

The Split-Bamboo Rods of Pezon et Michel

by Pierre Coursaget and Laurent Sainsot

Over several decades the split-cane rods of Pezon et Michel were the preferred tackle of the majority of French fly fishers and many foreigners. In view of the renewed interest that they have found recently, here is a short sketch which permits a revisit among the abundant wares of this French maker. Well designed and well built, the production rods of Pezon et Michel rivaled the very best handmade creations that cost three or four times as much. Once again, despite the preeminence of modern synthetic fibers, they remain excellent fishing tools with a particular charm and touch of the old-fashion, equally at home on the stream as within the display cases of collectors.

In the 1920s, Pierre Pezon, the leading maker of French fishing rods, bought out two Burgundian-based enterprises specializing in the fabrication of split bamboo: Robillard of Macon and Garreau of Dijon. In the face of increasing demand for well-made rods, met until that time by foreign makers, his goal was to make quality products. He therefore merged with three collaborators who wanted to establish their reputations. Edward Plantet, named head of manufacturing, assembled a team of specialized workers around the outdated equipment of the House of Garreau. Charles Ritz, a passionate flyfisher, offered his services as technical advisor. Finally, a little later, Pierre Creusevault, world champion caster, came to assist the Planet/Ritz duo as a prototype designer and evaluator.

Together, they perfected and tested original tapers and actions which, at the time, represented a true revolution. To realize their new ideas, they designed and constructed modern machines capable of milling the bamboo strips to the necessary high precision.

The first bamboo rods made with the new equipment were released in 1938 and called "Parabolic". As a result, the screw-locking ferrules and the intermediate wraps of the first Pezon rods, "Teddy", "Willy", "Normandy", "Imperial", "Fancy", "Delight", "Darling", "Lady", and "Weekend", inherited from makers H. Garreau of Dijon, soon disappeared from the company catalogues.

The "Parabolic" series was established in three lengths: 8', 8'6", and 9' in two actions: Normale or Competition. The first, more light, was better suited to fishing under normal conditions. The second, more powerful and fast, applied better to the casting competitions so much in vogue at the time, or for fishing requiring long casts. From the selection of the raw bamboo through to the glued-up sections arose three distinct quality levels: Supreme, Speciale and Prima.

The Supreme series (reference 230 in normal action, 232 in competition), the most expensive and highest quality, was distinguished by green wraps with

green borders. Equipped with a black screw-locking reel seats, this series included the Skish and Ritz models in a length of 8'2" for a #5 line with unequal-length sections, forerunners more or less of the famous PPP series.

The Speciale series (ref. 220 normal, 222 competition up until 1975, 221/223 thereafter), which became the most popular sellers, was wrapped in red with double red borders and carried a sliding-band reel seat. From the early 50s onward, this series included a 7'2" rod for a #4 line and the "Sawyer Stillwater", ref. 241; "Nymphe", ref. 246; "Dry Fly", ref. 247; and "Greased Line", ref. 249, inspired by the celebrated river keeper and English author.

Later, in the same series, the "TOS" model of 8'5" (ref. 229) wrapped in green with green and red borders was introduced in 1970.

The Prima series, ref. 210, replaced in 1970 by the Sterling series, made with average quality bamboo, finished with red wraps without borders, equipped with a sliding-band reel seat, represented models at the entry level.

The Supreme and Speciale series included three three-piece models ranging from 8'6" to 9'6".

Each rod was mounted with long and solid nickel-silver ferrules, chromium stripper guide and tiptop, bronzed snake guides, and a tulip-shaped grip. From 1938 to 1957, a "Parabolic Mixte" model of 8', made for either fly fishing or weight casting, completed the collection. Through the years, other entry-level models "Fly", "Flyxor", "Imperiale", and more recently "Tourangelle" delighted beginners and, after a few fishing seasons, were ready for the woodstove.

In 1952, a new original series surfaced: the Ritz "Super Parabolic PPP" with Progressive Pendulate Power or Perfect Progressive Power, according to the brochures. This series represented the highest achievement in the design work of the trio Plantet, Ritz and Creusevault. They are distinguished from the "Parabolic" classics by refinements described at length in the Pezon catalogues of the time. The butt section, shorter than the tip, leads to the placement of the ferrule closer to the rod grip, carrying over, in the words of the designers, to an improvement in the action. In the opinion of other specialists, this disposition engenders some drawbacks, augmented encumbrance and increased ferrule weight.

The PPP models are excellent fishing tools for those who know how to use them. As a principle occupation Ch. Ritz and P. Creusevault sought efficiency in their rods, suited equally well to short casts as for distance. For a fisherman at that time, accustomed to the long and soft-action English poles of 10', the discovery of the wonderful rhythm of casting resulted in an unexpected revelation. This compares much in the same way to the experience of present-day anglers when they try a graphite rod.

The PPP models were put up in a red silk bag, lodged in a green aluminum tube, later in a PVC tube, with the tube covered over in beige gabardine. They were offered with two tips and equipped, according to length, with an anodized sliding-band or screw-locking reel seat. The latter, weighing 35 grams, was

judged too heavy by many anglers. Up until the mid 80s they carried a number corresponding to their position in the series for the model. Thereafter, they are enumerated as in the classic series. Their total number is estimated to be at least 10,000 rods built. The great commercial success of such models as the "Fario Club", "Master" and "Powerplus" together account for some 6,000 examples, but some older or more specialized models were not built beyond a few hundred rods. The exhaustive list of PPP models may be found in the table on the following page.

Adding in three models destined for the Japanese market – the "Featherlight", "Midget", and "Longlift" – leads to a total of 26 models of which 9 are still in production.

In 1967, Charles Ritz conceived for Pezon et Michel the "Variopower" models, hybrid rods joining a fiberglass butt section to a split-bamboo tip. They were offered in four lengths: 7'1", 7'9", 8'2", and 8'8"; the last of these was not recommended to fishermen of slight constitution.

The "Parabolic Royale" series, transitional between the PPP and classic series, appeared in 1975. These were also made with the butt shorter than the tip and equipped with a single tip, wrapped brown with yellow borders, in 6 lengths from 6'10" to 9'3", ref. 222, with a Ritz grip and PPP-type screw-locking reel seat; ref. 224 with a cigar grip and sliding-band reel seat. The "Parabolic Royale Super" series, with brown wraps and black borders, issued with two tips and a screw-locking reel seat with precious wood filler, was above all destined for the American market.

Toward the end of the 1980s a Pezon technician, Claude Bodier, placed a graphite spigot at the junction of the sections. This system was adopted on the impulse of the commercial director, J. Marquet, for the "Privelege" models available in two lengths, 8' for a #3-4 and 8'5" for a #4-5. The butts of these rods were hollow-built which noticeably reduced the weight of the section. But the 8000 franc purchase price for such an acquisition effectively precluded their widespread use. In the same timeframe, the "Vinci" rods, made with a bamboo butt section and a tip of graphite joined by a spigot, did not achieve much success despite an offering of 8 models ranging from 6'10" to 8'6".

The series of bamboo salmon rods produced until 1984 included a "Grielse" of 10'6" in two or three sections, 4 "Parabolic Saumon" models ranging from 12' to 14' 6" in three sections, a "Glory" of 14'6" and an economical series ranging from 10'6" to 14'6".

Finally, one should not omit to mention the "Distance" rods of 100, 130, and 170 grams reserved for casting competitions as well as the "Parabolic Criterium" designed for similar usage.

Pezon et Michel also furnished other famous rod makers with bamboo culms, glued-up sections or, similarly, finished rods carrying prestigious labels. During the time of the Chinese embargo and extending into the late 1970s, the Orvis

rods impregnated and finished in Manchester, Vermont owe their bamboo segments to Pezon et Michel. Farlow in 1965, then Sharpe in 1979, used Pezon blanks to finish copies of the "Fario Club", "Sawyer Nymph", "Stillwater", and "Ritz" models. Pezon et Michel also produced rods at the request of the large New York store Abercrombie & Fitch after the death of Jim Payne in 1970, which some unscrupulous sellers pass off today at the price of an authentic Payne.

With the arrival of modern synthetic fibers, sales have shrunk since the final years of the 1970s to not more than 400 rods annually, sold almost exclusively through export. Fortunately the quality of production has never fallen because it has never varied. The only noticeable difference is the color of the bamboo, more light in recent rods than in those made in the years after the war.

Superlatives have not been lost describing the close relationship maintained by fishermen with their split-bamboo rods. For those who would make the leap, Pezon et Michel rods are sold new or used at Maison de la Mouche, 1 bd Henri IV, 75004 Paris, which also provides service and repairs. The Speciale series is priced at 2900 Frs (francs), the Supreme series: 3600 Frs, the Superparabolic PPP: 5900 Frs.

From numerous auction sales over the past few months, the PPP models sold at prices between 1900 and 3000 Frs, according to their condition. The "Parabolic Speciale" or "Supreme" models brought around 1500 Frs, while two Variopower" models of 7'1" and 8'8" brought barely 1000 Frs.

Pezon et Michel of Amboise has continuously made fly rods competitive with the very best of their era for the pleasure of anglers world wide.

How to Read a Pezon et Michel Rod

Besides the written inscriptions giving the model, length and the "I" judiciously marking the eye of the trout at 23 cm, a number giving the date of manufacture can be found at the base of the butt section. One can therefore easily date rods up until 1970. It suffices, for example, to read the number 1510691 as the 15th of October 1969, 1st rod wrapped in the series. I would be grateful to the owner of the rod that carries this number, corresponding to the date of my arrival in this world, to contact me through the intermediary of Plaisirs de la Peche. For the rods made after 1970, it is necessary to know the reference for the rod before determining the date of manufacture. Therefore, the number 7222797 is decoded as follows: the first and the last figure give the year as 1977; ref. 222 is a Parabolic Royale; length 7'9". Finally, toward the middle 1980s, a more readable notation appeared giving the year, the month, and the reference for the rod. So, for example, the number 8805232 corresponds to a Supreme

Competition model made in May, 1988.

L. S.

Header and sub-headers for the table appearing on p.25:

Toutes Les Superparabolic PPP = Models of the Superparabolic PPP Series

Nom et Type = Name and Type (“brins” in this column means “sections”)

Longeur = Length

Puissance = Power (“soie” = silk = line weight)

Annees = years

Ref. = reference or rod code