

Everything you need to know to buy a bamboo rod!—page 2

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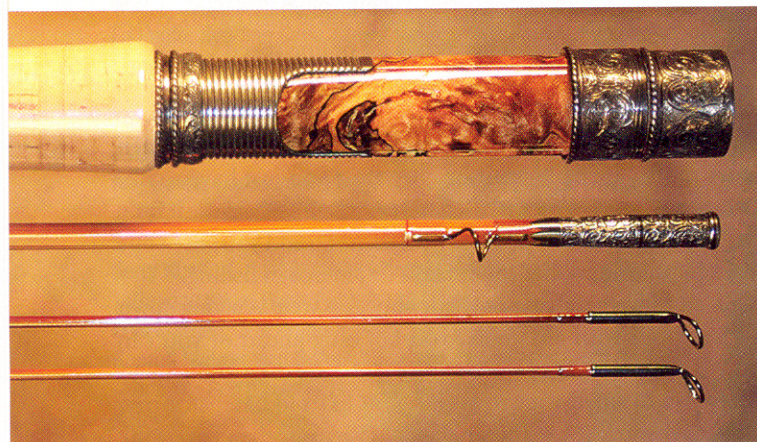
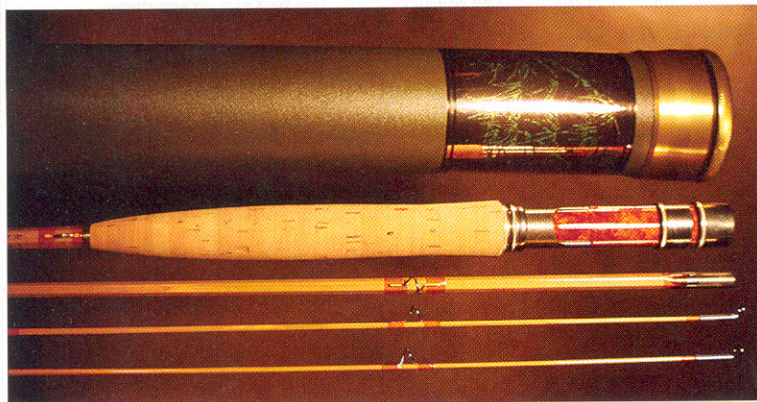
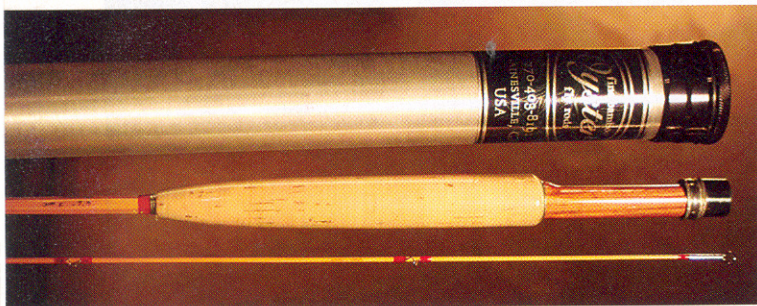


PLEASE DISPLAY UNTIL 12/15

Where the Money Goes

Time is money, so the longer a cane rod takes to make, the more it usually costs. Of course, more expensive components can drive up the price, as well. Georgia cane-rod maker William Oyster offers three levels of quality that illustrate the degrees of craftsmanship (and the attendant prices) available from many custom builders. For \$845, Oyster offers the Guide Series (top), hard-core fishing tools for anglers who don't need a lot of frills. For about twice the price, the Signature Series rods (center) add features such as a spare tip, screw-locking reel seat, agate guides, and more labor-intensive wraps and varnishing techniques. The Master Series rods, which start at \$2,620, are true works of art, with reel seats and ferrules that are cold-blued and hand-engraved by Oyster himself. All three series are available in the same tapers and actions, although the components and finishing affect the latter somewhat. According to Oyster, he sells about twice as many Master Series rods as he does the other two series combined. Obviously, when most folks make the decision to buy a bamboo rod, they jump in with both feet. But you don't have to.

—Philip Monahan



cap," A. K. Best says, "and it's probably not even toxic." The only thing a graphite rod smells like is, well, nothing.

Most graphite-rod makers today focus their marketing muscle on the high-modulus, fast-action rods that have proved to be cash cows. Unsurprisingly, fast-action graphite now dominates the market. Graphite as a material has changed the way we fish: longer, stiffer rods allow us to throw heavy nymph rigs and make longer casts. Cane has always been able to provide these same opportunities, but at a cost: weight. "After all," Orvis's Logan continues, "would you rather swing an eight-ounce bamboo rod or a three-ounce graphite stick if you're chasing steelhead all day?" (He's exaggerating for effect; bamboo single-handed rods are rarely above six ounces, or twice the weight of graphite.)

Of course, cane also offers the angler the chance to match the rod exactly to his need. "A lot of makers have been making faster, tippier cane rods lately to ease the transition from graphite," Engle continues. "That's the great thing: if you want a rod that bends all the way to the butt and delivers a fly slowly, there's a taper out there for you. If you want it to be faster or more like graphite, you can have that, too." Many cane-rod aficionados unconsciously equate "fast action" with graphite, but bamboo can also be "fast." In fact, bamboo can be both fast or slow just as graphite can be fast or slow, depending on the taper and (especially with bamboo) the weight of the rod.

On the other hand, graphite is not inherently better just because it is lighter. Bamboo fishers frequently lament the missing intangible in graphite rods: "feel." What is feel? No one seems to be exactly sure, but almost everyone agrees graphite has less of it. It may be that solid wood rods convey vibration better than graphite, but whatever the explanation, slow bamboo—good bamboo, anyway—has feel in spades. Anglers all over the country are rediscovering slower bamboo rods for tight, technical casting and dense cover, when bamboo's ability to load short becomes crucial.

Moreover, cane is really strong, says Engle. "I know of a drift boat that overturned while full of rods and had to sit over the winter. By the next spring, all that was left of the graphite rods were the handles—but the bamboo sticks were only a little rounded at the edges. Try standing on a graphite rod and a cane rod and see what happens." Cane's strength can make it a true lifetime investment. If a rod does become damaged, a qualified maker can rebuild it.

Traditional Rod Shops

Price-wise, cane rods fall into three basic categories (with a fourth, "vintage," which is itself too big a topic to include here). There are the traditional rodmakers—companies such as Orvis, Thomas and Thomas, Winston, and now, once again, Scott—whose storied shops tend to produce some of the more expensive rods. Then there are the custom makers, whose rods vary in quality and price, according to the skill of the craftsman, the quality of his materials, and the desires of the client. Finally we have the Far Eastern imports. Just like graphite rods, bamboo is now being made abroad, and the usual tradeoff applies: mass production for cost. These rods also lack the "provenance" that makes a cane rod attractive as a link to the traditions of the sport.

ALL BY WILLIAM OYSTER