



# River's Pearl

Bill Oyster crafts heirloom bamboo fly rods at his Blue Ridge, Georgia, workshop

/ by Libby McMillan Henson // photography by Brandon Cawood he best thing about fly-fishing is that it gives you a reason to get out and explore, according to master fly rod craftsman Bill Oyster. "There's no fly-fishing in ugly places," he says, with a knowing smile. This multi-faceted angler divides his time between gorgeous fish habitat and his workshop in tiny Blue Ridge, Georgia, where he designs and creates highly coveted custom fly rods.

"From a purely craftsmanship standpoint, fly rod making is part of the American craftsman heritage, alongside woven baskets and pottery," Oyster explains, from the comfort of the workspace he's had more than 20 years. His small but booming business, Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods, has elevated a practical American tradition to a thrilling marriage of art, science, and nature. Oyster's clients have included President Jimmy Carter, professional athletes, famous writers, and billionaires, whose identity he fiercely protects. But it's the water, rather than the movers and shakers, to which this Blue Ridge maker feels most connected.





**Southern Accents:** 

Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods are carefully crafted for the expert fisherman, and include intricate nickel silver engravings, a process Bill Oyster learned to further customize his work. His rods can include gold inlay, specific sculpting, and artistic scenes.

Oyster-who studied art, philosophy, and engineering before weaving them into a career based on his love of fly-fishingmakes rods, but not reels. "The rod is the most important part," he explains. "It's what transforms and transitions the energy from the fisherman's hand to the fly. These days, fly rods are typically made of carbon fiber and graphite," he explains, of the industry's mid-century move to synthetic materials. "They're manufactured en masse, mostly overseas, by relatively unskilled labor. The rods we make are bamboo, the worldwide standard from the mid-1800s until the move to synthetic materials. Bamboo really takes some serious handcraft," he says. "There's no way around the time or skill involved, which means we have the higher price tags." Today, Oyster's custom fly rods include (but are not limited to) the most expensive fly rods in America, if not the world: a custom rod can fetch nearly \$20,000 (although the average is \$6,000-\$8,000).

In essence, Oyster is creating beloved family heirlooms. Bamboo rods "are all about beauty, tradition, and remembering," says Oyster. "In today's throw-away mentality, people don't

expect things to last anymore, but if you don't put these bamboo rods back in the tube wet, and you keep them out of extreme weather, you pass them on for generations," says Oyster, "especially if they're customized."

The bamboo of Oyster's fly rods is harvested from a small 20–30 square mile river valley in southern China. "That particular bamboo has just the right properties, the perfect fiber densities," he explains. Each of his rods is made of 24 individual pieces of bamboo: hollow, and about three inches in diameter. "We're cracking and splitting the shell into strips, planed down into triangles," explains Oyster of his process. Those triangular strips are tapered fat to thin, then glued together lengthwise to form a hexagon. Even basic rods still take him over 30 hours of work, before he begins the engraving process. The more complex rods can each take hundreds of hours each. Oyster's are precision-planed within 1/1000 of an inch.





Reel Man:

Bill Oyster crafts his fly rods
out of bamboo shipped
from a small river valley
in southern China. Each
rod contains 24 individual
bamboo pieces and can
take more than 30 hours to
create, and that's before he
begins engraving. Oyster's
customers have included
professional athletes and
authors, as well as President
Jimmy Carter.



The many lengths and weights of rods are for specific performance situations, but he also has to customize the action of the rod, which a devout fly fisherman like Oyster understands and translates into his work. Any change will make a change to the action of the rod. The line guides make the fly line take the shape of the bending rod. "The different bands of color you see near the line guides are silk thread," Oyster explains, "wound round and round, and then varnished over the top. We also do a thing called 'inserts': twelve additional strips, inlaid above the grip, to give an alternate, tapered accent of color . . . wispy streaks of color like you'd see on a pool cue."

Many of Oyster's commissions have been executive retirement gifts. "When a man's retiring from 40 years on the job, he doesn't want a Rolex," laughs the rod-maker, fully understanding the desire to flee clocks and simply unplug on the water. Oyster's customized fly rods also incorporate intricate hand-engraved nickel silver accents, a process he learned so he could further customize his work, without relying on an engraver who didn't know anything about rods. Oyster can also incorporate gold inlay, sculpting, even artistic scenes. He gets some specific requests, but most clients—after seeing the dazzling rods he's already created—give very little input, typically only dates of retirement, or perhaps a name or event to commemorate.

Visit this passionate angler's Blue Ridge headquarters and you'll discover large observation windows for seeing firsthand the many steps of Oyster's well-honed craft. As he engraves, a nearby camera affords the opportunity to see—on a monitor in the showroom—exactly what he's seeing on his workbench. You can also discuss upcoming fishing trips led by Oyster

himself; past destinations have included Patagonia for trout, Andros Island for bonefish, Paraguay for golden dorado, and Belize for tarpon.

Oyster's business evolved with the construction of a building that houses his retail shop, studio, and upstairs, The Oyster Cast & Blast Inn. Guests of the four-room inn are a combination of tourists, devout anglers, or students of Oyster's fly-rod-making classes, where 60 hours lead to one's own handmade rod. Close to 150 people, from around the globe, come through Oyster's school each year.

The quaint village shop and studio regularly gets Main Street walk-ins who assume a business named "Oyster" must sell seafood. In fact, the man behind the name hasn't kept a fish in 15 years or more. Most fly fishermen eventually develop a strong catch-and-release philosophy, and he's no different. "There's so much beauty to the experience," he admits, "that there's a real feeling of satisfaction to watch that fish swim away, and knowing it's still there. You never know what 12-year-old kid is going to hook it the very next day for a memory of a lifetime."

Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods, 494 E Main St, Blue Ridge, GA. (706) 374-4239, oysterbamboo.com

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/ by Scott Gould
// photography by Paul Mehaffey

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#### MAN ON A MISSION

Like many Southern stories, cooking culture in the South comes with a complex history. Meet John T. Edge, the Mississippi writer who's not afraid to narrate it, putting pen and passion behind the progress of our region's celebrated cuisine.

/ by Ashley Warlick, with sidebar by John T. Edge // illustrations by Timothy Banks

COVER:
Fresb oysters, a succulent
Soutbern staple, are a
common item on Hello,
Sailor's dynamic menu,
wbich changes based on
seasonal availability. The
Cornelius. North Carolina,
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cuisine team Joe and Katy
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"Anchors Away." page 100.
By M. Linda Lee
Photograph by Paul
Mchaffey

THIS PAGE: Fly fisberman and master crafter of bamboo fly rods Bill Oyster works on one of bis custom pieces. For more see "River's Pearl," page 50. Photograph by Paul Mchaffey

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