

Contemporary Bamboo Fly Rods & Reels

Rod makers are reviving the traditional magic of Tonkin cane.

Until the 1950s, fly rods were individually built of split bamboo. Then along came fiberglass and graphite, and fly rods were mass-produced at a fraction of their previous cost. However, bamboo rods are still being made today, since nothing synthetic rivals the natural look and feel of a rod made from fine Tonkin cane, cultivated only in a hilly 25-mile-long area along the Sui River in China. Compared to graphite, bamboo is generally slower in action and slightly heavier, but the upside is that each rod is unique and has an innate, solid feel that seems to come alive in the hand, even with the smallest fish.

In the past, it was difficult to find reasonably priced new bamboo rods of good quality. Affordable rods built on proven American-designed tapers are now being imported from China. The most desirable are 8 feet or less in length and usually two-piece, like the **Metolius River Rod**. Combined with the new **Hardy Bougle Mark IV Reel**, this is a great outfit for small-water trout, sunfish and white bass. (\$349, Metolius River, 7 feet, 6 inches, 5 Wt., #MR76521, Headwaters Bamboo Rod Co., (866) 432-3928, www.split-bamboo.com. \$375, **Mark IV Bougle Reel**, House of Hardy, (607) 756-2851, www.hardyusa.com)

Among the high-end production rods tested is the 7-foot-long **Justin Charles Rod** that balances perfectly with an **Abel Platinum TR-2 Reel**. It loads well, casts beautifully and has impeccable workmanship and materials, including the traditional agate stripping guide. This manufacturer uses a resin impregnation process that prevents the split bamboo blanks from absorbing moisture, thus protecting the pithy interiors. This treatment also gives the rod a permanent satin finish and overall greater durability than varnished cane, which requires periodic refinishing. (\$1,600, Justin Charles 7-foot 4 Wt. rod, (608) 269-2728, www.justincharles.com. \$300, **Platinum TR-2 Reel**, Abel Products, (866) 511-7444, www.abelreels.com)

Custom cane builders pride themselves in their rods' personality, select materials and tailored construction. They produce only a limited number of rods, which are often back-ordered for more than a year. In Texas, John Bradford of Fort Worth started building rods in 1952 and is famous for taking a traditional taper formula and making it even better. His three-piece **Bradford Legacy** is considered one of the finest modern fly rods. Newer builders such as Richard Wolf of San Antonio continue the tradition. His latest, intended for the



From top: Metolius River Rod with Hardy Bougle Mark IV Reel; Justin Charles Rod with Abel Platinum TR-2 Reel; Wolf/Leonard Rod with Hardy JLH Ultralite Reel

smaller streams and pocket-waters, is the **Wolf / Leonard Rod**, shown with a **Hardy Ultralite Disc Reel**. Many weeks of intensive effort are required to create just one rod that meets his standards of an ideal action and final finish. (\$1,925, Legacy 7-foot, 6-inch, 5 Wt. Rod, J.A. Bradford Rod Co., (817) 292-3324. \$1,400, R. Wolf/Leonard 7-foot, 4 Wt. rod, (210) 269-2071, www.wolfplace.com. \$295, #2/3/4 Ultralite Disc Reel, House of Hardy)

Fine cane and hardware alone do not make a great rod. Not all have the magic that others possess. Some ill-conceived rods are dull and lifeless. A fine rod by a master builder is something like gourmet food or wine. It must be compared and tasted with sensitivity to be understood. The right bamboo rod is like a magic wand that transports you back in time and connects you to all the trout waters, fishers past and angling in its purest form. ★