

B·A·M·B·O·O



Truax rods



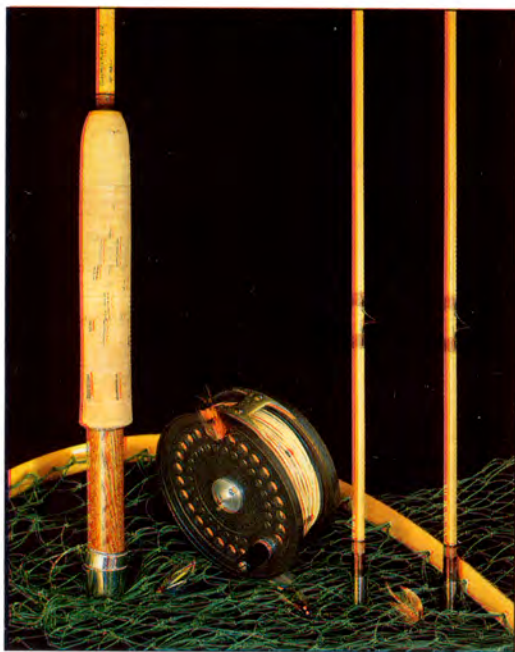
Schaff rods



Cane rods by Leon Hanson

JOHN GIERACH

Cane rod by Marc Aaronner



Twin-tip bamboo rod by Hoagy Carmichael



Thomas and Thomas cane rods by Tom Dorsey



Orvis bamboo rods

THERE ARE SOME COMMON misconceptions about bamboo rods: that they're all old (as in "I see you've got one of those *old* cane rods,"); that, old or new, they're obscenely expensive and used only by the rich and famous; and that, although they're classy and pretty to look at, they don't stand up to graphite in terms of performance.

Well, there are plenty of old ones around. Many are still in use, others are proudly displayed in museums and private collections, and sections of others are being used as tomato stakes and to prop open windows. Granted, earlier in this century more cheap, bad bamboo rods were produced than good or great ones, but if you're tempted to stake a tomato plant with an old fly rod, please check with someone who knows the value of old cane rods before you do it.

As for new rods, they are, happily, coming out of the woodwork. I don't know how many bamboo rod makers are working in this country today. While researching this article, I contacted 28 craftsmen who are currently making bamboo fly rods professionally, as well as some companies who are importing them and some dealers in previously-owned rods. However, Hoagy Carmichael, famous rod maker and co-author with Everett Garrison of the classic book *A Masters Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod*, told me there are "over 100" rod makers working in basements and garages around the country at night and on weekends, some of whom are turning out excellent (though little-known) work and who are, not unimportantly says Carmichael, "helping to keep this craft alive."

You may consider that a disclaimer. I've talked to everyone I could find, but I haven't talked to *every-one*.

Bamboo rods may be seen by the general fishing public as somewhat enigmatic, but they are still very much in demand. So much that Martin Keane, dealer in "modern and historic fly tackle," says there are "dramatic shortages in almost every category" from new rods to antiques, and many of the rod makers I talked to are back-ordered by a year or more.

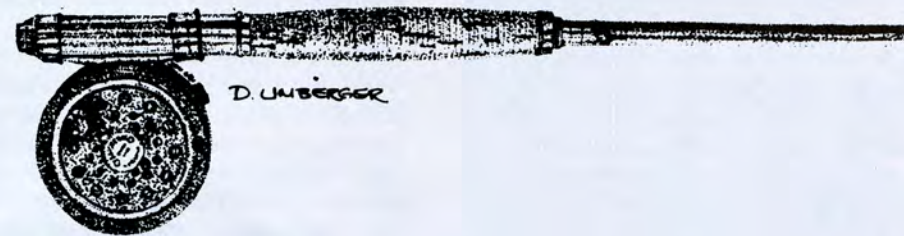
Tom Dorsey, rod maker at Thomas & Thomas, said there is a bamboo rod revival going on—the second one in 15 years. He said he expects this to tone down, "when some other plastic material rivals it" (as graphite did) and then regain momentum again when the new material becomes passé—this is the way of classics.

High prices invariably come to haunt discussions of bamboo rods, and some of them *are* pretty steep. New bamboo fly rods made in America range in price from about \$400 to well into the four figures, depending on the name of the maker, the type of rod and cosmetic options. It's not all that difficult to pay from \$1,500 to \$2,000 for a new rod, although many of the fine pieces are priced more in the \$600 to \$800 range.

On the other hand, at least two companies, Derbyshire Rodmakers, Ltd. and Partridge of Redditch Ltd., are currently importing very serviceable English-made bamboo rods, some models of which sell for between \$230 and \$350. By all accounts, these are good production rods and the prices are low because of lower

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Buying a Bamboo Rod



Ten things to look for

1. Is it straight? It should be. Put the rod together and sight down the guides. If the guides seem to spiral off to one side it means there's a twist in the splines, which is not the sign of a good rod.

A set or slight bend in the rod tip will sometimes occur in a used rod. This is often a simple repair job for someone qualified to do the work, but a set in a new rod is unacceptable.

2. Look at the wraps. Are they clean, crisp and tight with no gaps or cross-wraps? Were the feet of the guides filed down so the wraps taper smoothly from the guides into the blank, or is there an unsightly bump? Attention to cosmetic detail is a mark of a good rod maker.

3. Check the finish. A good varnish job should be smooth and clean with no drips, smudges or dust spots and should have a rich, deep look to it. An impregnated rod should have a dull luster.

A good impregnated finish lasts longer and requires less care, but some rod makers say it dampens the action of the bamboo. This is probably a matter of opinion.

Speaking of care, no bamboo rod, be it varnished, impregnated or otherwise, should be stored wet or damp, as this can damage the wraps and the rod itself. Remember, bamboo is biodegradable.

4. How much does it weigh? A bamboo fly rod will be a bit heavier than a com-

parable graphite or fiberglass, but some bamboo rods are heavier than others. This is seldom a problem with the shorter, lighter rods, but some mid-weight to heavy bamboo rods can be real clubs.

5. What kind of reel seat does it have? Sliding-ring and cap and ring reel seats are very stylish and handsome, but some fly fishers find that their reel seats work loose during a day of casting and they prefer a locking seat.

A sliding-ring seat with a cork spacer is lightweight and good looking, but on some the ring has a tendency to bite into the cork and leave a scar.

Some exotic woods, like mesquite, have been found to be too brittle for use as reel seat spacers. For looks and performance, you probably can't go far wrong with walnut.

6. How big is the stripping guide? The traditional bamboo fly rod was designed for silk lines and has a very small stripping guide which, when used with a fatter, modern line, causes a "ballooning" of the line between the line hand and stripping guide that seriously cuts down the amount of line you can shoot. Today's bamboo rods should have a larger, roomy stripping guide.

7. Looking for an older rod to save money? That's an excellent idea, but beware. Some of the older production bamboo fly rods (especially the top models once made by Heddon, Granger and Phillipson) are excellent fly rods by any standard and real bar-

gains in today's market. On the other hand, *most* of the inexpensive bamboo rods made prior to the 1950s were junk and are not worth more than \$10 now. Genuine treasures still sometimes turn up at garage sales, but it's best to check with a reputable dealer before paying good money for any bamboo rod. In fact, it's probably best to buy the rod from a reputable dealer in the first place.

8. Don't know much about bamboo fly rods? There are ways to remedy that. Read, study and talk to any and all bamboo rod aficionados you can find. Bamboo rod nuts are like nuts anywhere, they're more than happy to talk about their passion, especially when the fish aren't biting. If you're real nice, they might even let you cast their baby, but don't be insulted if they don't offer.

It's also a good idea to order some, if not all, of the new and previously owned rod catalogs and lists to see what's available and to get a feel for relative prices.

9. Don't buy a rod sight-unseen. Okay, that's not always possible, but if you can't handle and, preferably, cast the rod, make sure you can return it if you're not satisfied.

10. Most importantly, please yourself. Get a rod that casts well and feels good. Price often reflects quality, but not always. The real test of a fly rod is how well it works for the fisherman who uses it.

Bamboo . . .

labor costs in Europe and, as Thomas Widmar of Derbyshire said, because "there's not much stature involved in owning an English split-cane rod."

And there's at least one company in the U.S., Bob's Rod & Tackle in Denver, still making modestly priced bamboo fly rods. These rods, made by Paul Hightower, are based on the old Phillipson tapers and sell for between \$175 and \$250.

In other words, there are bamboo fly rods out there for just about every taste. The less expensive ones sell for, in some cases, less than you'd pay for a new graphite and the bigger-ticket rods, well, most are worth every penny if you can come up with the pennies. Such a rod is a fine casting tool, a joy to own, use and show off, and it will at least hold its value and probably appreciate with time, as long as you don't back over it with the car.

The investment potential of bamboo fly rods is mentioned more and more often these days as vintage rods by the legendary makers continue to climb in price on the collectors' market. As Todd Young, third generation rod maker at the Paul H. Young Company, said, "A rod that my father or grandfather made and sold for \$65 may now be sold for \$2,500."

And what about performance? This question tends to make fishermen and rod makers alike resort to poetry. Bamboo has that "feel" you're always hearing about, and *that warmth*, and that tradition. Tom Dorsey said, "If angling pleasure is what you're after, 'performance' takes on a new meaning. Fishing a bamboo rod is like making love—it's not always practical, just wonderful."

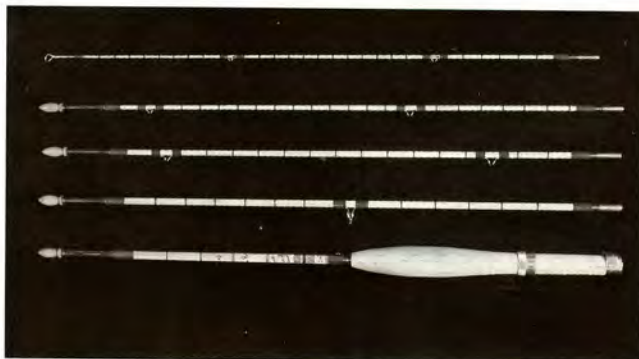
On the practical side, Dorsey pointed out that,

among other things, bamboo cushions light tippets better than the stiffer graphite, making it less likely that you'll break a fish off by over-striking.

A bamboo rod may also be easier for fishermen to cast at normal fishing ranges because the action will be somewhat slower and more progressive (and therefore more forgiving) than graphite. And, says Leon Hanson, the slight extra weight in a bamboo rod—compared to graphite—lets you feel your timing better.

There it is again: "feel."

I'm sure graphite boosters get tired of hearing the word, but I'm afraid I can't do any better. In fact, all I can do is get more obscure. For instance, a bamboo rod was described in a recent rod list as "personable," and when rod maker John Bradford handed me one of his rods to try last year he said it was a "gentleman's rod," and added, "Maybe I shouldn't let you cast it." It's like a friend of mine who tells me his Porsche



Five-piece bamboo by Derbyshire

"feels the road" better than my pickup does. I don't know what the hell he's talking about, although I might if he'd let me drive the thing.

The same suppleness that keeps you from breaking the fish off on the strike will also allow you to play that fish with a more sensitive (dare I say it?) *feel*. It's my own observation that you can safely play a fish harder with bamboo than with graphite—or "put more wood to it" as they used to say.

And then there's that matter of delicate presentations with dry flies and light tippets, and the equally important matter of line control in tight spots. Neither is impossible with graphite, but both are easier and more reliable with bamboo.

Ease and grace in casting, better cushioning of tippets, fish-playing advantages, fine presentation, better line control and, of course, warmth, heft, tradition and poetry. What more could you ask for?

Well, in some situations you could ask for more distance. And, for bigger cane rods for the heavier line weights, you could also ask for a little less weight. Almost to a man, the people I talked to said it was on the longer casts (and we're talking about *really long* casts here) and in the heavier line weights that graphite "has its place." Most of the people I talked to felt that, the cutoff point comes in the neighborhood of 8 or 8-1/2 feet for 6- or 7-weight lines.

Tom Morgan, rod maker and owner of the R.L. Winston Company, summed up the consensus as follows: "Do you want to have a casting competition for distance? Then graphite will win. Do you want to have a contest for delicacy of presentation and lower line speed? Then bamboo will win."



Art Weiler rod

If you look at the rod racks of fishermen who use both kinds of rods, you'll probably find that the shorter, lighter rods are bamboo and the longer, heavier ones are graphite. My own rod selection is like that, and it could be that a fisherman's relative level of devotion can be determined by how long and how heavy he'll go in a rod before switching from bamboo to graphite.

And there *are* still those who fish exclusively with bamboo rods. As John Bradford, rod maker at the J.A. Bradford Co., points out, "There's no one who actually *bates* bamboo, but there are people who *bate* graphite."

Of course fly rods do not cast themselves, so all this relative performance stuff depends on the caster. If someone tells you that such-and-such a rod (of whatever material) casts easily out to 100 feet, don't ask about the rod, ask first, "Who is that *guy*?"

Few bamboo rods are used on salt water these days—notice I said "few" rather than "none"—and some of the rod makers said they were not much in use in the West, either.

In defense of the Rocky Mountains, let me say that bamboo rods are, in fact, used here, although it's true you don't often see them on archetypal "big, windy rivers." The fine old Grangers and Phillipsons were made here, in Denver, Bob's Rod & Tackle is still turning out bamboo rods, and so is Charlie Jenkins of Denver. Charlie stopped making rods a while back, but was recently hounded out of retirement by insistent customers. The R.L. Winston Company is in Twin Bridges, Montana; Mike Clark of Lyons, Colorado makes lovely hand-planed bamboo rods and, well, you get the idea.

It may be true that, as Tom Rosenbauer, editor of the Orvis News says, "The real hotbed for cane use is in Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire." But Michigan rod maker Bob Summers is also right when he says that bamboo rods are used nationwide, adding, "We have many good builders from coast to coast."

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Bamboo Fly Rod Directory:

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Tom Clark
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Robert W. Lancaster
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T. Moran Rod Co.
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Redditch B97 5AU
England

Orvis
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(802) 362-1300

Partridge U.S.A. Inc.
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Bamboo . . .

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San Francisco rod maker Gary Howells has sold cane rods to customers in "every state in the Union," although as he points out, "Naturally you will see more bamboo rods in the areas that have the best trout fishing."

How do top-quality modern bamboo rods compare with the legendary rods by the great makers? As long as we underline *top quality*, most bamboo rod aficionados say they're every bit as good, if not better. Better by virtue of



VALERIE BAKER ILLUSTRATION

modern glues and varnishes and, in some cases, new tapers—or at least adjustments of the old ones.

Much of the work currently being done is based squarely in the past and the names Payne and Garrison are mentioned again and again. As rod maker and author Hoagy Carmichael puts it, "Men like Jim Payne showed the way for all other production rod makers, as did Everett Garrison for those of us who prefer to hand-plane the bamboo." For some cane rod lovers the method of rodcrafting employed by a particular cane rod maker seems to determine the sainthood that he invokes.

Speaking of Payne, Bill Ally at Research Engineering Company (REC) in Stowe, Vermont, reports that his company recently purchased the Payne rod operation and is now producing bamboo rods on Payne's original rodmaking equipment with the original tapers that are "As close to a Payne as we can get, without, of course, trying to fool anyone." Even the hardware and the thread have been duplicated.

Among the things REC acquired is Jim Payne's own work bench and some people have dropped by to ask if they can touch it.

As strong as tradition is, there are some departures from it. One rod maker many in the trade are watching closely is Barry Kustin, who is producing a split-bamboo and graphite rod. Once the pith has been removed from the bamboo splines, he glues a thin sheet of graphite on the inside. The finished rod is a hollow shaft made of six splines of bonded bamboo and graphite.

The hollow bamboo rod isn't a new idea, but putting graphite in there is new, if not futuristic.



Tod Young, the latest generation of rodmakers from the Paul H. Young Co., works in his shop near Traverse City, Michigan.

These rods have attracted attention, cautious and otherwise, and one rod maker said they would have to "stand the test of time" before they'd be accepted. Still, many of the people I talked to pointed to Kustin as one of the true innovators in the trade.

Naturally, when you get into bamboo rod tapers and variations in construction you're in an area where even



Rodmaker Bob Summers in his shop near Traverse City, Michigan.

the experts disagree. Another touchy subject is hand-planing the splines compared to making them on a milling machine—the distinction between the "handmade" and the "production" rod. The keys to a good rod are tapers, tolerances (down to 0.001 inch) and overall workmanship. Many cane rod enthusiasts say that a good production rod fishes every bit as well as a good hand-made one.

Then, again, others point out that it's

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Bamboo . . .

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Cane rods by Robert W. Lancaster

the hand-planed rod that has the personal mark of the craftsman on it. Rod maker Ron Kusse, who once worked for the H.L. Leonard Company, says that the larger cane rodmaking shops often lack the personal involvement and "intensity" of the lone rod builder, while Hoagy Carmichael cites workmanship. "It takes more time and more work to make a hand-planed bamboo blank, and if the care is taken, it stands to reason that the product will be better. The tapering will be more even, more exact."

Denver rod maker Charlie Jenkins thinks people enjoy the myth of the rod maker, "with his glasses down on the end of his nose, working alone in his basement in the middle of the night," a myth that survives, he said, "because it's pretty much true."

Some of the hand-made rods being produced today see the water seldom, if at all, because they become collectors' items while they're still just a gleam in the customer's eye. This irks some rod makers. Hoagy Carmichael, who makes about a dozen rods a year and gets \$1,750 apiece for them, said most of his customers use his rods sparingly. "It is a lot to pay for a rod, that I know, and they don't want something to happen to it, but I wish they'd air the silly thing out more often, because that is why I made it."

JOHN GIERACH lives in Longmont, Colo. His latest book is *Trout Bum*, published by Pruett Publishing Co., Boulder, Colo.

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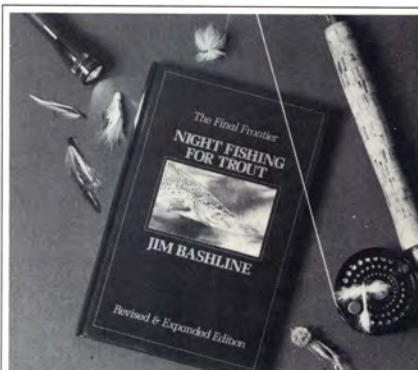
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