

# Sweet!

BY JIL MCINTOSH

**Franklin-Christoph offers a line of papers made from sugar cane.**



Franklin-Christoph's Firma-Flex notebooks, \$11.50–19.50

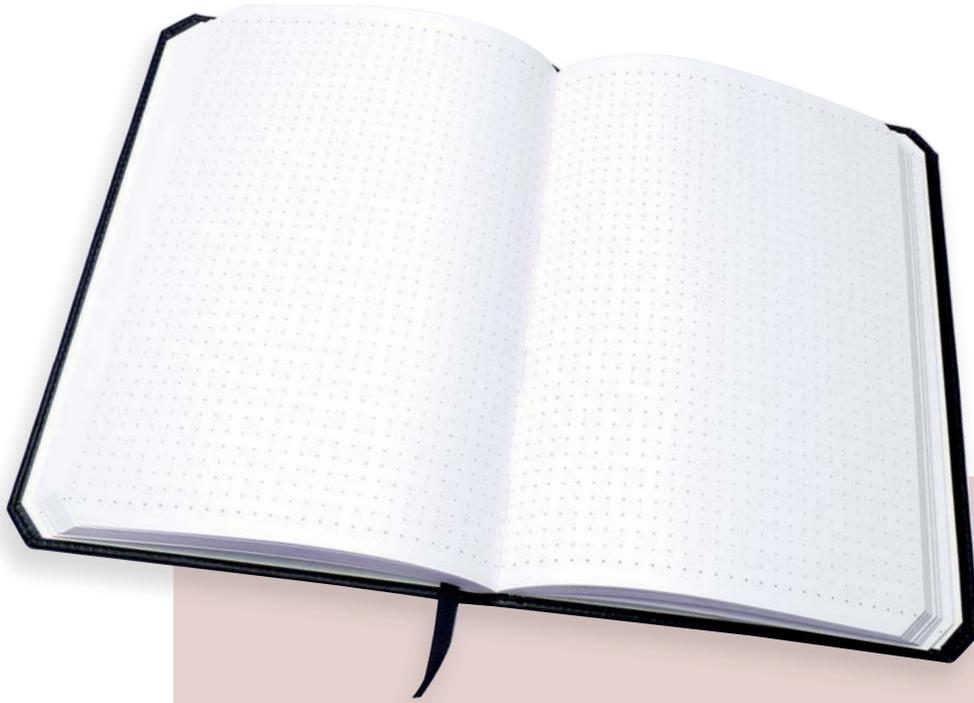
**W**hen we want to put our thoughts down, we use a pen, ink and paper. We spend a lot of time choosing just the right pen, and sometimes just the right ink, but it doesn't fully come together until we have good paper as well.

Scott Franklin understands that. His pen company Franklin-Christoph, based in Raleigh, North Carolina, has begun to offer notepads and journals made with proprietary sugarcane

paper. Not only does it provide an excellent writing surface, but it is also based on a sustainable crop by-product, adding environmental friendliness to the mix.

Of course, sugarcane alone isn't enough. "It's only a starting point if you want really good fountain pen paper," says Franklin. "We tinkered with the formula to balance the four goals we identified as priorities in a fountain pen paper."

Those are a surface that's smooth but not slick, absorbent, resistant to bleed-through and resistant to feathering. It took a great deal of trial and error, and numerous tests, but Franklin says, "We finally hit on the right balance to do all four factors very well. Of course, then we had to commit to producing several tons of it, so it was a big investment and a bit of a gamble. But so far, sales have exceeded expectations."



## *Paper Made from What??*

The pulp for sugarcane paper is actually made from *bagasse*, the fibrous material left behind after the juice has been extracted from the cane. It can be used to make paper as fine as tissue or as heavy as building materials like particle board. Bagasse can also be used as a biofuel.

That success is even more impressive considering that the paper hasn't yet been heavily promoted. It was Franklin-Christoph's first venture into this part of the writing experience, and the company debuted it at the Los Angeles Pen Show in February 2013 with a small run of notepads that quickly sold out.

The company then attended the Baltimore Pen Show, where it introduced the Firma-Flex notebook, a journal that combined the paper with a flexible cover that would still stay firm enough to hold the book's shape and support the pen when the writer got to the final pages.

"After that, we made some card-stock journal notebooks with grayscale artwork on them, along with a larger production of black Firma-Flex, and unveiled the paper on our website in April that year," Franklin says. "We started with only a couple of thousand books, but by summer, we were already selling out of various sizes and styles."

A large A4 journal was added to the existing A5 and A6 books, covers were embossed with the Celtic Knot Four Diamond logo, and leather-bound books were offered. Dot printing was added to the choices of graph, ruled and blank journal pages and pads. But what hasn't changed is that the paper remains

90 grams per square meter (equal to 24 lb.), pH neutral and acid-free.

It's also sized to international standards. "Our marketplace is the world, and most countries we sell to use the 'A' system," Franklin says. This wider surface also works better with a fountain pen, and since each number up is half as large as the preceding one—cut an A2 sheet twice and you get four A4 sheets, for example—there's no waste. "Except the corners, which we cut off to feature our trademark beveled look, which also eliminates dog-eared corners," Franklin says.

Making paper products in these relatively small volumes isn't

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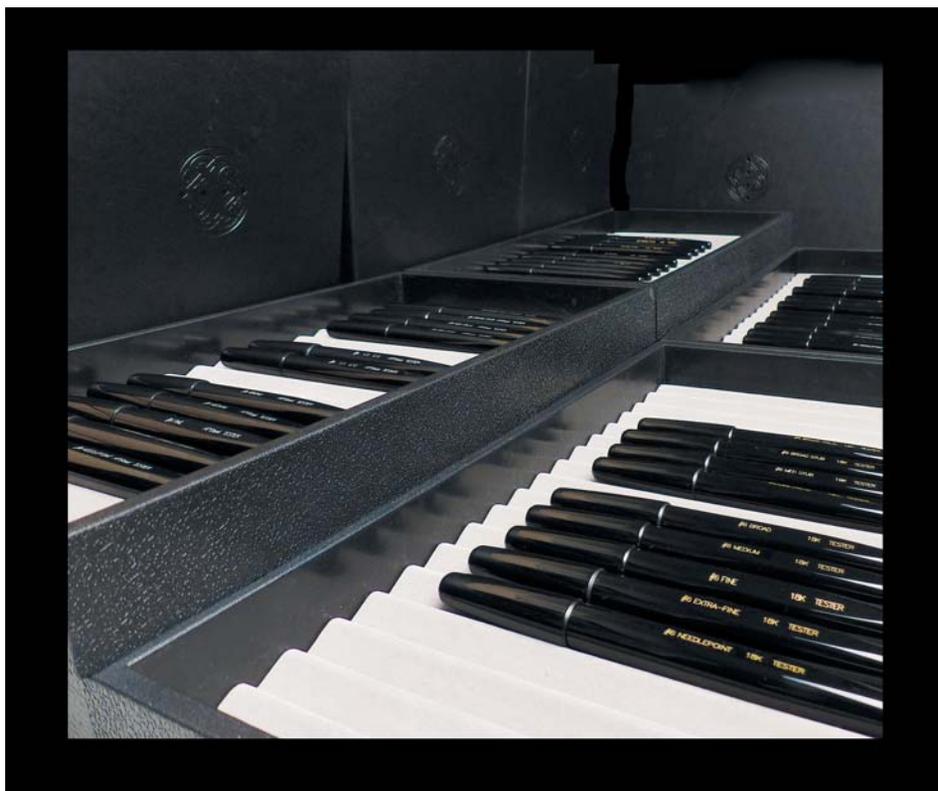
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Franklin-Christoph's nib testing kit travels the pen show circuit.

particularly cost-effective, but it does give Franklin-Christoph an edge: the products are constantly being tweaked, and the improved versions can make their way to consumers that much faster. The Firma-Flex material has been upgraded, and new perimeter stitching in subtle color variations coordinates with the page printing, such as dark maroon stitching for ruled paper. Many customers have asked for loose-leaf paper, which is being added to the collection as well.

In addition to pens and paper, Franklin-Christoph also makes ink, but while the two complement each other, the company formulated the paper for superior performance with almost any brand of ink. In fact, there

was a bit of a surprise when they created their Black Magic ink, a quick-drying but very potent formula. The sugarcane paper did such a good job of preventing bleed-through that no one realized just how strong the ink was until they tried it on other papers. "Now we just recommend our Black Magic ink for either fine or extra-fine nibs, or when bleed-through isn't an issue for people," Franklin says.

With paper and ink taken care of, it's now time for a pen, and for that, Franklin-Christoph has developed a nib testing kit. Go to a pen show or visit the company office to sample forty different nibs before making your selection.



“In the old days, we used to just ink up regular pens as demos with extra-fine, fine, medium and bold,” Franklin says. But when the company partnered with nib specialist Michael Masuyama to offer specialty grinds, there had to be a better way to let customers try writing with as many nibs as possible.

Franklin and Dan Symonds, the company’s director of manufacturing, came up with a test set of twenty-four pens. Along the way, Symonds’s design details and caps also became the company’s production Models 65 and 66. They have flat spots milled into them, providing a place to engrave the nib details on the test pens and keeping them from rolling off a desk.

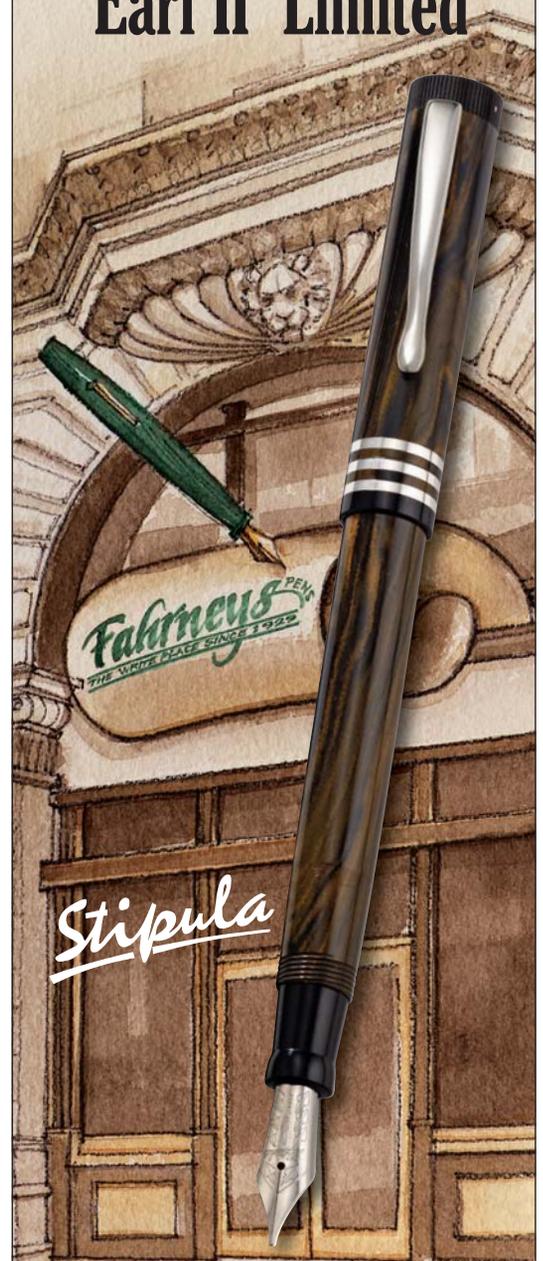
When a customer tries the test pens at a show and decides on a nib, the pen is built for them on the spot. “We go through the seven-step nib-tuning process and give them the

option to ink their pen and make sure it matches the feel and performance they expected,” Franklin says. “Of course, even if someone isn’t buying that day, we encourage them to sit down and try out a few nibs. It might help them decide what nib to get on a pen [of another brand], or from us later on when they order online.”

That first twenty-four-pen test kit has been retired to the archives, although Franklin says it could go home with a serious collector. This summer, the company will also offer “something we call the Christoph nib that will be very interesting,” Franklin promises. Watch for it. And, of course, don’t forget that lovely sugarcane paper to go with it.

JIL MCINTOSH, based in Canada, is a pen collector who contributes regularly to *PW*. She also writes frequently about cars.

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