

A couple of issues back, I wrote a column on fly rods. Well, fair is fair, and if I'm going to opine on graphite and boron rods, I should probably offer equal time to bamboo. Not that I'm what you'd call a split cane guy - it's hard enough to pay the bills as an outdoor writer, much less spend a grand, or two, or three, on a cane rod - but there's something about bamboo that takes you a little deeper into the moment and a little further from the frenetic pace of modern life. I suspect it's the same reason a few of us still shoot stick bows instead of compounds, or wear wool instead of space-age fabrics. Sometimes you don't want to fish with a polymer-based technological marvel. Sometimes you want a rod crafted from a living material, a rod with a soul.

To offer what may be a useful comparison, if you're fortunate enough to own a really, really good graphite rod, it seems to fade away as you fish. After a while it's just you and the river and the rising trout. With bamboo, it's more like you're out on the stream with an old friend. Now that might sound like a relatively minor distinction. It's not.

It's also my way of saying that I'd fish bamboo if I could afford it.

Anyway, one of the main benefits of writing this column is that the occasional rod maker sends me forty hours of his time and talent to cast. So here, for whatever they're worth, are my thoughts on three gorgeous bamboo rods.

Rick Cunningham lives in Texas. Now to the best of my knowledge, there aren't any self-sustaining populations of wild trout in Texas, and as a result, I may well go to my grave without ever visiting the Lone Star state. But Rick builds an absolutely beautiful split-cane fly rod. In fact, I liked every single thing about the brand new 7', 9", two tip 5-weight that Rick shipped up here to Montana, from the smell of the varnish when I opened the rod tube, to the gorgeous (though understated) cosmetics, to the way the rod felt in my hand. I'll be frank. I didn't want to send it back.

Rick, who's been building bamboo rods for the public for over ten years, hand planes his rods from tempered cane. The one he sent me was a 7' 9", 5-weight modified Garrison 209, with brown silk wraps and black accents. He actually flamed the cane in the culm before splitting it, and he also turned and mortised the walnut reel seat himself. The ferrule was hard drawn nickel silver from Bailey Woods of CSE, and it was engraved by Rick's nephew, Nicholas Cunningham.

The rod's finish, as you might imagine, was perfect - Rick uses at least three coats of varnish on every rod - and the color was beautifully mottled from the flaming process. The cork grip was outstanding and it turns out that Rick makes the elegant reel seat hardware himself, from solid nickel silver bar stock.

As far as the cane's performance: Rick's rod was nicely balanced and accurate, and it threw one heck of a handsome line. In fact, I could control the loop size and the line speed simply by varying the timing on my cast. I could also put my fly right where I wanted it on a consistent basis. You really can't ask for more than that.

So to sum things up, Rick's rod was beautifully built, very accurate and a pleasure to handle. At \$1200, plus another \$100 for the custom engraving, it's also a true bargain.

Doug Kulick of Kane Classics was kind enough to ship me a single tip 8', 5/6 weight bamboo rod that was marked "Demo" on the black aluminum tube. Since the rod was a demo, I had a sneaking suspicion that I might find a minor imperfection or two if I searched hard enough. After all, who'd ever use a flawless rod as a demo?

Well, Doug Kulick, that's who. I looked and looked, but if there was anything other than impeccable craftsmanship, I sure didn't see it.

Doug builds cane rods with what he calls "modern tapers." I cast a WF-5, a WF-6 and a DT-5 on Doug's rod and all three lines told me the same basic thing. Either my oh-so-slow bamboo casting stroke needed a lot of work (a distinct possibility) or this particular Kane Classic was designed for anglers who prefer a quicker action.

As best as I could tell, it was the latter. When I got a little more aggressive with my casting, Doug's rod threw darts. And I mean darts. Someone watching from a distance would have thought that the tight loops rolling off the rod tip were courtesy of a space-age composite, not classic cane. It was pretty damn incredible. And to top it off, the rod was smooth, accurate and extremely responsive.

I actually asked Doug if my experience was typical, and he said that, yes, he'd designed this particular "medium fast" taper to please modern anglers using modern fly lines.

Doug flame tempers about 80% of his rods, but his demo featured blonde, oven-cured bamboo (the cane had seasoned for 40 years before it was cured) with burnt orange Chinese silk wraps and burgundy accents. The cork grip was what I'd call a modified full wells and it included a decorative, unusually dense burl'd cork ring to mark your thumb position. Doug actually designed and built all of the rod's 18% nickel silver hardware, as well as the walnut spacer for the reel seat. He also dip-coated the rod with an extremely durable polymer coating that he prefers to spar varnishes.

In the end, my only question with this particular Kane Classic was whether to call it a great casting rod that also happened to be extremely handsome, or an extremely handsome rod that also happened to throw a wonderful line. In either case, it's a stellar

example of the rod maker's art. If you'd like to pick up its twin, a two tip version will set you back \$1400 - a small price to pay for such exceptional quality.

When you hear about a swelled butt, it usually falls under the "Thanks, but I didn't really need to know about that." category. But with **Orvis** bamboo, a swelled butt actually adds strength and beauty to the fly rod's design. Orvis shipped me a new single tip 7' 6", 5-weight Adirondack rod (the Madison grade, not the Battenkill grade) with caramel colored nylon wraps and a truly exquisite nickel silver & amboina wood reel seat. The rod said "Impregnated" - you may have heard of the Bakelite process associated with rod makers Bill Phillipson and Wes Jordan - but Tom Rosenbauer of Orvis explained that it's more of a trade name now. New Orvis rods utilize state-of-the-art glues and waterproof resins rather than the old impregnation process.

The Orvis cane was baked - it's easier to control temperature and rod color if you cure bamboo in an oven - and the rod featured hard chrome guides and a nickel silver ferrule. The cork grip was well-designed and comfortable, and the fit & finish were everything you'd expect from a company that's been building bamboo rods in Vermont since the 1850s.

As for performance - well, the Adirondack proved to be crisp, quick and very accurate. I could vary the length and pace of my casting stroke to open or tighten my loop, but in general the rod liked to be pushed just a bit. In fact, it responded to a more powerful stroke by throwing perfect, effortless loops. Which means that this Orvis split cane rod is more than just a pretty face. In the hands of a good caster, it's a serious fishing tool. The Adirondack (Madison version) retails for \$1295.