



Bill Oyster crafts bamboo rods in Blue Ridge, Ga., and regularly offers classes on rod-making.

A THING OF BEAUTY

Make your own bamboo rod and elevate the art of fly-fishing

BY PETER CARY

Fly-fishing has its own mystique: The caster's push and pull on the rod, the swishing of the line through the air, the quiet drop of the fly on the water, the chance that a fish will bite.

Once upon a time, nearly all fishing rods were made of bamboo, which greatly enhanced that mystique. The best ones were made by dedicated craftsmen, and you could get one that flexed just the way you wanted for your favorite stream and your casting style. Then along came fiberglass rods, and then ones made of resin and graphite fibers, and bamboo passed out of fashion.

But bamboo didn't go away. Some people kept fishing with it, eschewing "plastic" rods, and new anglers discovered the pleasures of fishing with bamboo.

The rods themselves are beautiful: tawny, hexagonal, lithe, whippy things. Fishing with them is beautiful, too. Bamboo rods tend to be more

flexible, they slow down your casting. You feel the rod load with the weight of the flyline on your backcast, and then when you cast forward, the rod — not you — throws the line.

"The leader rolls out beautifully and the fly just drops in the water," says Larry Tusoni, who makes bamboo rods in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains east of San Francisco.

You can always buy a bamboo fly rod — they typically cost \$1,200 to \$2,500 or more. But there's another, more appealing alternative — you can build your own.

Rod-makers around the country offer classes in bamboo rod-building. Classes last about a week, the work is hard and at the end you walk away with your own custom bamboo masterpiece, one you can hand down to your kids.

"It's not just Granddaddy's fly rod,

but the rod Granddaddy made himself," says Bill Oyster, who runs classes in Blue Ridge, Ga. "They are so pretty and so classic, they had always held my interest."

Oyster was working as a fishing guide when he found old books with instructions and made his first rod in 1998. Oyster, who has crafted rods for former President Jimmy Carter, taught his first student in 2000 and now offers at least a dozen classes a year.

In a typical class, students select the rod they want to build — how long,

how they want it to flex, what weight line it will throw. Then they go to work. Each student is given a 12-foot stalk of bamboo, cut into sections (usually 7 feet and 5 feet long). They split each section lengthwise into 24 long slivers, about a quarter-inch in diameter.

The best of the slivers are heat-

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treated and straightened, and then one by one, they are laid in a V-shaped groove in a 6-foot-long piece of steel. The student hand-planes the pieces from end to end, turning them and re-planing them until, eventually, each piece has a triangular cross-section.

Each piece will also have a taper, that is, a specified width at discrete intervals along its length. All rods have an obvious taper, since they're thicker at the handle end than at the tip, but custom rods are thicker or thinner than others in certain places, giving each rod its distinct action.

The planing is tedious — the work is measured in thousandths of an inch — and takes about three days. Then six pieces, each with the same triangular cross-section, are glued together to make the butt section, and six thinner ones are glued to make the tip section.

When the glue is dry, students sand and varnish the rod and add the cork handle, the reel seat, the ferrules that will connect the butt section with the tip section and the line guides.

Then it's time to write their names on the rods, wait for a final coat of varnish to dry and go fishing.

"Making them is fun. Using them is even more fun," says Oyster.

Does a student have to be an accomplished woodworker to make a rod? Hardly — most students have never even used a plane.

"It is a lot of work," Oyster agrees, "but in 15 years I've never had a non-completed rod."

Kelley Baker, 67, who teaches rod-making in Falmouth, Maine, has had students ranging in age from 14 to 84. One woman who didn't even fish made "an absolutely beautiful rod" that she planned to give to her son, Baker says.

Tusoni, who teaches classes in his workshop in Angels Camp, Calif., learned the art from his father and made his first bamboo rod when he was 10. He's fished bamboo ever since.

"Bamboo rods are slower, you relax with them and you feel the rod better," Tusoni says. "And you catch more fish." ●

KEEPING TRADITION ALIVE: Both Baker's Bamboo Flyrods in Falmouth, Maine, and its students carefully craft bamboo rods, below. The work at Baker's includes meticulous planing of the wood, above right.



AN ELEGANT TOUCH

Bill Oyster makes bamboo rods and also hand-engraves ferrules for the rods.



DETAILED WORK

An engraved reel seat cap from Oyster will add a finishing touch to a bamboo rod.