Japanese Rods and Rod Makers

I ended up learning enough to write a book (which I plan to do!) However, I hope that in this column I can at least offer some general reflections on Japanese rod making, as well bring a bit more specific about several makers and their rods.

From the outset, a welcome general observation was how highly skilled these Japanese artisans at work. They all shared a careful, unrushed approach, with a strong sense of dedication and commitment to producing the best possible work.

Many Japanese rods seem to have evolved from the legendary rod tops of the American master, Paul Young. The Perfectionist was a phrase that described the rods that Paul Young produced. It reflected a strong sense of craftsmanship and attention to detail.

For me, these Japanese tapers were intriguing. For those accustomed to stiffer, faster rods, they could take some getting used to and may not be to everyone’s taste. Still, I’m looking forward to experimenting with this style of rod over the coming season in the Snowy Mountains, in particular on moderately tight waters and in strong winds.

It was no surprise that aesthetically, the Japanese rods I saw were a reflection on its availability, but mostly because bamboo has been proven to produce rods unrivalled in performance for Japanese stream fishing.

In conclusion, my May–June 2012 trip to Japan was a truly inspirational experience. Elsewhere in this issue, I’ve written about flyfishing Japanese streams, fishing with many diverse uses, including building/construction, furniture, cooking/eating utensils, tools, food (bamboo shoots), ornamental plantings, erosion control, and a huge number of other applications.

Bamboo also has great cultural and spiritual significance, with its characteristics of undying flexibility, longevity and endurance. So bamboo in Japan is both commonplace and very special. The fact that it is used by choice as a rod making material is partly a reflection on its availability, but mostly because bamboo has been proven to produce rods unrivalled in performance for Japanese stream fishing.

Before my visit, I was already aware that, as in the West, Japanese Tinkin Cane (Arundinaria amabilis) is well established as a rod making material. I had also read that the softer, lower modulus Japanese Madake bamboo (Phyllostachys bambusoides) was used in making their rods too. As I turned out, I was to learn on my visit that this is only the start of the story, and several Japanese makers are working with a range of other indigenous bamboo species.

Another interesting point relates to the preferred section of most Japanese rods. Because of the complex braided currents on most Japanese streams, a huge amount of importance is placed on slack line presentations and drag-free drifts, while maintaining accurate placement of the fly. This is often achieved using very long ends (over 20 feet) leaders, and a range of specific casts and mends. The best style of rod for this application has an action that could be considered very soft and slow in the West. Full flexing rods in 1 or 4 weight, in lengths from 7 to 8 feet are the most common choice.

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With these general observations in mind, here are some of the master craftpeople that I met, and some specific reflections on their work.

Kazuki Kikuchi – rod maker
Kikuchi-san is a really lovely guy, very laid back and relaxed. His home and workshop is in the town of Morioka, in the Prefecture of Iwate. Interestingly, his rod business is called ‘Big Two Hearted River’, after the moving Ernest Hemingway story. He is one of the makers we met who is a fan of the Paul Young tapers, particularly the Perfectionist. The rods of his that I cast reflected this. They were smooth and deep loading, but with plenty of reserve power to fish tumbling pocket water, emerald streams or more open waters.

Though he has experimented with Madake bamboo, Kikuchi-san’s current rods are made from lightly heat-treated Tinkin Cane. He uses Japanese Hanks ferrules, along with finely knurled reel seat hardware which he makes himself. His rods are finished in hand-
rubbed Tung Oil, revealing a subdued, natural look, and on the
ones I saw, accented with golden guide and ferrule wraps and fine
black tipping. Rods are tanned in brown buff, which looks a little
like some of the brown mallee I use. He grips rods with his fingers
and makes his rod bags, which also feature a fish motif button.
Kikuchi-san learnt rod making by translating the Garrison
book with an English-Japanese dictionary. This is no mean feat
– if you’ve seen the Garrison book, you’ll know it can be pretty
erudite, even in your native language!

Kikuchi-san’s website is

www.bthr.net

Higashi-san’s translation, it is evident that he is critical of his own
work. Lacquer that looks perfect and that his customers rejoice in
and imminent breakage!

Shibuya-san’s website is www.kawatsura.com

Sao-Naka-san was very generous in showing me some of his
rod making and Urushii lacquer work, Shibuya-san is a noted flyfishing
author, guide, instructor and tackle designer – he designs hooks and
LfL fly lines and leaders. He has also produced three instructional
flyfishing DVDs. His rod making and fishing are based on using
loosening leaders (20 foot plus) and long dog fish drifts. Watching him
fish is like nothing I’ve ever seen.

Like Kikuchi-san, he makes rods from powerful Tenkara Cane.
He also mentions the Paul Young Perfectionist as a starting point,
but as he says, his rods have now evolved a long way from that point.
They are 3 and 4 weights, from 7’2” to 7’9”. To me they feel like
they have the essence of the Perfectionist to them, but are maybe
lighter through the tip and with more taper and power into the butt.
However, they still have a more continuous feel and action than say,
Payne rods, ‘fast’ dry fly rods.

Shibuya-san’s rods use custom Japanese Hekiki ferrules
and red wolf hareline, which he outlines to a dark finish. The rods are
varnished in a warm reddish gold gloss, over mentored flamed cane.
The red varnish and bullet-shaped ferrule plug are finished in exquisite
Urushii lacquer. The wraps are unique. He uses a gold tipped thread,
but varnishes them over in dark brown Yamabuki Urushii. This results
in a colour that blends in with the bamboo, but with faint golden
highlights. The grips are a shallow taper and very comfortable full
wells.

Shibuya-san’s website is www.kawatsura.com

Naoto Shibuya – rod maker

Shibuya-san is a full-on character. Based in the town of Kawatsura
in the Akita Prefecture, his family business is in the beautiful
but overwhelming, even in your native language!

Kikuchi-san’s website is

www.bthr.net

Sao-Naka – rod maker

Sao-Naka-san is a Tokyo based rod maker. He does make split cane
rods, but his core profession is making whole culm rods. These are,
as the name suggests, whole, full, culms of Bamboo (from species
such as Yadake or Arrow Bamboo – Pseudosasa japonica), made into
multi-section rods. I had envisaged something basic like our old style
Rungcon Cane surf rods. Although the principle at the fundamental
level is the same, these rods are maybe the most refined and delicate
rods, to in a few paragraphs. From the very start, culm selection is critical,
as there is no opportunity to change the taper of a culm through
planning or shaping. Additionally many of these rods are formed from
many culms, with part of each culm being chosen for one of many
sections in the rod – rods may be 8 pieces or more, with sections
fitting together like a modern sleeve-fitted graphite roll.

One factor in his innovation, I think, is the wonderful collaboration
in his rod making. These included Tonkin, Madake, Medake,
Yadake and others. He makes mainly 6 sided split cane rods, but also
some of these rods are made as fly rods, but many are destined
to be ultra-light first fishing rods without reels, for tiny carp species,
using hooks the equivalent of size 50 or even smaller. The line on
these reel-less rods runs through the inside of the rod sections (like
the Dames ‘interline’ style rods). The rods can be made to be quite
resilient, but apparently the true connoisseur seeks out a rod that is so
fine and delicate, it sits on a knife-edge between sublime performance
and imminent breakage!

They are finished with Urushii lacquer, applied meticulously
with the fingers. Sao-Naka-san speaks no English, but through
Higashi-san’s translation, it is evident that he is critical of his own
work. Lacquer that looks perfect and that his customers rejoice in
frustrates him – he tried to show me elements of the finish he is
mourned to improve.

Sao-Naka-san was very generous in showing me some of his
techniques and tools, and also gave me a whole culm to make into a
7 foot 4 weight on my return to Australia. I am in the process of finishing
it now. It’s been intriguing to work on. I’ve had a preliminary cast,
and it feels more like a medium-tip action graphite rod than split cane.
It’s interesting to note that Sao-Naka-san’s rods are in such
demand that the rods he showed me were borrowed back from
customers. He has nothing in stock. He doesn’t have a website or
advertise.

Ushu Nakamura – rod maker

Nakamura-san has many projects and prototypes underway.
One factor in his innovation, I think, is the wonderful collaboration
and highly respected rod maker, which has been his career since he
was young.

It was a true honour to meet him – an experience that on
its own was worth the trip to Japan. Nakamura-san owns a small
tackle store and workshop in the town of Kitaya in Gunma Prefecture.
Walking into his store feels in some ways like stepping back into the
1950s, with wooden spools of line and other vintage and collectible
tackle. And yet he is a very progressive, leading edge rod maker. After
initial greetings, still at the front door of his workshop, he was very
keen to show me a sheet with photos of microscopic cross-sections of
half a dozen or more species of Bamboo he is using and experimenting
with in his rod making. These included Tonkin, Medake, Madake,
Yadake and others. He makes mainly 6 sided split cane rods, but also
whole culm rods and hybrids (full split cane, half whole culm).

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

That he has with close neighbor Kenshiro Shimazaki. Shimazaki-san is an icon in Japanese flyfishing. He is a leading fly tier, a hook and tackle designer for Tiemco, and keeps Nakamura-san very busy from what I could see!

I cast a large range of Nakamura-san’s rods over the course of an afternoon. They were all amazing, and each unique in their own way. Most were made from Madake and other very low modulus bamboos, so had an amazing fluid feel. He also had a spliced Takin Paul Young Midge-based rod, with scarf ferrules, that was as fast and tight as any bamboo you would wish to cast.

The aesthetics of his rods to me are definitively Japanese. Bamboo ferrules, bamboo reel seat, semi blonde lemon bamboo finish, Kanji signing and poetry inscribed on the butt, and golden brass reel seat hardware to blend in with the bamboo. There are clear wraps, guides and tip tops that he makes himself and every other detail comes together into a simple but beautiful rod.

Nakamura-san has no website or email, no advertising or social media presence. All his work is word of mouth, and he is in such demand that he has the luxury of being able to select his customers. I was lucky enough to get on his list, so now I get to experience the other side of what it’s like to wait for a rod!

Harada-san – rod maker

Harada-san is an Osaka-based rod maker. I only had the chance to meet him briefly, over dinner, but I had seen photos of his work in Japan FlyFisher, and was able to cast two of his recent rods during my visit. Harada-san makes rods for Japanese trout using Madake bamboo. He feels that the supple feel of this material suits the fish and the fishery. The rods I cast were finished beautifully and also cast very smoothly. Because of the low modulus of Madake, he is now using hybrid bamboo (female) and graphite (male) spigot ferrules, to balance the light action, feel and weight of Madake in a responsive, smooth small stream trout rod. He also swells the wood on the reel seat insert to meet the cork grip, so there is a seamless transition from seat to grip. This looked unique and felt very nice too.

Harada-san speaks some English and he spoke beautifully when we were discussing why we fish for trout. He simply said, in perfect, deliberate English, “I fish for trout, because when I catch a fish, I think that he is me”. He apparently speaks French very well (I’ll have to take his word for that!) which explains his business name – ‘Le Grand Soir’.

Harada-san’s website is www.le-grand-soir.net

Toshiyuki Hariki – Ferrule and Reel seat Hardware Maker

It was on Higashi-san’s initial recommendation that, in addition to American CSE ferrules, I have been using Hariki-san’s ferrules and reel seat hardware for several years. So it was wonderful to finally meet him. Hariki-san works with his father in their Osaka-based precision engineering family business, making parts for the automotive and other industries. Hariki-san’s love of flyfishing lead him to begin making ferrules and reel seat hardware and these have been very well received, both in Japan and internationally. I hope to review Hariki ferrules and hardware at a later date, but suffice to say, they are in keeping with the level of craftsmanship of the Japanese rod makers who use them.

Hariki-san’s website is: www.hariki.com
With an English page at: www.hariki.com/0802hf_web01.pdf

Kouji Yano – Silk Fly Line Maker

Along with Harada-san and Hariki-san, Yano-san is another Osaka based flyfishing craftsman. With a career and experience in the fine textile industry, Yano-san turned his skills to making silk fly lines. I had the opportunity to cast some (on my own rods and those of Harada-san) during my visit, and they felt really good. He was also very kind in giving me a line to field test here on my return. I am eagerly awaiting the chance to put it through a full season and review it for the Australian market.

Yano-san’s website is at: www.ace-lure.ne.jp/yansilkline

Three weeks was barely enough time to scratch the surface and meet just a few of Japan’s fine tackle and rod makers and other artisans. Everyone I met was so generous, humble and friendly. I hope to return many times to renew friendships, make new ones, and to share what I learn in Australia.