research project (which included CAT scanning in a Norwegian hospital and the assistance of a local secondary school!) demonstrated that though there is some truth in this, the overall effect is negligible. Yet there are two distinct schools of thought on the matter here in Norway: bark up, along the coast; bark down, inland. The reason is that coastal rain is often hard and lashing, and because bark is water-repellent, the wood stays drier with the bark on top. Inland regions don't have the same problem, provided the wood is well protected above. Bark down, however, is a standard rule for the bottom layers as a protection against ground moisture, and bark up on piles that have no top cover.

Today the art of stacking wood in Norway is confined to a few distinct



A sun-wall stack in three sections, reinforced for the winter

styles. Piles built against walls offer few possibilities for variation and the circulation of air is not optimal, but the construction is stable. A drive through rural Norway will soon show how widespread this method is. In Finland the situation is different; there, fire-safety regulations prohibit the stacking of large quantities of wood against an external wall. There are also regulations governing how much wood one may store within a specified distance from a dwelling place, with the result that the country has developed a strong tradition of freestanding piles. Such piles are more difficult to build, but they can be sited where wind conditions for drying are advantageous. A good choice is where the drying rack stands, or—more realistically—the second-best place, after the place where the drying rack stands.

The Norwegian Sun-Wall Woodpile

This is a real classic—where regulations permit it. It is functional, stable, and easy to build. The wood is piled against the wall of a house, preferably a sun-facing wall and—for best air circulation—not too close to other buildings or trees. Pallets or long poles are used to keep it off the ground. If the logs are small it is a good idea to attach planks, four or five every square meter, at an angle of ninety degrees to the wall. When the logs press up against these planks the pile locks and stands firm. It is also sensible to leave a small passage between the wood



One of the many sculpture stacks that pop up in rural parts of Norway during the spring. This one is made by Bjarne Granli at Drevsjø.

and the wall to facilitate the flow of air. The higher the structure the greater the risk of collapse, so better to have a pile tilting inward than outward. Often, however, the best way to avoid the risk of collapse is just to nail up a retaining plank that runs the length of the pile, and this may be a requirement if the pile is up around the height of the gutter. With the first pile in place a second can be built against it. The inner pile gets less air, but if you have enough wood to last you a couple of winters this is a very useful method. A three-layer-wall, a variation on this style, is shown on page 118.

The Firewood Wall or Firewood House

This is a variation on the sun-wall woodpile. The external wall is covered to its full height in wood, completely obscuring the original surface. The effect is particularly striking if all four walls (excluding doors and windows naturally, one mustn't get carried away!) are clad in firewood in this fashion. The result is reminiscent of an even more revolutionary construction, the freestanding woodshed, which is built of wood in its entirety. This is defined as a stack and so is not covered by, for example, the Finnish fire-safety regulations. A woodshed with a surface area of about fifteen square meters will require about eleven cubic meters of wood, and the wood should be between sixteen and twenty-four inches long.

