

The Patagonia School of Fly Fishing

In a new book, Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard evangelizes a back-to-basics Japanese technique for fly fishing

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By MICHAEL HSU [CONNECT](#)

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SUPER FLY | Yvon Chouinard, founder and owner of Patagonia, with his tenkara rod at Foster Park in Ventura, Calif. *Peter Bohler for The Wall Street Journal*

FOR SOMEONE WITH a vested interest in selling goods for exploring the great outdoors, Yvon Chouinard, the owner and founder of the outdoor-apparel company Patagonia, takes a surprisingly stripped-down approach to one of his favorite pastimes. "Heaven knows we fly fishers are suckers for every new gizmo we think will give us a leg up on catching fish," he writes in "Simple Fly Fishing: Techniques for Tenkara and Rod & Reel," to be published by Patagonia Books on Monday. With what could safely be described as ornery skepticism, Mr. Chouinard, along with his co-authors, Craig Mathews and Mauro Mazzo, questions the rise of \$1,000 fishing rods and tackle boxes overflowing with flies. "I would offer," Mr. Chouinard continues, "that this proliferation of gear is supported by busy people who lack for nothing in their lives except time."

Therein lies the book's charm. Part straightforward how-to, part back-to-basics manifesto, the volume is also a bit of a sermon that seeks to spread the good word about a centuries-old Japanese technique known as "tenkara"—which calls for a long, flexible, reel-free rod—that Mr. Chouinard believes is the hands-down easiest and most pleasurable way to fish.

"Some people say, 'I don't fish because I don't have patience,'" Mr. Chouinard said by telephone from Patagonia's headquarters in Ventura, Calif. "Well, it takes no patience whatsoever to fly fish. It's not like sitting in a boat and dangling a worm down below and waiting for a bite," he said. "It's proactive. It's like dragging a toy mouse across the

floor for your cat. If you just drag it, the cat just looks at it. But you stop it and give it a little twist, the cat pounces on it."

Granted, Patagonia does stand to profit from a surge of interest in tenkara; the book is part of a kit they're selling—complete with a rod, lines and flies. But a portion of the proceeds from the book, which can be purchased separately, will be donated to various conservation organizations. And Patagonia stores around the U.S. will offer free clinics on the technique. We asked Mr. Chouinard to highlight beginner-friendly techniques from the book.

The Gear



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The Tenkara Rod *F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal*

The Tenkara Rod

One problem with a traditional fishing rod, explained Mr. Chouinard, is that it's stiff: "It's just a dead stick." Giving movement to the fly is essential, he said, which is where a tenkara rod excels. Long, thin and flexible, tenkara rods are traditionally used by market fishers in Japan. Mr. Chouinard's favorite is a telescopic 10½-foot soft-hackle model from Temple Fork Outfitters (shown collapsed at left; forods.com). Using a tenkara rod also makes it harder to cast your fly too far past the fish's actual location, he said. "Everyone's been making fly rods as if you need to cast 100 feet to catch a trout, when in reality the trout are at your feet, practically."



[Enlarge Image](#)

The Essential Fly *F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal*

The Essential Fly

"If I was to use only one fly for trout fishing for the rest of my life, it would be a 'partridge and pheasant-tail' soft hackle," said Mr. Chouinard, specifying a size 14. Known as a "wet" fly because it's intended to float beneath the surface of the water, the partridge and pheasant-tail imitates insects that are part of the trout's diet. "It's an all-purpose fly," he said. "You could probably go out with this one fly and outfish anybody."

The Beginner's Knot

To secure the fly, Mr. Chouinard's go-to knot is the nonslip loop. Here's how to tie it.



1. Start by forming a basic overhand knot.



2. Thread one end of the line through the fly, then send the end back through the loop of the overhand knot.

3

3. Wind the end around the line four or five times, then thread it back through the overhand knot again. Pull to tighten.



[Enlarge Image](#)

The Beginner's Knot *Erik Brooks*

The Basic Cast

For beginners, the technique known as the Belgian Cast is the easiest to master, according to Mr. Chouinard. The key is not to bend your wrist; otherwise "you lose all your power in the stroke," he said.



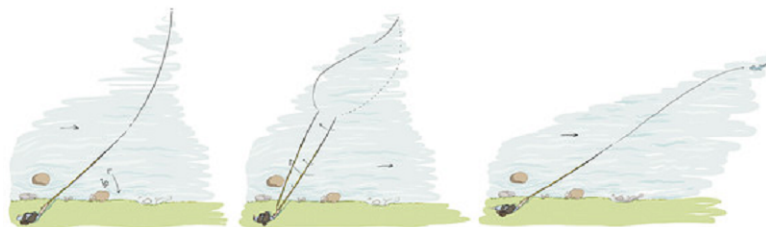
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The Basic Cast *Erik Brooks*

1. Stand a bit sideways to your target and throw the rod behind you, keeping the rod tilted at a 35-degree angle from the vertical.
2. Throw the rod forward, keeping the rod at a 10-degree angle from the vertical.
3. On the back cast, the rod goes to about a 2 o'clock position; on the forward cast, about 10 o'clock.
4. The line should make a small oval as it travels; there are no abrupt stops.

Fishing Technique

Trout are masters at expending as little energy as possible to gather food, Mr. Chouinard explains in the book. It doesn't pay for fish to swim up to the water's surface from four feet down to nab a tiny fly. When feeding on small insects, they need a large quantity (a hatch) to make it worth their while, but a trout can be enticed to fall for an artificial fly if the fly is close enough that the trout only has to move a little and open its mouth.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Fishing Technique *Erik Brooks*

1. Cast the line at about a 45-degree angle downstream.
2. As soon as the fly is in the water, lift the loose part of your line and place it across your body. This mending upstream slows down the drift of the fly and prevents the loose line from getting caught in the current and swinging your fly at an unnaturally fast speed.

3. When the line comes tight, twitch the tip of the rod by squeezing the bottom fingers of the hand holding the rod. (Your goal is to imitate the emerging and swimming stages of the caddiefly and mayfly.) The rod itself should hardly move. Almost everyone who tries this overdoes it at first. Here's the rule: If you think you're not moving the fly enough, move it less.