



The Bamboo Renaissance

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Against all odds, bamboo fly rods are making a comeback. Nowhere is that more visible than out West, where a new generation of rod builders are grafting modern materials to decades-old techniques -- and squeezing even more performance from today's bamboo rods.

Bamboo fly rods have been pronounced DOA several times, but stubbornly, they've refused to disappear. Today -- decades after they were displaced from the mainstream

of the rod industry – the finest bamboo fly rods the world's ever seen are being built in garages, basements, and backyard workshops by individual craftsmen. And anglers are buying them in increasing numbers.

In the midst of this revival, a new generation of Western builders are picking up where legendary California rod makers like E.C. Powell and Lew Stoner left off. Instead of focusing on the light, short, small stream rods prized by collectors -- rods often better suited to windless Eastern streams instead of the West's big, windy flows -- these Western craftsmen are building the new generation of stronger, high-performance bamboo rods needed to handle Western rivers. They're picking up where legends like E.C. Powell and Lew Stoner left off. And they're helping spark a revival in the use of bamboo fly rods.

A Brief History of Bamboo

Prior to WWII, almost all fly rods -- the very good and the very bad -- were manufactured from bamboo. After WWII, fiberglass arrived on the scene, and while it didn't wholly displace high-end bamboo rods, it mercifully killed off the low-end models, which were often better suited to clubbing trout as opposed to fishing for them.

Then graphite entered the game. It was light, fast and sexy, and everyone said it was going to drive a synthetic stake through the heart of bamboo rods, which were still sold in good numbers. But a funny thing happened on the way to the scrapyard; as the high-volume bamboo rod manufacturers shut down, individual craftsmen started hand-building bamboo fly rods one at a time in garages and basements.

These craftsman built rods one a time, started sharing information, and a movement was born. Like all underground movements composed mostly of experimenters, fanatics and cranks, they formed a loose-knit, sometimes dysfunctional network which eventually found its way to the Internet. By sharing information about glues, tapers and tooling, they built atop of the work of bamboo's "Golden Era" companies, who typically shared little with their competitors.

The results were exceptional. The rods painstakingly hand-crafted by modern builders were built to tighter tolerances than the collectible "classic" rods selling at stratospheric prices, and also featured modern glues and materials. They were stronger and better suited to the needs of modern fishermen. Suddenly, the would-be bamboo faithful had access to rods that cast and fished like the "classic" collectibles they couldn't afford -- at prices sometimes approaching those of the latest graphite rods.

Driving this market were fly fishermen looking for rods that better reflected their fly fishing experience. Bamboo rods -- with their calmer, reasonable actions and ability to transmit every sensation to the fisherman -- were just the ticket. John Gierach's books added to the demand (and spiked the prices of Granger rods pretty spectacularly) by helping to clear away the myths surrounding bamboo – like its supposed fragility.

Still, even as bamboo gained in popularity, the industry retained a strong Eastern

focus -- Western builders had historically played second fiddle to Eastern builders, both during bamboo's "Golden Era" and during the revival -- not for lack of quality, but simply because the bamboo tradition was more firmly established back East.

The Western Bamboo Revival

As bamboo rods regained popularity on a nationwide basis, most of the newer builders reproduced the shorter, light-actioned, "Eastern-style" rods which commanded the highest prices from collectors. These rods are a joy to cast, but their light actions, fine tips and shorter lengths often rendered them inadequate to the demands of Western rivers.

Western fishermen needed rods that were long enough to control and mend lines on freestone rivers, and strong enough to handle big rivers, big fish, and winds. Longer, stronger rods had been developed by Eastern builders, but were heavy and hard to fish for a whole day.

Looking for better solutions, modern Western builders turned to the past -- and revisited the work of E.C. Powell and Lew Stoner. Both were Northern California builders, and more than 75 years after they invented 'hollow building' techniques that rewrote the performance books on bamboo.

Hollow-built rods entered the modern rod building lexicon in the early 1900s, when Marysville's E.C. Powell started removing the heavy, weak "pithy" center portion of the rods he was building and laminating Port Orford Cedar in its place. He then scalloped out material, leaving a series of hollow cavities in the center of the rod. By substituting light, strong Cedar for the pithy bamboo center, Powell created "hollow built" rods that were used to shatter the existing distance casting records.

Later, in the mid-30s, Lew Stoner of San Francisco patented a different "fluted" hollow building technique. Ingenious in its simplicity, it also resulted in high-performance rods that challenged existing distance records.

Back then, the epicenter of the hollow-building revolution was the Golden Gate Casting Club -- where top fly casters met to cast new rods and compete with each other. It was where Powell and Stoner tested their new creations against rods by other builders, their hollow-building techniques allowing them to deliver more power while still squeaking under the weight restrictions.

Oddly, while Powell's and Stoner's hollow-built rods gained an enthusiastic following among the steelheaders and trout fishermen plying the large coastal rivers in Northern California and Oregon, hollow-building techniques never caught on with the majority of builders, who didn't want the extra hassles associated with hollow building. The Eastern focus of the industry also had its say; the shorter rods used to fish smaller, slower rivers didn't experience the performance benefits enjoyed by longer rods when hollow building techniques were applied.

The New Western Builders

In the late 80's and early 90s, the first of a new generation of Western builders emerged -- builders intent on squeezing more performance from bamboo rods. Leading the charge were Per Brandin and Mario Wojnicki, who used new glues and hollow-building techniques to create the highest-performance bamboo rods the world had ever seen.

Today, a handful of full time Western builders like Jim Reams, Jim Hidy, Randy Johnson, Chris Raine, R.K. Bolt and AJ Thrasher are at the forefront of the Western Bamboo Rod Renaissance, and they're building the longer, lighter, better-performing bamboo rods demanded by the Western landscape. Other Western builders -- like Doug Kulick and Larry Tusoni of High Sierra Rods -- have met the needs of the Western landscape in unusual, unique ways.

Meanwhile, as the hollow building renaissance continues in California, Wayne Maca of Twin Bridges, Montana -- the same town where the formerly San Francisco-built Winston bamboo rods are now produced -- is building what is said to be the highest-performance bamboo rod ever seen. If the builders listed above are foot soldiers in the Western renaissance, Maca might be its bomb-throwing anarchist -- creating rods that defy tradition and at first glance, common sense.

When faced with a "movement" of any kind, it's tempting to create the bamboo equivalent of the Algonquin Roundtable -- a group with unity and purpose, but in truth, the "New Western Builders" are only loosely associated; most have had little contact with more than one or two of the others. What they have in common are the demands of the Western landscape they fish, and -- like all borderline-obsessive craftsmen -- an interest in seeing how much better they can do "it" the next time.

The rods they're building are lighter, more resilient, more powerful and better equipped to handle the demands of modern fishermen, yet they retain the beauty, craftsmanship and raw nostalgia that brings so many to cane rods.

Not surprisingly, close inspection of each maker's rods reveals a lot about them, both as individuals and fishermen. For example, you'll often find Jim Reams stalking Hat Creek using the longer, hollow-built light line rods he's become famous for. Or you might stumble across Chris Raine making long, stylish casts on the Upper Sac's toughest water using the powerhouse 8'3" hollowbuilt quad that is fast becoming his signature rod.

I've profiled a few of the full time builders below. Before the cascades of e-mail begin, I know others exist, and I haven't even attempted to document the part time and hobby builders who are also creating great rods. Talking to these full time builders was a treat, but the risks to my bank account were significant -- each has their own twist on rodmaking that could have easily led to me ordering "one of each." (Note to those who have yet to cast their first bamboo rod: a bamboo addiction might be marginally more acceptable than a dependence on cocaine, but it's scarcely any cheaper.)

Clearly, while the prices of most of these builders aim them squarely at the hardcore cane market, their rods rise to the top of the heap in terms of craftsmanship and performance -- and in no industry do either of those come cheap. In addition, rods from certain builders (Brandin and Wojnicki leap to mind with Reams close on their heels) are considered collectibles before the varnish has even dried, and collectible status always adds a lot of dollars to the bottom line.

Per Brandin & Mario Wojnicki

These two San Francisco-based builders were the fathers of the Western Bamboo Renaissance. And both have clearly arrived at the pinnacle of their craft -- you'll wait 3+ years to get one of their rods, and their prices approach (and exceed) the CEO-only \$3,000 range. In the late '80s -- while most builders pursued the perfect varnish job -- Per Brandin was experimenting with tapers and different hollow building techniques, leading him to become the premier performance rod builder. In fact, his 8'6" Special Tournament Trout Fly four-sided rod (a "quad" to cane freaks) was designed expressly to compete in accuracy casting competitions, where it compiled an impressive list of high placings. Though he's moved his shop back East, Brandin's impact on Western builders continues to be felt.

Mario Wojnicki has pursued a similar course, but with a different outcome -- his rod catalog includes hollow-built five-sided "penta" rods in addition to the standard six-sided hex rods. Wojnicki even created a fiberglass ferrule, reasoning the weight savings over metal ferrules would improve performance. Like Brandin, his rods are rarely seen in the used rod lists, proof that their owners aren't willing to part with them.

Jim Reams

Reams enjoys a strong cult following for his long, light line rods, though he's not quite the household name you would expect for someone of his 20+ years of experience and reputation. This might be the result of an utter lack of Reams rods available for resale -- his rods rarely turn up on used lists, as those who own them won't give them up. In an excellent example of geography informing function, Reams' fly rods are exactly what you'd expect from someone who regularly haunts Hat Creek and whose backyard fronts the Fall River in Northern California. A largely self-taught builder, his 8.5' 5wt might be his best-known rod, though there is now a waiting list for his 8'3" 4wt; a wonderful, delicate rod that deserves the recognition that's it's receiving. Real cane freaks suggest he's one of the best rod builders working.

Jim Hidy

A student of famed builder Mario Wojnicki, Hidy's rods are a little atypical among this group. While he does build stronger models, the rods most often associated with his name are his long, light, delicate rods which are also famous for their refined appearance. While every builder develops his own cosmetic style, the San Francisco-based Hidy's rods are particularly clean and elegant, which may account for his appeal to Japanese buyers, who account for a sizable chunk of his output. Recently, several fishermen on the Internet have sworn that someday they will own his 8' 3wt, no matter

what the cost. "I think it's great that people have so many rod makers to choose from," said Hidy, referring to the plethora of amateur builders, despite the fact they often undercut his prices. "They'll bring more people into bamboo, and everyone wins." Wojnicki's influence on Hidy's work is apparent.

Chris Raine

Working from inside his brand new rod shop on the banks of the Upper Sacramento River in Northern California, Raine bucks the trend of builders creating rods in basements and garages. Self-taught at first, he's become a protege of Jim Reams. Buyers are clamoring for his powerhouse hollow-built 8'3" 5wt "Quad Rod" -- a four-sided rod instead of the traditional six-sided design -- and his new 8'3" 4wt hex rod. Raine is a perfectionist whose four-strip quads are quickly becoming his signature tapers, appreciated by both cane fanatics and first-time buyers alike. His experiments with ammonia toning have produced some stunning, seductively dark rods, though traditionalists are drawn to his medium "browntone" rods. Raine has built, fished and discarded a lot of experimental tapers, and has a tinkerer's intuitive grasp of rod design. "A lot of people get a rod and the first thing they do is examine the finish. I'd like the first thing someone does with my rod is cast it and fish it -- and appreciate the fact that it does both very well. Then they can admire the effort I put into the finish."

A.J. Thrasher

The Oregon-based Thrasher is probably the best known of the profiled builders -- his name is recognized by rod fanatics nationwide, both for the rods he builds on his own tapers and for his reproductions of almost every classic taper you could name. While Thrasher's solid-built rods are favorites with dealers and new cane buyers, his finest rods are his new line of (you guessed it) hollow-built "Signature Series" rods. They're already drawing raves on the Internet, and in a reversal of standard market demand, more than half his output is for 8.5' or longer rods. Thrasher -- a fast-moving builder who often seems to hover a few inches off the ground -- has refined his production techniques, and turns out 2-3 times as many rods as most other full-timers. Given that each rod is painstakingly hand-planed, assembled, and hand-finished, Thrasher's output is the stuff of legend among other builders. "We've all made those little rods because they're fun," he said of short, light rods. "But Western builders understand the 8.5' 5/6/7 weights better than anyone, because they have the toughest test lab you can imagine right out their shop door."

Randy Johnson

Randy Johnson of Volcano Rods (located in Volcano, CA) builds in the mold of E.C. Powell, but with a twist; his rods are "nodeless," a construction technique requiring extra steps in assembly but which -- according to its adherents -- results in a smoother-casting rod. Johnson relies on visits to shows, conclaves and gatherings to generate rod sales, where the buttery smooth actions of his latest rods -- and his refined rod cosmetics -- attract the attention of those who have thought about buying cane, but haven't done so. He remarks with a certain glee that "people walk by my rod display and you can tell they're afraid to even touch the rods. But if I can get one in their hands and out to the casting pond, the light comes on for a lot of them. They just need to

have one." Johnson's best rod (based on my unscientific poll of one person -- myself) is his hollow built 8' 5wt, an extremely smooth, delightful rod which roll cast far more line than I thought possible, though I understand his 7.5' taper might be even better.

R.K. Bolt

Bolt built rods in San Francisco for many years before he purchased the late Gary Howells' rod building equipment. Howells was a craftsman closely associated with Winston when Winston was still located in San Francisco. Bolt's rods are similar to Howell's in that they're hollow built and feature a very relaxed, medium action that wins raves from advanced casters. Bolt's catalog offers long steelhead rods, but he admits that he rarely sells rods longer than 8.5'. Bolt's tapers are somewhat more relaxed than those sold by other Western makers, yet they are still popular due to their light weight and excellent craftsmanship. Walking in Gary Howells' footsteps can hardly be easy -- he was noted for his mind-bending attention to detail -- yet Bolt is building rods that make him a worthy successor to the Howells legacy.

Wayne Maca

While the Northern California/Southern Oregon builders mentioned above are exploring the limits of traditional rod building techniques, Montana's Wayne Maca has completely stepped beyond them. A former custom builder of snowboards for the tiny group of elite racers at the top of the sport, Maca has patented a technique where he removes almost all the central part of the bamboo -- leaving only the stiffest outside part, which contains the "power fibers" that give bamboo its resiliency. (When viewed from the end, solid-built rods look like six pieces of pie fitted together to form a hexagonal; hollowbuilt rods remove some of the soft center of the pie -- but removing too much weakens the rod.)

Normally, a design like Maca's would literally come apart at the seams when stressed, but Maca -- using an extremely strong (and extremely toxic) epoxy -- has created what might amount to the ultimate hollowbuilt bamboo rod. It's almost all power fibers, and the result is a rod that looks like bamboo, weighs the same as a Winston graphite, and casts like neither. "There's so much myth in rod building that isn't backed up by facts," he said. "Too many rod builders define a high-performance rod as one with a perfect varnish job -- there's plenty of performance improvements still to be found in bamboo."

Other builders in the Western arena are creating unique rods designed to fit the West's unusual landscape. This group includes Reno-based Doug Kulick of Kane Classics, who is best-known for his rare multi-piece pack and travel rods, which are favored among those who fish the California high country.

And then there's the High Sierra Rod Company of Larry Tusoni and Chuck Irvine, who build rods that are ideal for use in California's Sierras -- the landscape that surrounds their Angel's Camp shop. In fact, their most popular rod is also their bargain-priced entry-level rod -- a 5'6" one-piece "Brookie" model that lists for \$499. Suited for use on small streams, it's also a perfect match for small alpine trout.

There's even another Powell in the bamboo rod game. Eugene Powell is a fourth generation builder descended from E.C. Powell himself, and he's building rods employing methods almost identical to those used by EC in his original hollow builds. There are also a lot other part-time and hobbyist builders scattered around -- the very people who help fuel the bamboo rod renaissance.

You say you want a revolution?

(or, how to participate in the Bamboo Renaissance)

If you're already a bamboo rod addict, then there's little hope for you outside of death or total revocation of your credit card privileges. Personal experience suggests that these things have a way of getting under your skin, to the point that a new rod can seem far more important than getting the mortgage paid.

Still, if you've never cast a good bamboo rod -- and by "good" I don't mean a 60 year-old Montague that was a tomato stake the day it was made -- you should try it. Sometimes, as Randy Johnson suggests, the lights go on and you wonder why you bothered with anything else. While these things are pretty and nostalgic for sure, but they're also excellent fishing tools; they make beautiful presentations, deliver lots of pleasant feedback, and fight fish with a stubborn delicacy. Their extra mass also helps load the rod when you're casting little more than the leader, making them ideal in pocket water and on small streams.

They're also nowhere near as fragile as some would believe (in fact, the blanks are typically more resistant to damage than graphite). Someone accustomed to the rapid accelerations and stops of modern graphite rods might need a few minutes to figure out the stroke, but once you've gained the smooth casting stroke needed to get the most from cane, you'll see why dry flies probably shouldn't be fished on anything else...

New Rods

Where to buy them? If you want a hollow-built rod from one of the full-time professionals listed above, be prepared to spend 1.5x - 4x what you'd pay for top graphite. These things are painstakingly hand-built, and the average craftsman will have 30-60 hours in each rod. So while you should visit their shops, seek them out at shows, cast their rods, and even buy them if you're so moved, it's also perfectly OK to shop a little farther down the food chain if you're not sure about bamboo.

There are a lot of hobbyists and part time builders out there who are making wonderful rods at prices well below those of the full timers, but finding these builders can be difficult. Some are producing great rods at low prices, and some are clearly self-deluded con men with little respect for craftsmanship.

Of course, one of the beauties of bamboo -- and the reason there is a brisk trade in used rods -- is that it rarely loses much of its value. Bamboo addicts are always buying rods, trying them, and selling the tapers that don't work for them. Remember,

you're buying something to use while fly fishing, and what you don't want is a rod that fills you with regret while you're out on the river doing something that's supposed to calm and relax you.

Used Rods

You can buy some excellent used rods off the Internet, rod lists and even eBay (though rod fraud seems to be running rampant there right now). However, first-time buyers are advised to do their homework -- there are a lot of tough-as-nails, pre-fiberglass Granger, Phillipson, Orvis and Heddon rods floating around and they're wonderful rods, but even they are gaining collectible status -- with price tags to match. An 8' Colorado-built Granger or Phillipson is a joy to cast and probably will become a lifelong friend, but prices of even those workhorses have dramatically increased.

You can also keep an eye on the used rod lists for rods from contemporary builders; these can be excellent values and it's hard to argue with an 8' rod based on a Payne or Granger taper from a contemporary builder. Again, stick with the handful of catalog-based and online dealers with good reputations, and you'll probably do fine.

Specifics

I'm tempted to create a list of "buy these rods" that neatly corresponds with the half-dozen rods I'm considering selling (and given what writing pays nowadays, who could blame me), but I'll speak in more useful terms.

Don't buy a 6' toy unless you fish toy rods a lot. The 7' and 7.5' rods are wonderful for small streams or when you're fishing midges on touchy water, but for your first bamboo rod, consider buying something useful -- and for all-around usefulness a 7.5' to 8.5' 5wt is tough to beat. It'll serve you well for pretty much every kind of fly fishing you might do in a day. A 5-weight bamboo rod will protect 7x tippets yet still handle some wind and even a little weight if you decide stonefly nymphs are the day's hot ticket.

8.5' rods are my favorite length, but I admit to owning a fair number of 8' bamboo rods. Some are all-rounders, and some are hauled out for specific instances. For new buyers, I'd suggest there are a stunning number of really first-class 7.5' and 8' tapers floating around out there (I own an embarrassing number of them myself), and buying something that you'll haul out just for the hatch isn't a bad idea.

A lot of builders -- including Thramer and Raine -- build quicker tapers that are ideally suited to those who fish graphite, and this might be the best way to try cane rods while primarily remaining a graphite guy. Of course, buying a high-end hollowbuilt from any of the listed builders is also not a bad idea -- you could easily end up with a soon-to-be-collectible rod that will also handle 90% of your fishing if you'd let it.

In the end, that's the real beauty of the Western Bamboo Renaissance; suddenly, you have a lot of choices -- due to the efforts of a group of builders who looked to the Western legends like E.C. Powell and Lew Stoner for inspiration, and then expanded on their work to build the bamboo rods demanded by the Western rivers they fish.