



Wizard of Blue Ridge

Engraving rods with Bill Oyster BY ZACH MATTHEWS

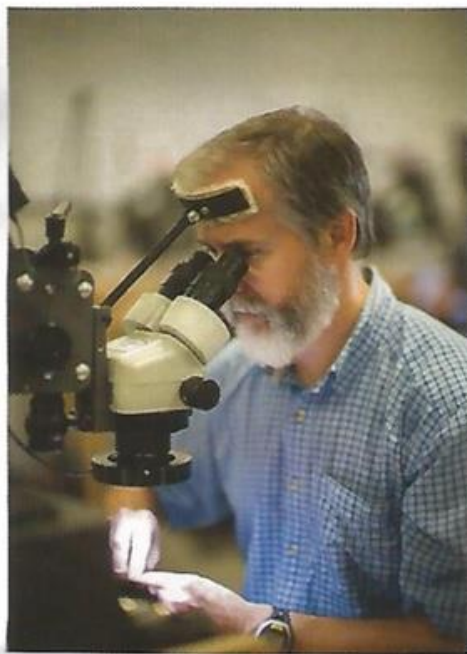
THE SHAVINGS LOOK A LOT LIKE A BEARD, I think to myself, glancing around what may be the ideal workshop. A half-dozen large, well-lit workbenches surround me, their surfaces and much of the floor deep in curly strips of discarded bamboo. I've been handed a draft beer from the kegerator in back—a friend's privilege, which I very much appreciate. Outside the door hangs a sign: "No one gets in to see the Wizard."

I am perched on a stool in the inner sanctum of a rod company called Oyster Bamboo, in Blue Ridge, Ga., a Norman Rockwell-esque town nestled among the green foothills of the southern Appalachians, mere minutes from the banks of the Toccoa River. This workshop is the

centerpiece not only of the rod company, but also of its rod-building school. Both are the brainchild of Bill Oyster, who, along with his wife Shannen and his understudy Riley Gudakunst, have rapidly become the world's most prolific teachers of bamboo rodmaking. In less than 20 years, Oyster has carved out a name among great rod builders like Leonard, Payne, or Garrison, all while sharing his art with dozens of newcomers.

Yet I didn't come here to talk bamboo; I came to talk *metal*. Oyster's engraving work on fly rod accent pieces now rivals that of European fine-shotgun manufacturers. Indeed, his current project—his largest and most expensive to date—is a 28-gauge shotgun called a Grulla Spanish side-by-side. It takes tremendous confidence to even cut into such a piece.

The engraving work started as an effort to differentiate his bamboo rods from his competitor's. "Engraving has always been part of bamboo rodmaking," Oyster says. "But engraving



took such a long time, it was usually saved for only the showpieces." Initially, Oyster hired the work out, sometimes with amusing consequences: "I had an engraver who did beautiful work, but didn't fish. He would return engravings upside down. Once he engraved the male side of the ferrule—the part that goes *inside* the female end." Eventually, Oyster decided to just teach himself.

He attended engraving school in Kansas (where, years later, he would join the faculty as a visiting instructor). His early work was relatively simple: "Just filling space with scrollwork, really." A natural artist, over time Oyster began to challenge himself with more and more complex designs. He crafted a Presidential seal for a rod that was going to Jimmy Carter. "I've had people ask for pictures of their dog, or the best fish they ever caught. I've engraved pictures of people's parrots on their rods," he says. "It's nice to have some artistic leeway though, when the customer requests it."

Engraving work is beyond meticulous. I watch as Oyster crouches over a large machine, like something you would see in an eye doctor's office. The piece, which will end up as the slide band of a reel seat, is placed firmly in a vise, with etching tools manipulated entirely by hand. Powerful magnification allows Oyster to see the finest detail; the very grain of the metal. He shows me some simple scroll work.

"What happens if you screw up?" I ask.

"You don't," he replies. And he isn't kidding. "At this level of detail, given the proper planning, it's actually hard to make an outright mistake," Oyster says. "But once you cut it in metal, it's there forever. It's similar to doing tattoo art."

Over time, Oyster has honed his work into a house style—one that has gained widespread recognition not just among rodmakers, but also gunsmiths, knifsmiths, even jewelers. "The focus will always be on bamboo, though," he says. "I am not about to start cutting soccer trophies." 