

XTREME
FLAME KITZ

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Playing with fire

Tailpipe flamethrowers make a sizzling comeback, but not everyone's pleased

By Chris Woodyard
USA TODAY

Jimmy Farrell knows how to live up a backyard barbecue.

He backs out his car, revs the engine and shoots 20-foot gushers of flame out the twin tailpipes.

"The guys dig it, and the girls are afraid I'm going to burn myself up," says Farrell, 41, of Middletown, N.J., who has been lighting up cars for 15 years without any more damage than an occasional melted taillight lens.

A blast from the past, automotive flamethrowers appear to be making a revival.

Several entrepreneurs have started selling inexpensive kits to allow car enthusiasts to shoot flames 2 feet or longer. They say they are seeing surprising interest in their products, which add nothing to performance and are meant strictly for showing off.

"It's like the new fad," says Clay Miller, CEO of Rasckl Enterprises in Corry, Pa. He says he took orders for his Xtreme Flame Kitz from as far away as Australia and Switzerland when he set up a booth in November at the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) trade expo in Las Vegas.

Race car driver Christian Rado unveiled a modified Scion tC sports car at the same auto accessories show. It will be capable of shooting a 30-foot plume of fire out the back when it's completed this month.

The car, meant strictly for demonstrations at auto shows, is being made with an array of spy gadgets, as if it had belonged to James Bond. Besides throwing flames, it will be able to lay down an oil slick or a smoke screen.

Rado says amateurs shouldn't be playing with fire. "Obviously, it's completely illegal to do something like that on the street," says Rado, president of World Racing. "We're

professionals. We build race cars and show vehicles for a living. We're not going to endanger ourselves or anybody else."

Sellers of flamethrower kits are careful to fill their websites with disclaimers and warnings, mostly noting that flamethrowers are illegal and are intended only for shows or safe use on private property.

"It's not intended for street use, and (we) say that all over," says Jeff Schloemer, president of Eat My Flames in Milwaukee.

He says he has sold thousands of the kits over the past year. The twin-tailpipe model costs \$45. Professional installation can add \$100 to \$250.

Fire officials aren't amused. "My gut feeling is that it should be banned," says James Burns, New York's state fire administrator and president of the National Association of State Fire Marshals. He cited the kits' potential to start fires or injure bystanders. "I haven't seen them, but when I do, I'm going to go after them."

The kits usually work the same way. A spark plug is rigged into the tailpipe. After being revved up, the engine is coaxed into emitting a stream of unburned gasoline at the flip of a switch. It's ignited as it is being expelled — producing a modest flame.

Miller says he has improved on the idea by making it fire electronically. "Ours gives just the exact timing, just the right amount of gas," he says, to produce a 3- to 5-foot flame.

Auto accessories marketers say they usually don't pass judgment, but in the case of automotive flamethrowers, they'll make an exception.

"Without a doubt, this is one of the more extreme products that I've ever heard of," SEMA Vice President Peter MacGillivray says. "Like extreme fashions, they don't tend to be superpractical."



Burn, baby, burn: Clay Miller sells a do-it-yourself kit to make flames come out of vehicles' exhaust systems. The average flames are 4 to 5 feet long. This dual exhaust flame kit sells for \$89.99 at Flamekitz.com.

Bob Findlay, an independent filmmaker in Flanders, N.J., has produced an hour-long movie on flamethrowers at car shows, including one whose flames reach 75 feet. It always drew a crowd.

Hot rodders have been creating tailpipe flames for years, going back to the 1940s and 1950s. Bill "Fireball" Ross of Bethel, Conn., used to tour in his 1958 Chevrolet pickup modified to use

pressurized jet fuel to shoot flames up to 65 feet. He says he quit the demonstrations about five years ago when "it got too crazy" and more car shows barred flame-throwing for safety and liability concerns.

But with the 2001 hit street-racing movie *The Fast and the Furious*, in which a scene depicted four cars throwing fire in unison on the starting line, flame shooting has

been making a comeback. Farrell is certainly doing his part. He shot flames during the summer from his 1967 Ford Fairlane, which he sold to buy a 1972 Chevrolet El Camino. Now he's equipping the El Camino with a flamethrower. "The most fun is when I'm in my backyard and someone says, 'Jimmy crack it out,'" he says. "It's the best barbecue conversation you could have."

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