

BAMBOO

NICK TARANSKY

Making your own bamboo rod.



Along with the growth in owning and fishing bamboo rods, there has been a corresponding interest in making them. Just as catching a fish on a fly that you've tied is very satisfying, fishing a rod you made yourself can add another dimension to your angling. It can also lead to developing your own tapers, quitting your day job and becoming a trout bum. Maybe the less said about that, the better!

So, you're thinking of making a rod. Where do you start? I would make the point at the outset that there is quite a bit of work involved, certainly a lot more than just wrapping a graphite blank. Most advice suggests there is around 40-60 hours of labour in a bamboo rod, but for your first one, I suggest you allow double or three times this. Having said that, making a rod is the sort of project you can either sink your teeth into, or pick up and put down as time permits. Each of the many steps has its own challenges, but none are particularly difficult, even if you don't have a woodworking or handyman background.

Reading Up

There are now a number of excellent books (as well as some average ones) dedicated to the process of making a bamboo rod. Having a look through a couple of these will give you a good idea of what is involved and help you decide whether you want to take the plunge.

In my view, 'Fundamentals of Building a Bamboo Fly Rod' by George Maurer and Bernard Elser is the simplest, clearest guide to making a rod. Other respected books include 'The Lovely Reed' by Jack Howell (now back in print), and Wayne Cattanch's 'Handcrafting Bamboo Fly Rods'. There are quite a few other books around as well. I own most of them, but the three above are probably more than enough to start with.

Carmichael and Garrison's 'A Master's Guide to Building a Bamboo Fly Rod' is worthy of mention too. For years it was the only detailed book available on rod making. "Detailed" may be an understatement. It is a pretty intimidating read if used as a first-up reference. In fact it may be responsible for turning more people away from rod making than it inspired! Still, it is a wealth of information and worth owning if you are going to call yourself a rod maker.

You'll soon discover, with pretty much all of these books coming from North America, all the measurements (and components) are imperial. Everything is in inches, thou, 16ths of an inch and 64ths of an inch, depending what you are measuring. Just go with it, you'll get used to it after a while, and anyway, a 12 inch trout is still so much nicer than a 30 cm one in my view!

I understand that there are also a number of step-by-step DVDs sets available on building cane rods, though I must admit that I haven't watched these. The two DVDs I have seen,

'Creating the Garrison Fly Rod', and 'Digger - Portrait of a Bamboo Fly Rod Maker' both offer a high level overview, and may be worth a look before you get started. Despite pretty average video quality, and the fact they probably show the rod makers concerned a little after their prime, I really like the nostalgic feel of these films. They capture the passion and character of these men as well as showing the basic skills and tools required to make a rod.

What You'll Need

To start with, bamboo is pretty important! Virtually all rods are made with Tonkin Cane, which grows in the Sui River Valley of the Kwantung province of China. Luis Marden's book 'The Angler's Bamboo', and the DVD 'Trout Grass' both tell the story of growing and harvesting the cane. Given the large number of American rod makers, the simplest way to buy cane is from a supplier in the USA. Andy Royer, from The Bamboo Broker in Seattle, has been a reliable source of bamboo for me and other Australian makers for some time now. There is the usual paperwork and ransom required to get your shipment through Customs/Quarantine, so going direct is really only worthwhile if you order 20 or more poles (or 'culms', as they are referred to). The other option is to buy a culm or two from me or one of the makers scattered around the country. In general you can get two rods from each twelve foot culm of Tonkin Cane, so you'll only need one or two to begin with.

The other core pieces of equipment dedicated to bamboo rod making are the planing forms. These are the adjustable steel bars with a tapered 60 degree groove in them, where you plane the individual bamboo strips or 'splines'. Again, these can be purchased from American suppliers, which after shipping and duty work out at close to AU\$2,000. Alternatively, it's possible to make planing forms from steel bars or even seasoned hardwood. Instructions can be found in Wayne Cattanch's book, or on the internet from sites such as Thomas Penrose's.

There is actually a way to make a simple bamboo rod with no forms at all. A design known as the Poor Man's Quad, which consists of a two strip laminate, with a square profile, can be made with just a block plane, callipers and a few other bits and pieces like sandpaper. If you search the internet for PMQ or Poor Man's Quad you can track down instructions on how these rods are made. By all accounts they perform quite well, and negate the need for the upfront investment in a set of forms.

Aside from the planing forms, most other tools required for rod making can be sourced from Australian woodworking suppliers or even the local hardware store. Items like a glue-up binder can be made, or even done without for the hobbyist. Rather than go into full detail here, complete lists can be found in the reference books mentioned at the end of the column.

Similarly, a variety of waterproof glues and marine gloss varnishes suitable for rod making are readily available from local Australian sources. For glue, several epoxies including West System, Urea Formaldehyde based glues, Resorcinol and others are in use by rod makers. Varnishes including International Brand 'Goldspar' or 'Schooner', Feast and Watson 'Spar Marine', and Epifanes (sold under the name 'Werdol' here) all provide a good finish.

Other components like reel seats, cork, guides and other



hardware, can be bought from a number of suppliers in the USA. I also keep a reasonable stock for my own use that I sell locally too.

Choosing a Taper

The reference books all contain a selection of tapers to choose from when making your first rod. My advice is to go with something like a 7 to 7½ foot, 4 or 5 weight. Also, I'd suggest choosing a taper with a tip that isn't too fine: at least 60 thousands of an inch or more.

Additionally, I recommend starting with a two piece rod, rather than three (or more). Believe me, you'll have enough fun preparing, tuning and fitting ferrules on a two piece rod without the truncated and extra-small top ferrule on a three piece rod.

After your first rod or two, you may want to try a three piece rod, or start tweaking existing tapers to suit your fishing style or your local waters. The possibilities are endless and it's a lot of fun.

An Overview of Rod Making

The reference books I've mentioned are dedicated to the process of making a rod, so I won't go into too much detail here. However it's worth broadly going over the major tasks just to give an idea of how a rod is put together.

Starting with a 12 foot culm of bamboo, the culm may be flamed (to stiffen it and enhance colour), and then cut down to the length of the rod sections (plus some overlap). It is then split into thin (5-10mm) strips. The nodes (growth rings) on the outside are filed or sanded (and may also be pressed), making the outside of the strip flat. The enamel on the outside is also removed via sanding or filing to



reveal, but not damage, the dense power fibres beneath. The strips are straightened and maybe further oven tempered.

Six strips are then identically tapered/shaped into equilateral triangle profiles to form each section of the rod (with maybe more kilning part way through to set the strips true and straight, and stiffen them further). As an aside, the planing of all the sections of a rod can take more than 5,000 passes of the plane – something for anyone at risk of RSI and joint fatigue to be aware of! These planed strips or 'splines' are then glued together to form a hexagonal laminate for each rod section. The excess glue is removed from the blank, the sections are trimmed to length, and metal ferrules are prepared and mounted. The cork grip is glued together, shaped, and mounted on the rod along with the reel seat hardware. The rod is varnished (several coats), guides are wrapped on and the wraps are also varnished with multiple coats. A final polish and wax and voila! – you're ready to go fishing. That wasn't so hard, was it?

This of course is the briefest of overviews, covering most of the basic steps, but missing much of the detail. Buy a reference book or two and have a read. One thing that reading up and talking to other makers will demonstrate, is there are many slightly different ways and sequences when making a rod. Don't get too bogged down or confused agonising over which method is best. Pick one of the books and follow it through.

Getting Help

There are makers now right across Australia, from newcomers to diehard enthusiasts. Most of these people are passionate about rod making and are more than willing to lend a hand to those starting out. Please understand though that some makers may be busy and might need their spare time to finish their own rods too!

The Victorian Fly Fisher's Association (www.vffa.org.au) holds a Cane Day every winter. The turnout is growing every year. It's an opportunity for lovers of bamboo rods – old and new – to get together for a cast and a chat. More makers are present every year and it's a really good opportunity to see and cast a lot of different rods. In the last couple of years, the weekend has been expanded to include a 'Maker's Day' on the Saturday before the wider 'Cane Day' on Sunday. It is a worthwhile trip to Melbourne for the weekend for anyone interested in Cane.

Internet forums are another potential source of help. I've come across some excellent cane rod making tips on-line, including some from generous and knowledgeable Australian makers like Peter McKean. I've also seen some 'advice' that should never have been offered! My advice is to take the forum route if you like, but if in doubt, stick with the books while you are finding your feet.

I am trying to make time (between building rods and field testing – a tough job...) to organise a live-in rod making class. Attendees would spend a week as a small group of three or four, each learning the rod making process and finishing up with a rod at the end of it. This is how I got started with American master Jeff Wagner. It will take a while to fit it into my schedule, but keep an eye out on my website for information.

Bamboo rod maker Nick Taransky lives in Queanbeyan, near the streams of the Monaro and Snowy Mountains. Visit www.taranskybamboo.com.au

Summing Up

Making rods won't be for everyone. In this time poor era, it can be enough of a challenge just getting out for a fish. Believe it or not I suffer from this malady too, more than I care to admit. Rod making is a craft though that you can pursue at your own pace, in your own home or garage. It's rewarding in its own right and you'd be surprised how well even your first rod will fish.

FACT FILE

There are many suppliers and sources of information, tools, materials and components. Listed here are a few that I have found reliable and that will set you on the right track.

BOOKS

Fundamentals of Building a Bamboo Fly-Rod (COUNTRYMAN PRESS) George Maurer and Bernard Elser
An excellent, simple guide. Start with this one.

The Lovely Reed (HOWELL HANDMADE) Jack Howell
A highly regarded reference, recently back in print after years of out-of-print copies commanding \$400 plus prices.

Handcrafting Bamboo Rods (LYONS PRESS) Wayne Cattanach
Another respected how-to book, including instructions on how to make a set of planing forms.

A Masters Guide to Making a Bamboo Fly Rod (MEADOW RUN PRESS) Everett Garrison & Hoagy Carmichael
A definitive guide!

COURSES, PLANING FORMS, ALL ROD MAKING TOOLS AND COMPONENTS

J D Wagner Rod makers (Ohio, USA—www.wagnerrods.com)
Jeff and his partner Casimira are wonderful people to deal with, and offer all the tools and components you need to make a rod. Their rod making course is also highly recommended if you can make the trip to the USA.

Classic Sporting Enterprises (Ferrules, reel seats and other tools and components) 214 Higgins Lane, Barton Vermont 05822 USA (802) 525 3623
CSE have set the standard in bamboo rod hardware for decades. No website (they are too busy making components to be on the net), but give Bailey or Steve a call and they will help you out.

Bellinger Inc.—www.genuinebellinger.com
Reel seats, hardware, and tools.

BAMBOO

The Bamboo Broker—www.bamboobroker.com
Andy Royer sends to Australia frequently and I carry his maker's grade Tonkin Cane for resale here too.

Charles H Demarest Inc.—www.tonkincane.com
Demarest have supplied the bamboo rod industry in the USA since its inception over 100 years ago.