



## THE MAKERS

“Serious fly fishers understand what’s special about a split cane rod,” says Chris Clemes, whose company crafts them in Worcestershire. **Hannah Hudson** reports

Chris Clemes is thigh deep in a river in Wiltshire, England. Birds chirrup in the trees and mayflies swirl in the air. The chalk stream is crystal clear and, as the sun dips in the sky, a faint mist rises over the water. It’s peaceful here for a solitary fisherman, rod in hand, lost in his own world...

Clemes shakes his head and he’s back in his London office. “I catch myself thinking about fly fishing a lot,” he admits “My father and uncle introduced me to fishing in South Africa when I was about seven years old, and I haven’t stopped since.”

After working as a professional fly fishing guide in the winelands region of his home country, Clemes moved to the UK in 2007 with Orvis, America’s biggest fly fishing company. A year later, he decided to launch his own range of split cane fly rods and accessories, setting up

a concession in Farlows, an outdoor pursuits boutique on London’s Pall Mall.

“Serious fly fishers understand what’s special about a split cane rod,” says Clemes. “There’s a feel and smell to it that can’t be copied. Yes, it looks beautiful, but it’s strong and durable too.” Clemes works with a team of six craftsmen in Redditch, Worcestershire, to create his rods, each specialising in a different part of the process.

The bamboo is sourced from a small area of China’s Guangdong province. (“It’s highly sought after due to its strength and straightness,” explains Clemes.) Creating the ‘blank’ [the wooden part of the rod] involves splitting, planing and straightening the strips of bamboo, before they’re bound and glued together. The rod is then either varnished or impregnated with special resin to give a resilient, →



ILLUSTRATION BY JESSICA KENDREW

durable finish. “An impregnated blank is remarkably resistant to water damage,” says Clemes. “You could leave these rods in the river for months and come back to find them undamaged.”

The rod is then fitted with a Portuguese cork handle, and Turkish walnut and nickel silver reel seat. “There’s a natural aesthetic beauty to the finished product,” says Clemes. “The knowledge that someone spent years learning the craft needed to make the rod, and spent weeks making the product in your hands, gives it a substance and character that a synthetic rod can’t simulate.”

Each Chris Clemes rod (they start

“ Y O U C O U L D L E A V E  
T H E S E R O D S I N T H E  
R I V E R F O R M O N T H S  
A N D C O M E B A C K T O  
F I N D T H E M U N D A M A G E D ”

from £1,150) takes around four months to produce, with just 20 made each year. The work is 95 per cent commission based, with an even mix of British and US customers, plus a few requests from South Africa and Europe – “particularly Scandinavia and France” – and even Japan. Clemes is keen to spread the word about British split cane rods, so that people can enjoy traditional fly fishing all over the world. “I’ve fished in some amazing destinations,” he says. “The Soca Valley in Slovenia is one of my favourites, because it’s so incredibly beautiful with extraordinarily clear waters, Russia is great for salmon fishing, and Zanzibar is the place to go for tigerfish.”

Clemes loves to hear about his customers’ fishing adventures. “They write to us and send photos every time they take their rod somewhere new,” he says. “You can see a sparkle in their eyes. These people have worked hard all their lives, often in demanding professions like finance and law, and they can’t wait to get back on the river. A split cane rod is something they can enjoy using for years – and even pass on to their children. Our rods are built to last. I want future generations to enjoy them, too.” ■

More information: [chrisclemes.com](http://chrisclemes.com)



Take me to the river: a rod can be four months in the making