

A man with a beard, wearing a black cap and a red, white, and blue plaid shirt, is focused on his work in a workshop. He is using a lathe to shape a piece of wood. The workshop is filled with various tools, workbenches, and wooden materials. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and his work.

SMALL BATCH FLY RODS

*BOUTIQUE MANUFACTURERS
DON'T JUST SELL A TOOL,
THEY SELL A CULTURE*

ROSS PURNELL

IN THE WORLD OF AMERICAN WHISKEY, A HANDFUL OF COMPANIES CONTROL MOST OF THE BUSINESS. JACK DANIELS, JIM BEAM, EVAN WILLIAMS, AND MAKER'S MARK OWN MOST OF THE MARKET, WITH BRANDS LIKE JIM BEAM SELLING 12 MILLION CASES PER YEAR. DISTILLERIES LIKE BULLEIT, WILD TURKEY, AND WOODFORD ARE ALSO BIG BUSINESS IN THE WHISKEY WORLD, BUT IN THE RECENT DECADES THERE HAS BEEN A TREND TOWARD "SMALL BATCH" WHISKEY, A TIP OF THE HAT TO THE MICROBREWING REVOLUTION THAT PRECEDED IT. THIS SMALL BATCH WHISKEY MIGHT BE JUST 15 TO 19 BARRELS MADE FROM A MASH BILL OF 200 BUSHELS OF GRAIN, OR IT COULD BE MUCH SMALLER THAN THAT. IN SOME CASES, "SMALL BATCH" PRODUCERS DON'T EVEN HAVE THEIR OWN WHISKEY STILL. THEY BUY SELECT BARRELS FROM OTHER VENDORS AND MIX THEM TO PRODUCE THE TASTE THEY WANT FOR THEIR OWN BOTTLED PRODUCT. IT'S PART OF THE "BUY LOCAL" MOVEMENT AND IT'S ALSO FUELED BY INTENSE INDIVIDUALITY AMONG CONSUMERS—ESPECIALLY MILLENNIALS—WHO WANT TO FIND SOMETHING THAT SUITS THEIR OWN TASTES AND PERSONALITY.

Every Midnight Special II is unique, as Moonshine Rod Company uses custom wood inserts for the reel seats, each one with a different burl, dye, or finish.

This trend toward alternative purchasing has also come to the fly-fishing world, where a new generation of fly fishers don't want to use the same brands their dads used to fish with. Or, just as common, lifelong fly fishers are searching for distinctive, heirloom-type tackle that their friends don't have. Some people just enjoy swimming their fly against the current. Sometimes it's an Abel reel with a custom paint job no one else has, and sometimes it's a "small batch" fly rod.

These kinds of boutique manufacturers have been around since split-cane fly rods were first produced. Fly fishing is by definition a "small batch." It's just a tiny part of the overall fishing market, but these boutique manufacturers have found new ways to create a niche

within a niche. Some, like Tom Morgan Rodsmiths, own their own proprietary mandrels, and have a bigger U.S. rod shop roll their rod blanks for them. Others buy the blanks with the feel and the action they want for their brand, and then customize the rods with their own wraps, epoxies, hardware, cork, reel seats, and other embellishments to give it the distinctive look and feel they want.

What consumers get in return for these efforts is a rod that not only catches fish, but something that speaks to their fly-fishing journey. They invest in a fly rod that isn't just a tool, it's a testament to their passion and their taste for homespun craftsmanship. —

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 Ross Purnell is the editor and publisher of FLY FISHERMAN.



WICKED FLY ROD & REEL CO. ORIGIN SERIES

Thomas Pytel, Jr. grew up fishing creeks, rivers, ponds, and lakes throughout New England with his grandfather, and discovered a passion for fly fishing at the age of 22. "I remember fishing this one stretch of the Farmington River in Riverton, Connecticut," said Pytel. "I'd get there early to beat the fly fishermen to the water. I knew that stretch like the back of my hand, and could catch-and-release 20 to 25 fish in two hours. I'll never forget this one day when an old guy yelled out, 'Hey! You're not a real fisherman. Try fly fishing.' I'd seen this gentleman for years fishing the same time of day in the same hole, so there was definitely a fondness and respect for him. After that comment, I went to the local Cabela's and bought my first and only starter fly rod setup. The next week I was back on the water with a fly rod. With my first cast into the hole with a Light Cahill, I hooked into and landed a 14-inch rainbow. The rest is history."

More than 15 years later, Pytel was shopping for a new rod and reel when soaring prices got him thinking that he could build exactly what he was looking for.

With a degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, and two decades of experience in corporate marketing and product development, Pytel in 2017 launched Wicked Fly Rod & Reel Co. Over the next four years, the Wicked Fly team worked with guides in Montana, British Columbia, New England, the Southwest and Pacific Northwest — and a factory overseas — to design and produce a carbon fiber blank that could compete with the upper tier of the fly rod market. The result is their proprietary Precision Power Taper. With it, the company in 2021 launched the Origin Series.

"I had a goal to build something that could compete with the brands I grew up respecting. I didn't want to do it with an off-the-shelf blank. So we invested the time, money, and resources to design, engineer, test, and manufacture something so different and special that I'd put my grandfather's name on it. It's my way to continue honoring his legacy while fueling passion for the sport we both shared. We took a year of development just to get the taper right. It needed to have enough backbone and recover quickly to be a true fast-action rod, and I wanted it to delicately drop a fly with incredible precision at 60+ feet. We achieved that."

"We named this series Origin, because everyone has a story about how they got started fishing. Mine includes my grandfather, and we want Wicked Fly to be right there at the beginning of incredible fish stories for generations to come."

Every Origin series rod is manufactured in Phoenix, Arizona, and has the name of Pytel's grandfather W.B. Hardwicke written on the rod blank. The rod is made from a 3.25 Toray Precision Power Taper carbon fiber blank with a fully machined aluminum gunmetal reel seat with hollow "windows" exposing the rod blank beneath. It has a reverse half wells AAA grade cork handle with a cork composite at the butt and tip of the handle for durability, and the Wicked Fly logo—a stylized dragonfly—burned into the cork right about where your index finger sits. It has a titanium-frame stripping guide, nickel/titanium alloy snake guides, matte green finish, and each Origin Series rod comes with a protective carbon fiber rod tube.

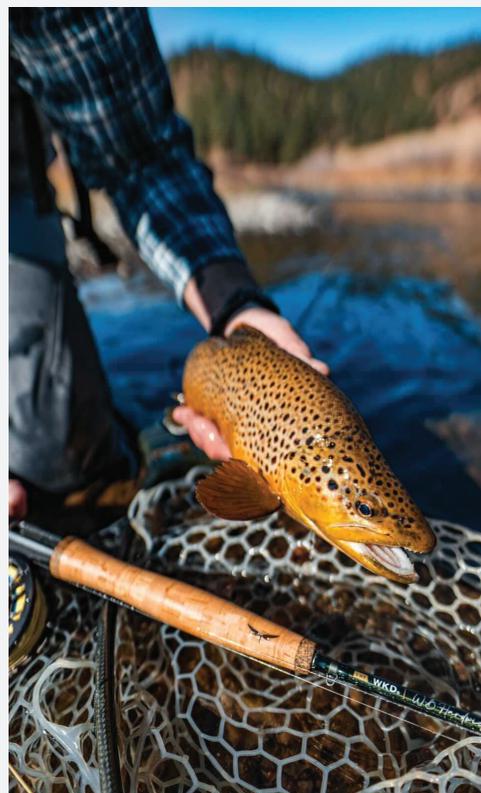


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MAINE FLY COMPANY KENNEBEC

When Jeff Davis's father passed away, he inherited his father's extensive collection of fly-fishing equipment. It wasn't until then that he became consumed by fly fishing. "It was a wave that hit me, and I couldn't stop thinking about fly fishing. It's all I wanted to do," Davis said. "It was incredibly inspiring to me, and I just wanted to know more." As Davis tells it, he immersed himself in fly fishing, and never forgot how important and inspirational your tackle can be. Even a box of flies passed down from his father had meaning. That was the genesis for his company Maine Fly Rod Company . . . to create tackle that is attached to a place with special significance.

Maine Fly Company's Signature Small Batch Rods include the Magalloway, Carrabassett, and Kennebec for fresh water, the Casco Bay for salt water, the Big Black River for Atlantic salmon, and many others. Each series is designed to perfectly match a certain river in Maine, and a specific quarry. The hope is that the 8'6" 5-weight Magalloway might also be just at home on Colorado's Big Thompson River or Montana's Ruby River.

The Kennebec River is widely regarded as the best trout river in Maine, and we tested the 9' 5-weight Kennebec fly rod on Pennsylvania's Yellow Breeches Creek. Available in 4-, 5-, and 6-weight models, the Kennebec design was inspired by a local Maine guide. It is a stiffer, fast-action rod for long casts, and it has the rugged, powerful character you might expect from the backwoods of Maine, or from a rod that could hook an 18-inch brown trout on one cast, and a running, leaping Atlantic salmon on the next. It has a matte green finish (Maine is the "Pine Tree State") and burnt orange wraps that match a vintage Maine Registered Guide shoulder patch. The rods have AAA grade cork handles with a full wells on the 6-weight, and a reverse half wells on the 4-weight. It has singlefoot chrome guides, a hardwood reel seat, and aluminum hardware with a light gunmetal finish. Starting in 2021, all Kennebec rods use renewable plant-based formulas to replace the old epoxies made with petrochemicals.

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