

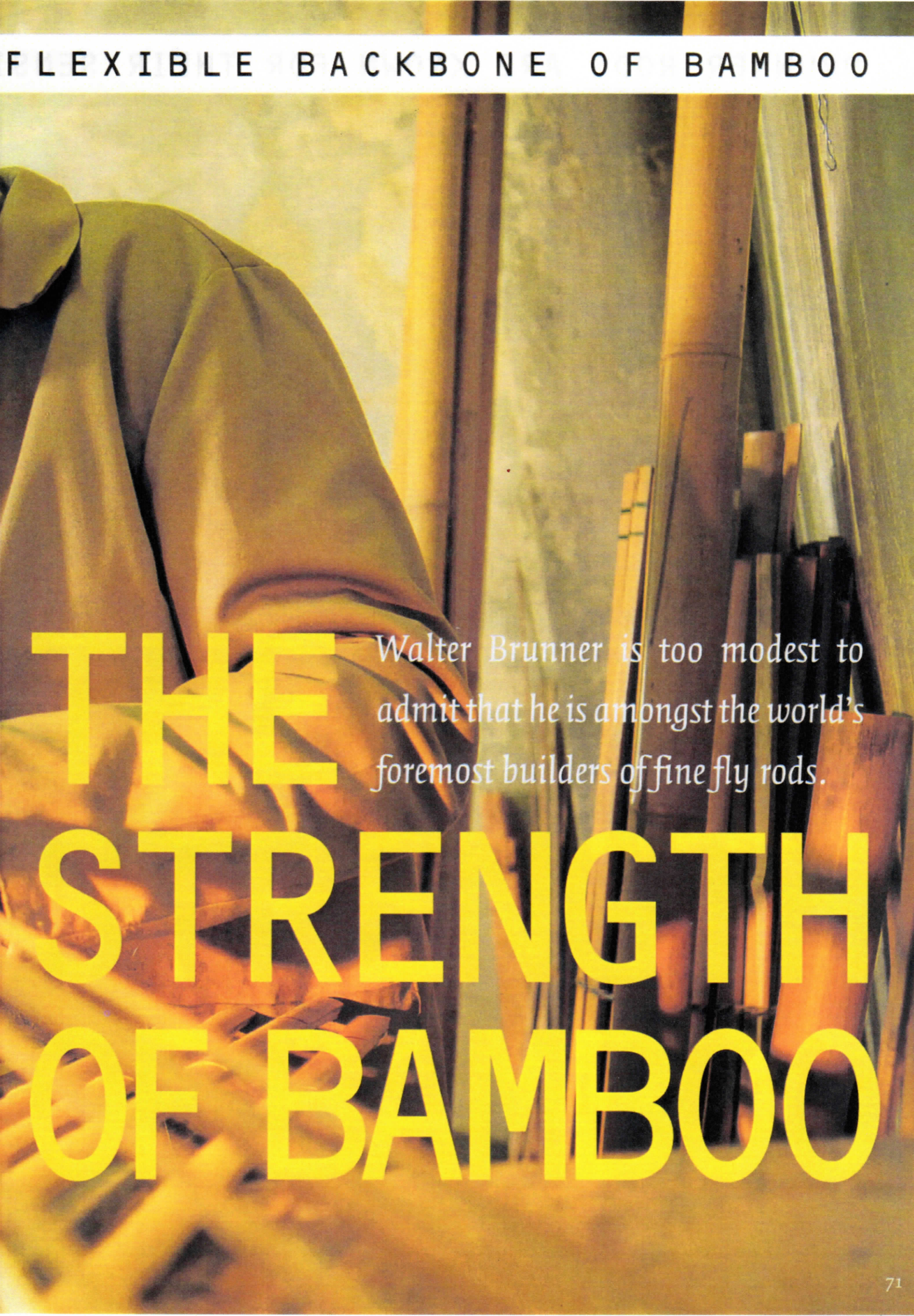
OF FISH, FLY RODS AND TH

C
r
a
f
t
s
m
a
n
s
h
i
p



Everything is done by hand:
After splitting the canes, they are
sorted and categorized according
to their various characteristics.



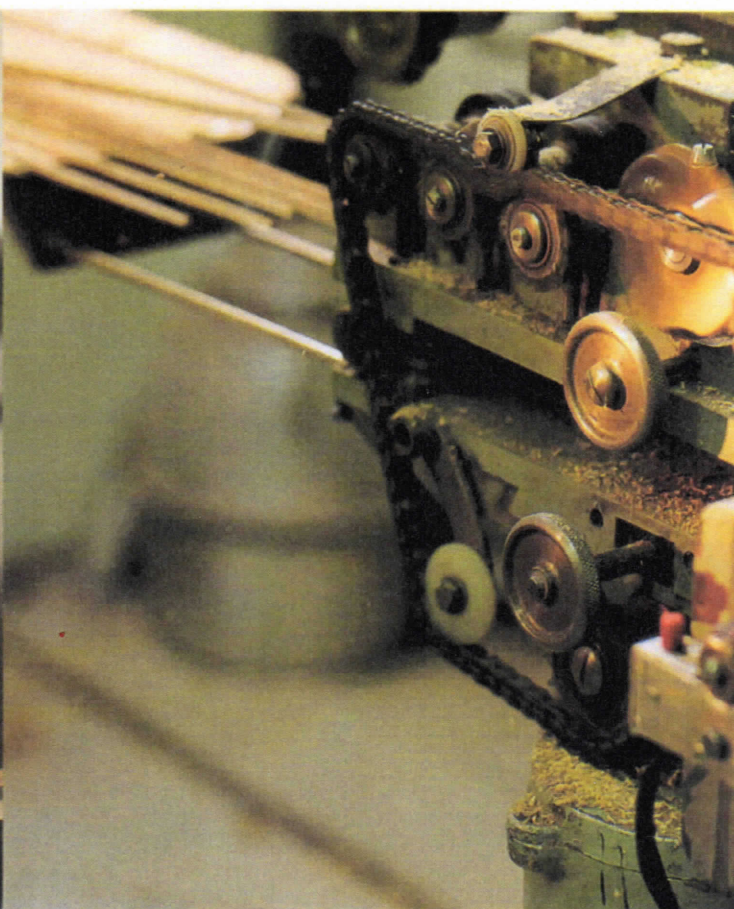


FLEXIBLE BACKBONE OF BAMBOO

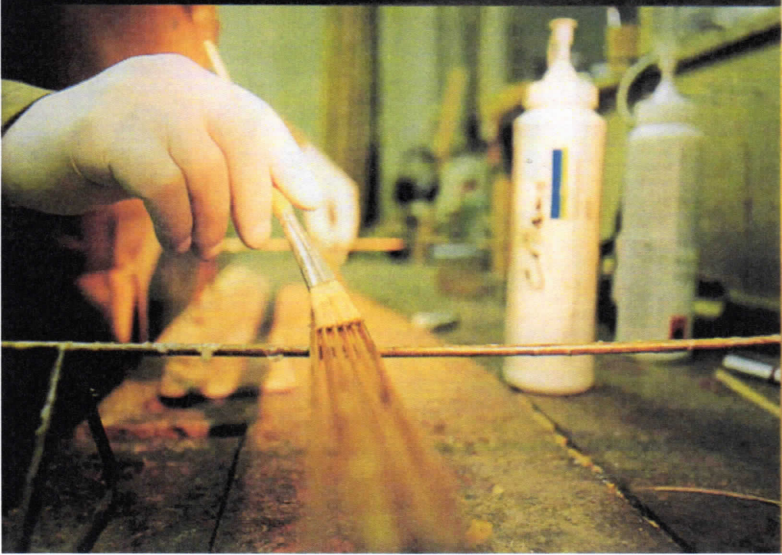
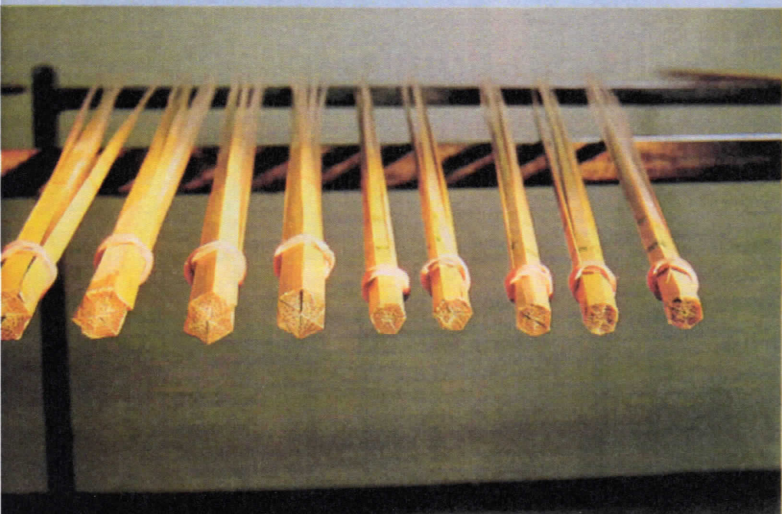
THE STRENGTH OF BAMBOO

Walter Brunner is too modest to admit that he is amongst the world's foremost builders of fine fly rods.

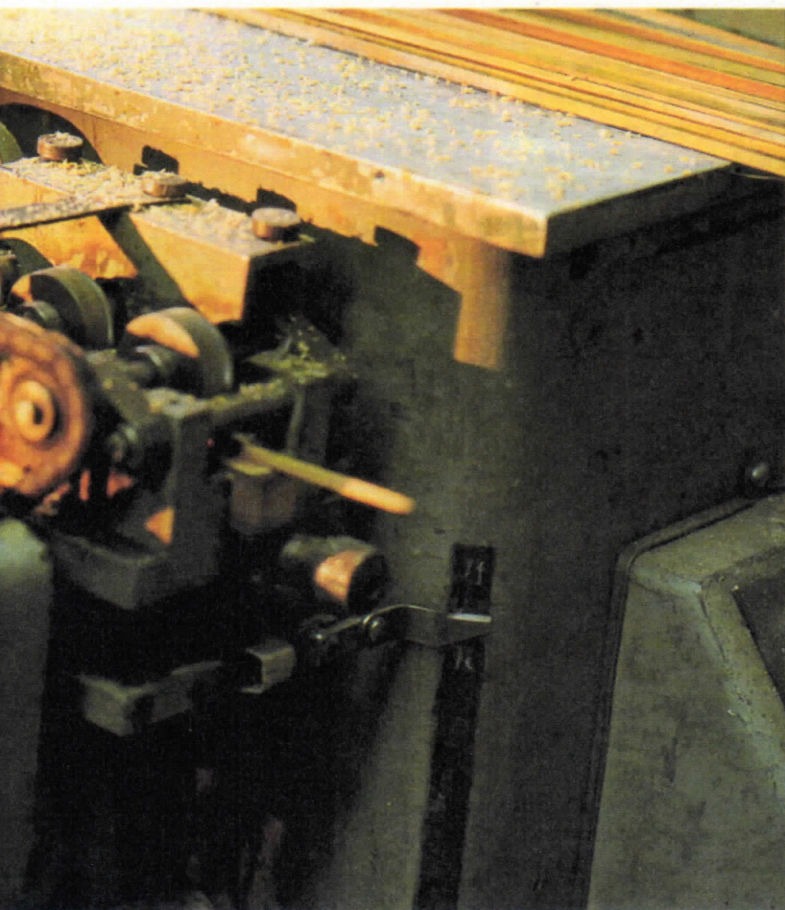
BRUNNER RODS ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR SENS



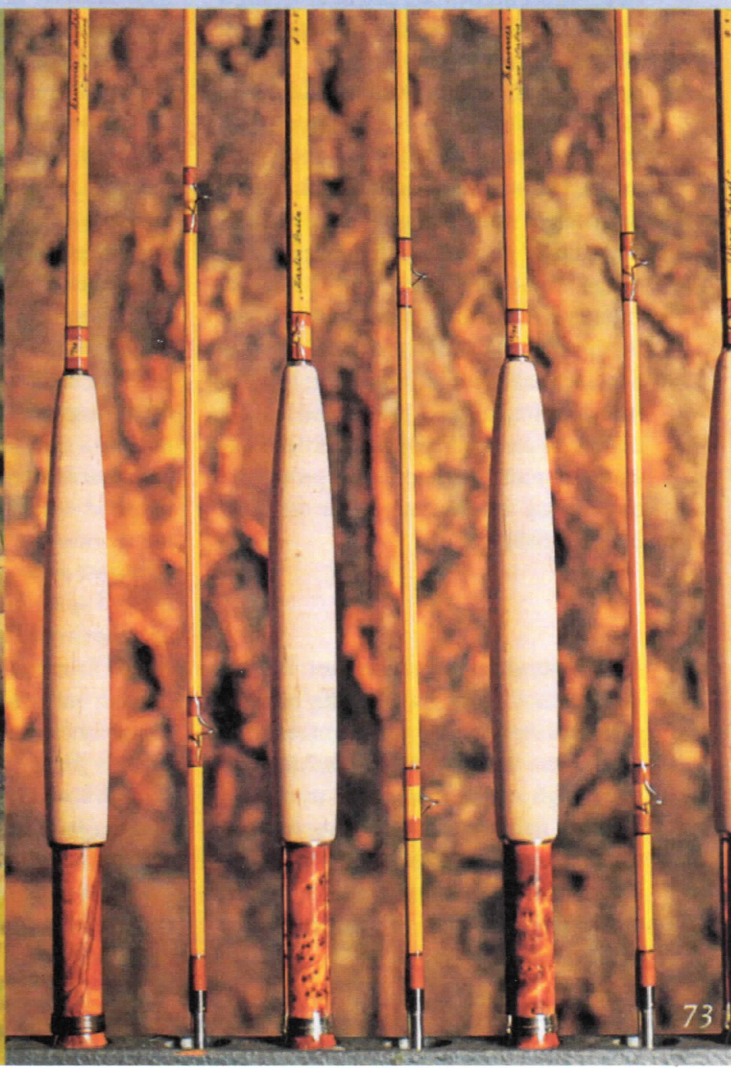
A perfectionist at work: splitting the cane, hardening and planing it; gluing and binding; handles of best cork and beautiful wood. "There



IVE CHARACTER, AND QUICK, FINE ACTION



en experts here who believe you can't calculate the proper temperature without a computer. I want nothing to do with computers."



FLY FISHING TRANSFORM

BY MARKUS HONSIG
WITH PHOTOS BY SERGE HÖLTSCHI

Probably the most astonishing thing about these fly rods is the price. A Brunner rod costs between \$1,000 and \$2,000, which seems quite inexpensive when compared with golf clubs or skis or similar sports equipment, especially when you consider the amount of work involved. A split-cane fly rod by Austrian Walter Brunner is hand made every step of the way, from the splitting of the bamboo canes to the sewing of the rod bag, which is his wife's job.

If Walter Brunner were a businessman, he would charge twice as much for a fly rod. Higher prices would not reduce the impressive backlog of orders or the usual delivery time of about a year, which the 72-year-old promises only if "our loving God wills it." Brunner's fly rods are truly amongst the best of their type in the entire world. He would be unlikely to praise his own work so highly, but a host of expert witnesses could be called to testify that his fly rods set a new standard for the delicate task of dropping a tiny fly onto the surface of a rolling stream. Walter Brunner is a perfectionist. For the past 35 years, he has continually raised the quality of his rods, but he has never increased his production or upped his prices. His is a one-man operation, which he manages with the support of his daughter, who is responsible for English-language correspondence, and his wife. "Money is not so important," he said. What is important to the fly fisherman trained as a cabinetmaker, is that he was able to make his hobby into his occupation, and that his customers are very happy with his delicately crafted fly rods. "My hope is that people will one day say that Brunner made the most beautiful fishing rods."



A short introduction for lay readers. Fly fishing, in which a dry fly is cast softly onto the surface of the water for a matter of seconds, transforms the endeavor of catching fish into a high art form. Any other method of catching fish, for example using wet bait under water, is not considered good sporting practice by fly fishing experts. In fact, other attempts to catch fish are simply "out of the question".

The alternative to split cane rods like the ones Walter Brunner builds, are modern graphite rods. These have two advantages: They are sturdier and cheaper. "But they have no life," Walter Brunner says. "So it takes too much strength and effort to cast with them. Bamboo canes possess their own tension. They create their own energy when they are in motion, so you can cast a fly long and soft in a gentle arc. Bamboo is the only material with these qualities."

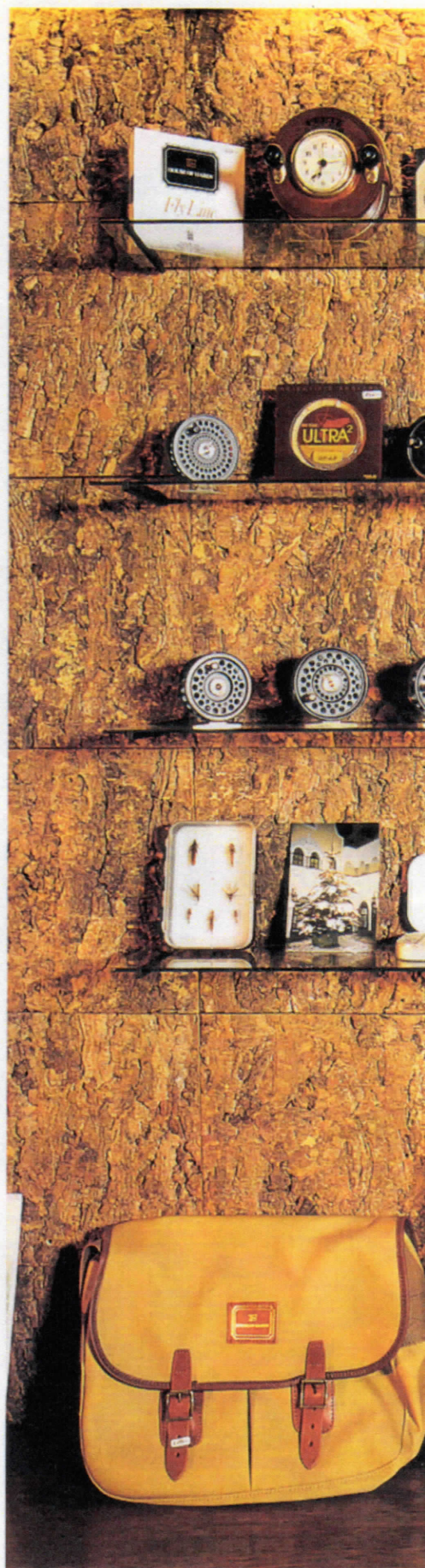
Brunner uses only Tonkin bamboo, and he is as dependent on this commodity as the panda bears in China. But he needn't fear for his supply, as his storage shed is bursting. "I have enough bamboo to last for another 30 years," Brunner says.



The reason why Brunner has such great reserves of bamboo goes back to 1963. After years of practice and some initial success, he finally decided to go into business making fly rods. At the time, he had a partner to take care of the administrative side of the operation. And the partner thought – and placed orders – on a much grander scale than Brunner himself. Three years later, well after the partnership had dissolved, Brunner received a call that his bamboo had arrived. When he went to the train station he discovered a whole boxcar full of bamboo cane. The young entrepreneur, who was already in debt, had to take out another loan to pay for it all. It was a heavy load on the budget at the time but, looking back on it, Brunner sees the accident proved a fortunate investment in his future.

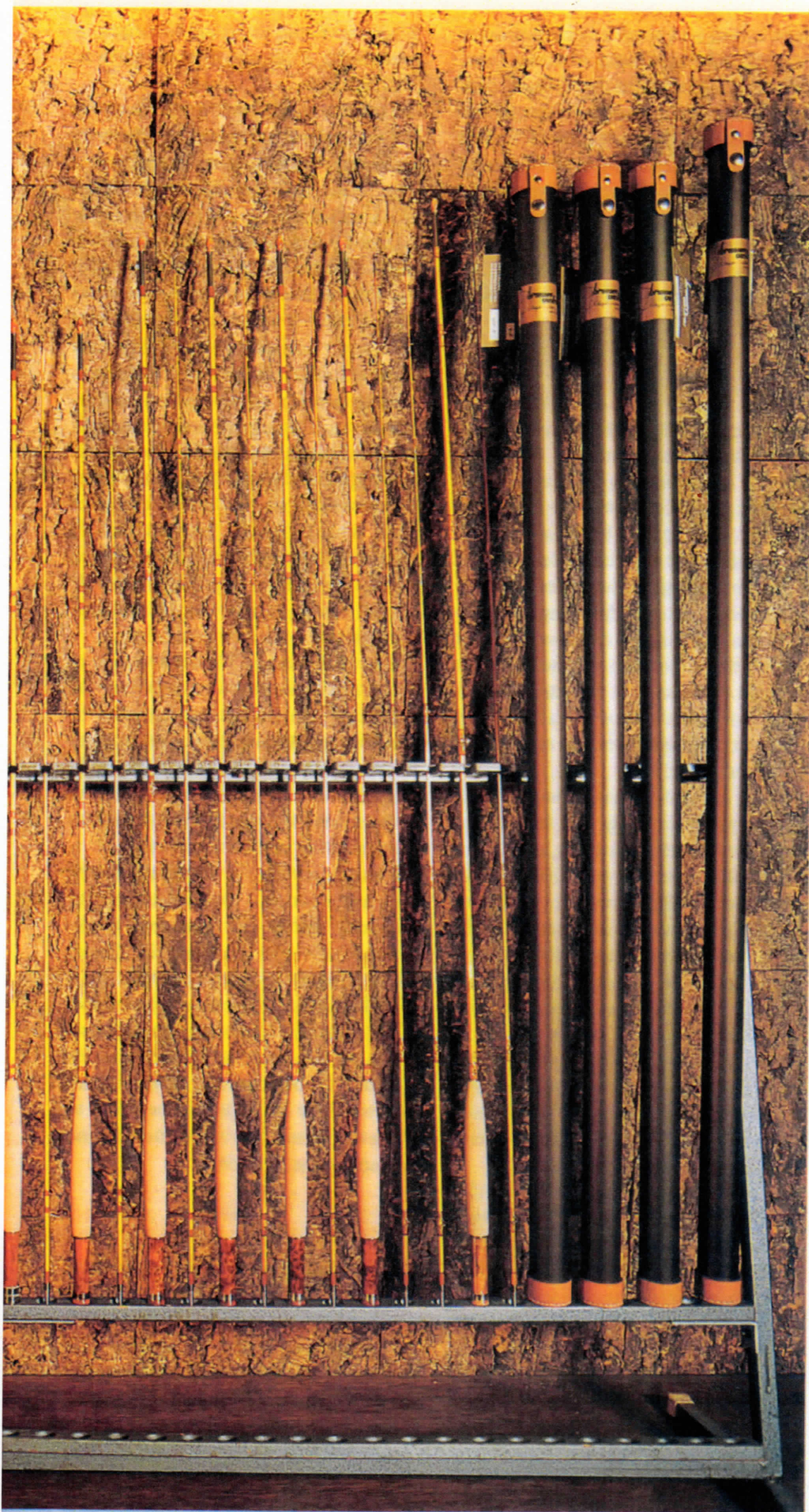
Walter Brunner's passion for fly rods was ignited a half century ago. It was 1949, and the 22-year-old Brunner was out fishing. He ran into a man who was fishing in a way he had never seen before. He used a long flexible pole and needed neither bobbars, sinkers nor worms, just artificial flies. Besides the stranger's exotic casting technique, Brunner noticed something else. The man caught only the coveted grayling, a fish that usually eluded Brunner. The exotic fisherman was English but he spoke German, and so the young cabinetmaker heard about split cane fly rods for the first time. Soon he came across a book in which he found a cross-section diagram of such a fishing rod. With that, his fate was nearly sealed.

The split-cane fly rod: Oversimplified, it consists of six thin strips of bamboo – the splits or culms, as they are called – glued



Completed split-cane fly rod dives away at the last second

CATCHING FISH INTO A HIGH ART



ods with olive-wood reels: "If a fish rises, almost snaps the fly and then need a lighter line. My most expensive rod casts the fly the shortest distance."

together. In the old days, it took the master craftsman about 20 hours to make a fishing rod. Nowadays, it's up to 35 hours. Over the years Walter Brunner has refined and perfected each individual step in the manufacturing process. And most of the improvements mean the process takes more time, and requires even more careful, minute handiwork.

In the beginning, for example, he had cut the raw bamboo cane into halves and quarters with a circular saw. Today, he uses a knife, so that he can be sure to split the cane between the natural filaments, without slicing through them. Injuring a filament would reduce the special flexibility of the material and diminish its ability to store energy during a cast. The only part of the bamboo cane suitable for building a rod is the outer layer. This is hardened in an oven constructed solely for this purpose.

Walter Brunner operates with finely tuned instincts, not precisely calibrated measuring devices. To monitor the hardening process, he doesn't need a thermometer, just his own senses and the wealth of experience accumulated over the past 25 years. "The bamboo changes color," he says. "And it smells different. There have been experts here who believe you can't calculate the proper temperature without a computer. I want nothing to do with computers."

After Brunner sands down the knots in the wood, he begins the trickiest step of all: running the edges of the culms through the router. Each of the six parts must have an inside angle of exactly 60°, so that six of them can be glued together precisely to form the rod. "Years ago, I used to plane the wood by hand for hours," Brunner said. "There just wasn't enough money in a fishing rod to pay for so much work." In the meantime, he has built his own machine to do this fine work on the cane splits. His homemade power tool is the only one of its kind and has been in service for 35 years.

Milling the edges of the bamboo split requires absolute concentration and nerves of steel, Brunner says. They must be delicately and steadily fed into the router, and even then the culm could rip or slip out of the machine. If that happens, all of the work was for nought, as it is nearly impossible to effectively repair the damage. "The natural tension in the cane is lost," Brunner says. On days when he is milling the cane splits, Brunner brooks no distractions. He closes his shop and doesn't answer the phone.

The unique feature of Brunner's router is the

A GREAT DEAL OF TIME AND PATIENCE

set of control cams. There is a different specially manufactured cam for each type and size of rod he builds. Each fly rod is designed with a particular type of water in mind, and each has its own character, which depends on the length and weight of the pole. Even more important to the character of the fishing instrument is the distribution of strength along the length of the rod, especially where and how much the cane tapers toward the top. (Fishermen ordering a rod with a particular size and weight will request a particular "taper.") The taper determines the speed and action of the fishing rod. Designing taper prototypes is a meticulous job that requires a great deal of time and patience, for the tolerances are infinitely small. On the slender one-millimeter tip of a fly rod, a tenth of a millimeter too much or too little can determine



Brunner's wife sews the cloth bags; the rods are supplied complete with a tubular aluminum protective case.

whether a rod snaps back when you cast with it. (And you can bet that a fly rod by Brunner does not snap back.)

It's not a good idea to ask Walter Brunner how far one can cast with one of his fly rods. You might as well just tell him you're a dilettante and not a fisherman. Brunner often treats lay people and bunglers with a sort of friendly impatience. After all, he has more than enough serious work to do.

Brunner rods are known for their sensitive character and quick, fine action. They are known to reward casting technique rather than brute strength. You might think of a golfer rather than a javelin thrower when you imagine casting with a Brunner fly rod. It takes a highly complex swing that must coordinate a variety of disparate motions. These sensitive fishing instruments may not be the best rods for beginners. In fact, Brunner has

been known to air some lengthy complaints about the casting technique of his customers. Walter Brunner could not have enjoyed such great success as a rod builder without the late Hans Gebetsroither, one of the founding fathers of the so-called Alpine casting technique, which boasts a much faster action than American or English styles. Brunner builds the ideal tapers for this technique, which even the dean of fly fisherman, the American Charles Ritz, has come to admire.



"I don't want to break a butterfly on the wheel," explains Brunner. When you fish on crystal clear mountain streams, you need a very fine and sensitive fly rod. There is nothing to be gained by throwing the fly a record distance, because there isn't space for that. "If I carefully and softly land a delicate fly in front of a grayling, and he chases it with his mouth wide open, the fly is okay," Brunner theorizes. "But if the fish dives away at the last second, that's a problem with the leader (the last part of the line). In that case, I need a finer, more delicate fly rod with a lighter line. My most expensive fly rod can cast a fly the shortest distance."

So never ask Walter Brunner how far you'll be able to throw the fly. Tell him instead about the water you plan to fish, and be honest with him about your own abilities. These are the two decisive factors when it comes to choosing the proper fly rod. Brunner builds a wide assortment of tapers, from 6 feet 4 inches to 7 feet 10 inches (1.90 to 2.40 meters). Rod weight varies from 2 and 3/4 ounces to just over 4 ounces (78 to 115 grams). The rods are suitable for line weights between 3 and 6. His rods have a variety of colorful names, including "Salza" and "Gebetsroither," whom we recall was a friend, and a famous Alpine fisherman.

If the narrow cane culms are planed evenly—usually after three trips through the router—there is little more to go wrong. Now they have to be glued, bound and finished, a five-hour process that also requires steady nerves. When it comes to glue, Walter Brunner could write a book. He has spent most of his working life looking for the perfect adhesive. Every time he finally found the right combination of ingredients or—through a fishing friendship to a chemist—the perfect compound, his sources have dried up sooner rather than later. The glue has to be durable and heat stable, hard but not too rigid, flexible but not too elastic. The rod maker has tried almost every-

thing, even things that could be dangerous to his health, if they only met his high technical standards.

The Spartan, undecorated workshop kept by Walter Brunner resembles a poisoner's apothecary more than an idyllic craftsman's shop. Poisons even play a role when it comes time to add the fittings that make it possible to break a 7-foot rod down into two or three pieces. (Imagine having to strap the rod to the top of the car for every trip to a trout stream.) These friction-fit sockets are made of nickel silver, a very hard alloy of copper, silver and nickel with outstanding corrosion resistance. Because there is no compound on the market that meets Brunner's exacting standards, he mixes his own. He heats the brew of acetic acid saltpeter and phosphorous to 175° F (80° C) before using it to finish the nickel silver tubes. When he is done, "the two pieces fit together so tightly that they create suction when pulled apart, yet they must be separable without twisting." (By the way, it is absolutely not permitted to lubricate these fittings.)

The small downside: The brown cloud of poison that is generated when he boils up the finishing mixture is not really suitable for closed rooms. Brunner built an exhaust system when he began to have respiratory problems related to breathing in the fumes, but not even fans and ventilation can prevent him from breathing in some of the poison.

Binding the ferrules, the rings that guide the line, to the rod is a time-consuming but ultimately healthy job. Of course, Walter Brunner uses only the finest silk thread, which he winds so tightly and evenly that it looks like a piece of tape once it is varnished and polished. And the master also puts a premium on the design of his products. He uses only the best cork and the most beautiful wood for his grips, and he strives to make every Brunner fly rod as attractive and harmonious as possible.



Once the rod bag has been sewn and a stable protective case has been fitted, there is only one task left: writing up the bill of sale. Walter Brunner has sent invoices to some quite prominent personalities around the world. I can't tell you who they are, for Brunner mentioned them to me in the strictest of confidence. And he is too discreet a man to adorn himself with other men's names. Walter Brunner is name enough for anyone who is fisherman enough to use one of his exquisite fly rods. #