

Superfly

BY KIMBERLY BROWN

A handmade bamboo fly rod is a functional work of art. Though there are few people versed in that art, their numbers are growing, thanks to Bill Oyster, a leader in the creation of the beautiful rods.

To pass on the technique of creating a handmade bamboo fly rod, Oyster teaches 18 classes per year in his Blue Ridge store and workshop, Oyster's Fine Bamboo Fly Rods.

In addition to classes, Oyster builds custom rods to sell to customers all over the world.

"They give us their details, and we make them however they want them," Oyster said.

Purchasing a custom-made rod from Oyster is an investment.

"Our rods are the highest end of the custom bamboo rod world," Oyster said, with prices running from \$2,590 to \$22,000 each.

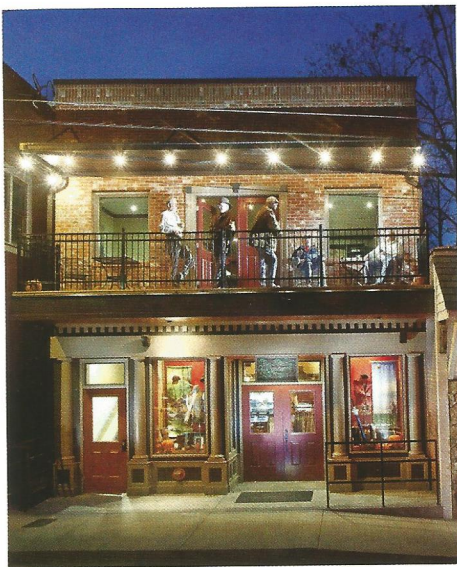
A big part of the high-

Shown is detailed engraving on one of Bill Oyster's hand-crafted bamboo fly rods. In addition to making the rods, Oyster also does engraving, sometimes in 24-carat gold. PHOTO/SUBMITTED





**BILL OYSTER LEADS THE WAY
IN CUSTOM BAMBOO FLY RODS**



Shown is a nighttime view of Bill Oyster's Blue Ridge storefront, with a store and workshop on the first floor, and lodging for students and the public on the second floor. PHOTO/SUBMITTED

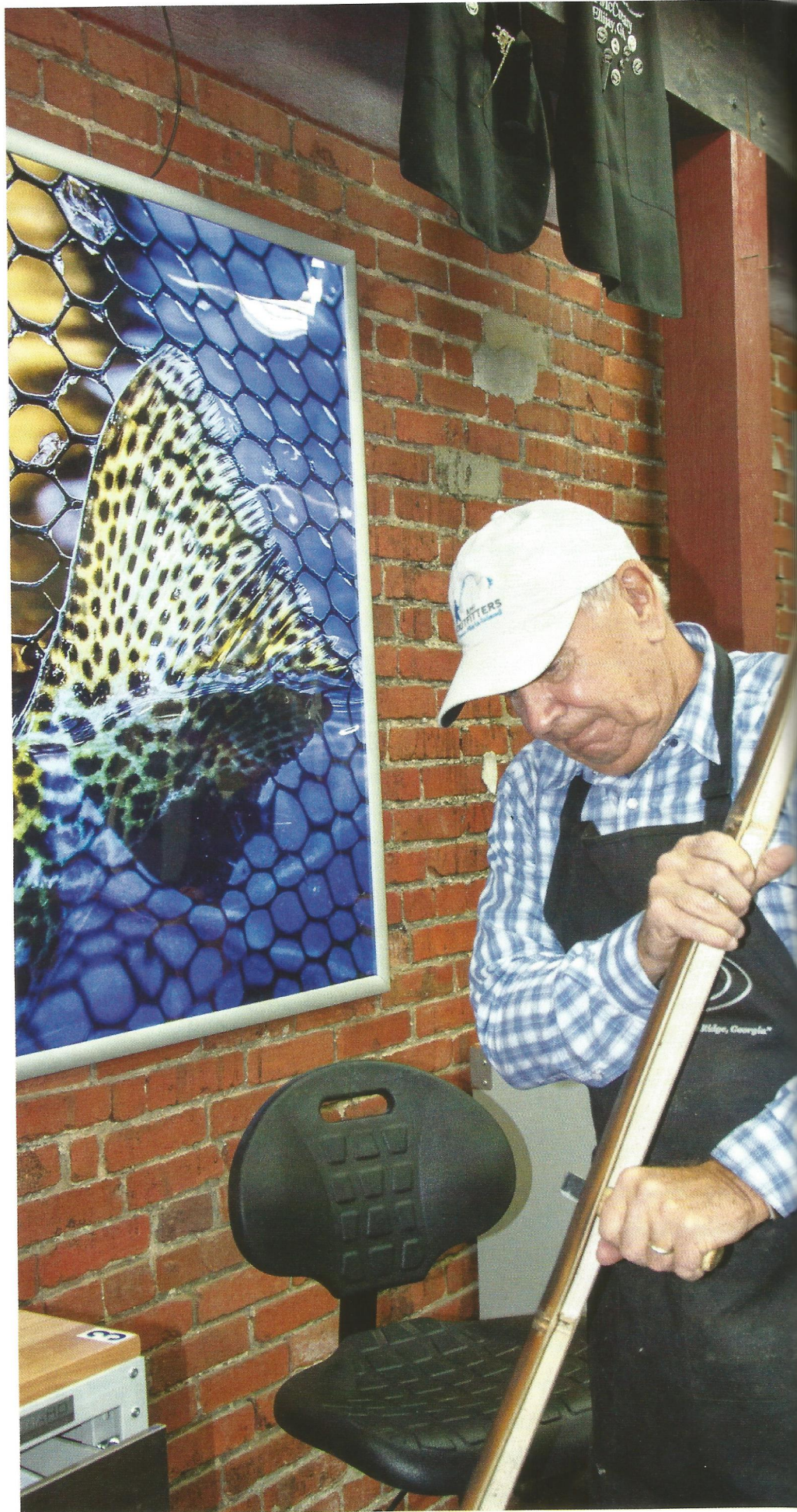
er-priced rods is custom engraving done by Oyster, including 24-carat gold inlay and scrollwork on the most expensive models.

If you own an Oyster rod, you are in esteemed company. Oyster said his rods have been created for President Jimmy Carter, and for the British Royal Family, commissioned by the U.S. State Department. That rod included the U.S. and the Presidential Seal, he said.

But you don't have to break the bank to have your own custom-made bamboo fly rod. Everyone who takes a class with Oyster leaves with his or her own rod, ready to fish.

"We've taught more people to do this (build rods) than anyone in history," Oyster said. "We teach more than everybody else in the country that does it, put together. They'll go 8:30 [a.m.] to 6 [p.m.] for six days straight. They do all of it themselves, and then they take it home with them at the end of the week."

Oyster's students come from all around the world, "pretty much anywhere they speak English," he said. Some students take one class, but some come again and again, with one Birmingham, Alabama, attorney having just finished her





John Schimkaitis of Anna Maria Island, Florida, splits his bamboo for a bamboo fly rod, during a class at Oyster's Fine Bamboo Fly Rods in Blue Ridge. Schimkaitis, who has already made rods for himself and his wife, is now making rods for his three children. "It's just something I enjoy doing," he says.
PHOTO/KIMBERLY BROWN

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A group of eight men, all students in Bill Oyster's bamboo fly rod-making class, listen to Oyster describe the process of flaming. Flaming a piece of bamboo serves to color and strengthen it. PHOTO/KIMBERLY BROWN

14th class.

Oyster, who is self-taught in the process, has been creating bamboo fly rods for 21 years.

"When I started, the people that knew (how) weren't talking," he said. "The people who knew were few and far between, and dying off fast. They were determined to take it to the grave with them. There were no classes."

Oyster said he taught himself by reading old books on the subject.

"It was just a hobby," he said. "There was no business interest. I was reading and experimenting and playing and enjoying it, but it turned out I had some aptitude for it. It started to take shape, and it turned into a business for us."

Oyster said bamboo fly rods are different in several ways from graphite fly rods found in sporting goods stores. He said the technique to build the rods was invented in the United States in the 1840s, and it was the worldwide standard for 150 years before modern synthetics came out.

"These rods are made to last



A map in Bill Oyster's Blue Ridge workshop shows where in the U.S. Oyster's students have come from to take his bamboo fly rod classes. Students also come from other countries to take the classes. PHOTO/KIMBERLY BROWN

for generations," he said. "You get it, you use it your whole life, and you pass it down some day. The modern rods, the same guys that sold it to you are going to tell you it's outdated, and you need the new version next year, because it's lighter and faster and quicker and better. These (bamboo rods)

are heirlooms. ... They're the only rods that can actually appreciate in value over time. Synthetic rods depreciate as soon as you pull it out of the tube."

Performance-wise, Oyster said, a bamboo rod is about 7 percent less powerful than a rod made with modern materials.

"If you can cast this (bamboo) rod 100 feet, you could probably cast the equivalent graphite rod 107 feet," he said. "But in most fishing, pure distance is rarely what you're shooting for. You're normally aiming for a target, and in accuracy, they (bamboo rods) do very, very well."

The bamboo used to make bamboo fly rods is called Tonkin, and it comes from 20 square miles near the Sui River in the Tonkin Gulf region of Guangdong Province in China.

"That's where the material for every bamboo rod since about 1900 has come from," Oyster's shop manager, Riley Gudakunst, said.

Gudakunst said dense fibers, called "power fibers," in the Tonkin bamboo is what makes it special.

"It's the density of those fibers that give us a good, fast, strong rod," he said. "It's got

a stronger tensile strength for its weight than steel. It's crazy strong stuff."

While creating a bamboo fly rod requires creativity and more than a little patience, it is worth the effort, said Danny Warner, from San Antonio, Texas, who was in Blue Ridge in late March to take Oyster's class.

"It's a beautiful, refined process of cutting, smoothing, shaping, and when you shape it, you shape it very, very precisely on a form," Warner said. "I'm attracted to the artwork of the rods, the craftsmanship involved, and the beauty of the object. I think of it as an art object, in addition to something functional."

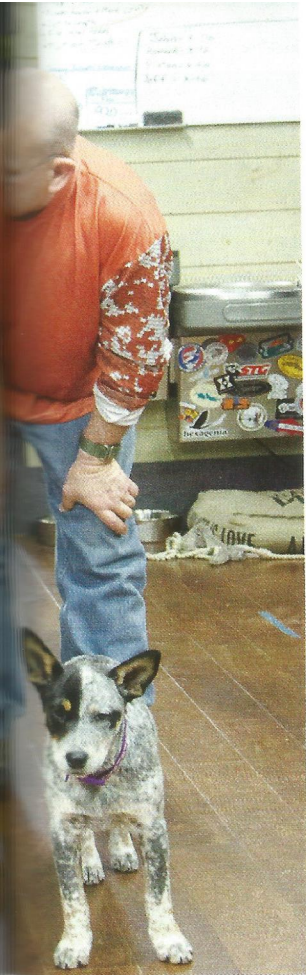
For more information about Oyster Fine Bamboo Fly Rods, visit oysterbamboo.com. The shop is located at 494 E. Main St., Blue Ridge. Lodging is available above the shop.



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Riley Gudakunst, shop manager at Oyster's Fine Bamboo Fly Rods, left, demonstrates filing nodes off of bamboo to Slaton Fry of Conway, Arkansas, while Pepper, Gudakunst's puppy, listens. PHOTO/ KIMBERLY BROWN

STEPS TO CREATING A BAMBOO FLY ROD

The first step to creating a rod is to file off the bamboo nodes, or rings that circle the bamboo stalk. After that, the outside skin of the bamboo is "flamed" Or charred, using a torch. The degree of charring sets the color of the rod, with darker charring causing a darker, richer brown.

Riley Gudakunst, shop manager at Oyster's Fine Bamboo Fly Rods, described the process from there.

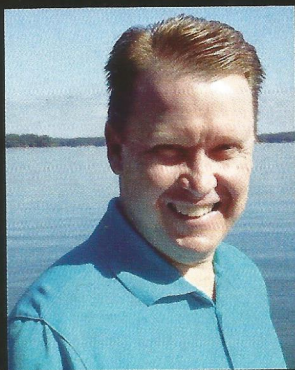
He said, after filing and flaming, the bamboo is then split lengthwise into many pieces, each about 1/2-inch wide. Six of those strips will be used for each piece of the rod, the butt section and the tip section. Each strip is then scraped to

remove the enamel, or bark, of the bamboo. The charred part comes off, revealing the color the rod will be.

The strips are straightened and run through a beveling machine, which is the only power tool used in the process. The strips are then hand-planed and glued together lengthwise to create the 360-degree hexagon, which is the shaft of the rod.

Then, Gudakunst said, the blank is turned into a fly rod by mounting the hardware, shaping a cork grip on a lathe and installing the guides.

"After that, we'll put three coats of marine-grade varnish on, and we're finished," Gudakunst said.



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