

The Nine Attributes



Let's face it, the length of this list is going to be almost arbitrary, but it's much better than no list at all. I could say "visual flaws" is one item, but I'd rather break that down a bit, while still lumping some visual flaws together. Contrariwise, I list "straightness" as a single item, but the two subcategories, kinks and curvature, could easily be divided into separate attributes. On an Instagram post I indicated that we look for "eight factors"...this list includes nine, though one isn't a factor with our culms (burn marks), which is probably how I came up with eight when I was ticking things off in my head. Without further ado, here is our list of things considered when grading.

1. Good Culm Color. We all know what we love. Gold. Well, golden straw colored bamboo at any rate. Flawless blonde culms. Of course these are the stuff of fantasy. All culms have some aesthetic inconsistencies. Color is the first attribute to hit the eye when a bale's wrapper is cut away. It's easy to find the good culms, and we expect to find many since we did so much preliminary grading over in China. As much as we put effort into curing the culms, curing time and effects are limited by the need to ship loads before the rainy season, and by the sometimes uncooperative weather...cloudy days and rainy days don't help culms cure to golden tones. Sunny days do. Attentive staff is also critical, because they must rotate the culms to expose the shadowed portions to the sun until the entire culm is cured. Realistically, it doesn't always happen and some culms will have greenish spans; some have curious "crossing shadows"...green stripes where the shadow of another culm blocked the sun's rays. Green is not desirable, yet it is not a flaw. Why? Because you, too, have sunshine at your disposal. If a culm has a green swath, you'll simply need to give it some time in the sun...prop it on a sunny porch or lay it across a picnic table on a bright day. Before long, the green will be gone. There are, however, other color problems which are flaws. Gray or brown patches of significant consequence drop a culm from A+ to A. Odd mottling, same thing; if the mottling is bad, I downgrade even

the finest culms, structurally speaking, to A-. This is difficult, and to some extent heartbreaking, but it is the right thing to do (and it makes our larger A- culms an incredible value for makers who flame or fume their cane). And, of course, excessive watermarks can downgrade a culm. We do our best when grading to be realistic – even the finest blonde A+ culm will have some sporadic freckles, some mottling, perhaps a blighty watermark positioned in a less consequential location. We also aim to be harsh...inconsistent color over the culm's length will downgrade a culm. Don't get too jumpy when I write "downgrade a culm" because that simply means it's not primo, it's not A+. We anticipate no B grade material – those are unusable culms, blotched from end to end, too-skinny, too thin-walled, burnt, bug addled, and so forth, to function in the intended role as raw material for making fishing rods. In our world, downgrading is simply admitting the plain truth – not every culm we import is A+ material. If we didn't downgrade a large percentage of culms, our high grades would mean nothing. They do mean something.

2. Lack of Burns. Tonkin bamboo should be naturally as straight as possible, never heat straightened, which can leave unsightly, and potentially damaging, random scorch marks. I've seen a lot of burnt Tonkin bamboo. We've told our team in China we will not accept



heat-straightened culms, so expect none of this from us. Burns are still on this list because you should know why a culm can arrive burnt – it was heat straightened in China. This is normal for Calcutta (desirable, in fact, if the burning was decorative), but it is no longer acceptable as a norm for rod grade Tonkin.

3. A pleasing Straightness. Bamboo should be straight, while bearing in mind that it is a reed that grew wild and was subject to competition from other culms, to winds which both bent the culm and strengthened the culm and developed its resiliency, to the natural flexion of heliotropism, and to so much more that we were not witness to. That's all nurture; there's nature, too (genetics). Some culms are straight by nature, and some are kinky, jutting left and right at every node. We judge kinks to be unwanted in most cases because they demand so much additional time to heat straighten; if a culm with kinks at the nodes also features long internodal spans, this makes the culm a great candidate for the nodeless rodmaker. Even within this realm of kinks, there are doglegs and there are dancers; the former are sharp, angular; the latter sway from node to node like a sultry dancer's hips in motion. Doglegs might run a culm down into the A- realm. Dancers, if all else was looking good, would drop a culm to A. To be A+, the culm needs to be kink-free, but not necessarily curve-free. We prefer culms with very little curvature over their length, however some curvature is natural and it is not a hindrance to good rodmaking. Think of the sawyer examining a cupped board...used full width and that board would require an unfortunate amount of resurfacing to eliminate the cup and much wood would be lost, but if that board is ripped in half, then two narrower boards of greater thickness can be salvaged. So it is with gently curved bamboo...cut the culm in half or thirds and the curvature well-nigh disappears as a flaw. In

the end, every strip from every culm will most likely need some straightening. That's why we're all so good with heat guns or alcohol lamps. It's part of the process. We're selling plants not plastic.

4. Relative freedom from Watermarks & Bug Holes & Leaf Nodes. Wild. This has to mean something. These culms were not started in flasks and then reared in hothouses under an unflinching regimen of botanically perfected days – ideal temperatures, ideal light, ideal moisture, ideal drying breezes, ideal seasonal fluctuations, ideal fertilizers, ideal pest control. That's for orchids. Quite the opposite with Tonkin. Slings and arrows, baby. Outrageous fortune! Wild-raised culms have been gnawed on by the odd bug. They have been dripped on by passing clouds, condensed upon by morning dews...and then that moisture has lingered on overcast, windless days. It happens. Culms develop blemishes in time with developing their finer points, such as strength, durability, diameter, length. We won't curse the very process that produces the bounty which we harvest. We'll just aim to select the culms with the fewest blemishes, the culms that best suit our craft. Remember, every rodmaking culm is judged for its potential, far more than it is judged against its flaws. In other words, is there enough good bamboo – room to split good strips – to make a rod? If so, we must shrug at these minor trespasses against our platonic vision of culms that can never exist in this world. Dream with Plato, but face the day with Voltaire who can smile slyly while both enjoying and overcoming the faults native to our days here, which are our days in this, the best of all possible worlds. Or to borrow from the bard, "If little faults ... shall not be winked at, how shall we stretch our eye, when capital crimes, chewed, swallowed and digested appear before us?" When considering bug holes, a single hole midway up a strip ruins the strip, so a string of well-aligned holes



(which happens with surprising frequency, as though the bugs compulsively order their holes) still ruins just one strip. On the other hand, a blight of bugholes, looking like a prairie dog town writ small, both speaks to disorganized bugs and an ill culm. Culms with PDTs (Prairie Dog Towns) are downgraded, unless the culm can be lopped short to remove the offending mass of perforations. With watermarks, small freckles are not even noticed. Birthmarks – deep reddish brown, rust-colored, or purplish blotches – are not freckles. On a human, they may be distinguishing, in a good sense. On a culm, less so. If they're located in such a way as to not kill the culm for rodmaking, the culm is graded as useable, but if a fairly massive watermark is going to be front and center on strips, that's no good. Sometimes we'll scuff away the enamel to see if the mark is skin deep, or deep into the power fibers. The fact that we peeked, i.e., that you can tell we removed the enamel in a small area, only shows we took the time to look before making our call.

Along with “wild,” “real” should also mean something. You know these culms stem from real plants and most plants have leaves. Bamboo reeds are among the leafed plants; thankfully they don't have many leaves, in part because they can also photosynthesize through their green stems. Some leaf nodes are inevitable. When grading, fewer are better, but we don't downgrade for leaf nodes, we accept them. As often as possible, we start our drying splits within a leaf node so the blem winds up on the edges of two strips where it can be planed away to non-existence.

5. Few or no Scratches or Growers' Marks.

Specifically, this means few deep scratches or hacking growers' marks that cut through the enamel and into the powerfibers. These culms are graced by nature with a protective

scrim of enamel which bamboo rodmakers remove while crafting the rod. Scratches or nicks in the enamel which do not slice into the powerfibers are a natural artifact of culms that have been swinging in the breeze for years, chopped and felled, drug to a cart or truck, jostled in transport, tossed into piles, tossed into scouring ponds, scoured, stacked for curing, tossed into piles for further grading, bundled against one another for shipment, jostled in shipment...you get the picture. Scratches are par for this course. Incisions & gouges are not. As with all serious blems, we don't hold it against the culm if a serious blemish is contained within the bottom foot or so of the culm, or the top couple inches, because these spans are either not part of the finished rod, or they're buried under the grip and reel seat.

6. Decent Internodal Spacing. The space between the rings, is it average, or longer, or shorter? Longer spacing is good, only because it means there are fewer nodes to deal with as you make your rod (or fewer splices to plane & glue if you're going nodeless). Internodal spacing can stretch upwards of 21", sometimes longer. Spacing “stretches” within a single culm as you move from butt to tip, so it's not at all unusual for the nodes at the butt end to be separated by 6” or less, while tip spacing approaches 18” or more. I have one culm I'll never use because it bears a brief Sharpie notation in Andy Royer's hand, “Very Nice!” That's it, but it's enough. This culm is one of my markers, a standard bearer, a touchstone. Full-node spans on this culm measure from as little as about 13.75” up to 18.75”. At one end of this scale, you might average a node per foot or slightly less, maybe eleven nodes over a dozen feet, on a culm with many nodes. At the other end of the scale, you could have less than eight nodes in that same span. Nodes consume time, but they are the ultimate *sine qua non* of the reed used in our



craft process. Without nodes, it wouldn't be the lovely reed. It would be a plank of some other material, perhaps hickory, lancewood, or greenheart. So, nodes are not flaws, but long internodal spans are a bonus and can contribute to a higher grade. Exceptionally long internodal spans may cause a culm to be culled from the bins and set aside specifically for nodeless makers; as with culms of extra-large diameter, we do charge more for these positively atypical culms.

7. The right sort of Heft. Mass. Diameter. Wall Thickness. Moisture Content. Heft is a subjective measure of several factors. It's also an act. You can heft a culm. Visit Sycamore Mill and you may discover yourself, having pulled out ten fine looking culms, but with a budget for five, closing your eyes and hefting two visually similar culms, testing one against the other. Here you're relying on your arms to discern relative mass – which culm has more wall thickness or powerfibers? This assumes the culms are equally dry. Mass can also be attributed to moisture content, so be aware that more recently harvested culms, or culms stored where ambient humidity can rise based on weather patterns, may be water laden and you may simply be noticing water weight. Hefting also gives a quick, almost intuitive measure of diameter....sort a hundred culms and you'll know without measuring which ones are thicker or thinner than average. If two culms seem to be of matched diameter, and both were harvested at the same time, then heft may give notice to a difference in wall thickness. Generally, heftier culms are preferred. But, if you're making delicate rods, there's also no sense wasting a heavy-duty culm on a 6' 3 weight rod....use your lighter culms for lighter tackle.

8. Appropriate Diameter. How plump is sufficient? Well, in most cases, you want the culm to be of large enough diameter to get twelve working strips, plus a few spares, from

the tip section. But this varies by taper. If you can split finely, a fairly small culm will yield plenty of material for a tiny rod. Making Spey rods demands culms of larger caliber. We sought culms with butt-end outside diameters in the range of 50 - 70mm. That's a range of about 1.96" to 2.75". A very few will be smaller and some will be larger. Culms of clearly outsized proportions compared to the average of those within our stated range will be pulled aside and sold separately. We're calling culms of 2.5" or larger "fat culms." We don't expect many.

9. Substantial Wall Thickness & Powerfibers. Substance. That's what we're considering here. Not is it good or bad, but is it enough to make a particular rod? Order three culms from us and you're likely to get three very different culms, specifically so you have some variety. But if you make light trout rods, or Alaskan Spey rods exclusively, you may want to travel to Sycamore Mill so you can select culms suited to your tackle making. Within reason, we'll do our best to honor requests. When it comes to grading, all other factors being equal, the culm with thicker walls, with discernably more power fibers, is going to get the higher grade. As often happens, the culms with the thickest walls are also the culms that are the oldest...and older culms, like older people, tend to develop interior strength at the expense of exterior beauty. If you ask for thick-walled A+ culms, expect them to have a few more water marks, a few more scrapes – it's not a certain guarantee that this will be the trade-off, but it's certainly the trend.

