

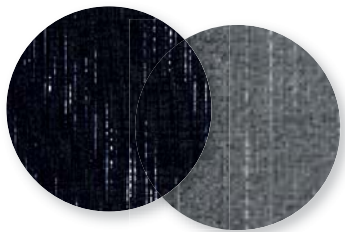
to follow

SUIT

Australia's merino wool is much sought after by makers of fine Italian suits. Meet the sheep with micron chic.

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As a bouquet is to wine, so is bloom to wool.

Each specialist industry breeds a certain type of connoisseur. Among wine buffs there is much talk of the nose, swirl and palate; among superfine woolgrowers, the character, handle and bloom are at stake. But the overriding factor is the micron (one millionth of a metre) – the measure of a wool fibre’s diameter. The lower, the better. Once, the benchmark was 17 micron. “Now there’s a lot of interest in 10 micron and less,” says Andrew Hundy, a third-generation woolgrower.

Winner of the 2008 Ermenegildo Zegna Protected Wool Trophy – the Oscars of superfine wool – the Hundy family, from NSW’s Mudgee region, has a reputation for quality.

“Their wool is the very best,” says Don Belgre from Giovanni Schneider, a buying broker for Zegna. “Known as ‘spinner’s wool’, it is entirely for apparel or special garments.”

Since the 1920s, Zegna has sought out Australia’s softest merino wool for the label’s classic range of menswear. To encourage innovation among Australian woolgrowers

and promote this precious fibre, national awards were established in 1980. As quality has improved, fashion houses such as Karl Lagerfeld, Donna Karan, Yves Saint Laurent and Giorgio Armani have spun Australia’s extra-fine yarns into featherweight frocks and bolts of luxurious trans-seasonal fabric.

The looked-for bloom Belgre describes as the wool’s “presence and appearance”. Ed Hundy, Andrew’s father, puts it another way: “If wool has got bloom, it will look you in the eye and say, ‘I’m fresh, I’m beautiful’. It comes out and says ‘G’day’.”

We’re standing outside the bungalow that Ed shares with his wife, Jill, on the family property, Windradeen. Close by is the house that belonged to his father, now home to Andrew and Penny and their two children, Gus and Sarah. Ed is feeding biscuits to his 10-year-old pet sheep, Princess Diana. >

FLOCK STARS

Their wool might turn up in luxury suits, but Andrew Hundy’s sheep favour nylon.







“A certain ram, a certain ewe... mate those two, I might get a Zegna”

Hundy senior still holds a commanding presence, although his 33-year-old son runs the family's three properties. Unshaven, with a battered Akubra sitting on his ute's dashboard, Andrew is affable and straight-up, keen to show off the family's 2600-acre (1052ha) property.

The undulating hills are covered with clumps of box trees and stringybarks, the green paddocks belie the area's drought status. From 2002 to 2003, the Hundys hand-fed their flock seven days a week, spending about \$40,000 a year on fodder plus agistment. “We should be carrying 8000 sheep,” says Andrew. “But the wool market doesn't make spending that sort of money on feed a viable proposition.” To ease the pressure they leased one property and reduced stock on their other two. Now they have 3200 sheep.

Wool makes up about two per cent of the world textile market. Australian superfine wool – the flagship of the global wool industry – comprises 7.5 per cent of that total and is worth about \$1 billion annually. Wool with a fibre diameter below 17.5 micron is considered ultrafine and as the Windradeen “clip”, is below 16 micron,

BLOOMING BEAUTIFUL Three Hundy generations – Andrew, Gus, 4, and Ed – assess the handle and bloom of their award-winning superfine wool.

the Hundys produce the wool industry's equivalent of Grange.

Kevin Dunn, president of the Australian Superfine Wool Growers Association, believes the current trend towards a lower micron is “going past a healthy balance. As you get finer, you get less wool per sheep. It's better to get higher quality and higher quantity.” A premium bale of Hundy's wool is below 14.5 micron. “That's the cut-off point,” says Andrew. “Buyers of 14 micron and below won't bid for anything above.”

From Windradeen, the bales are sold at auction in Sydney. Most of the raw wool (60-65 per cent) is processed in China, and sold to traditional (US, Western Europe, Japan) and emerging markets (Russia, India, China). The garments made from the wool turn up for sale in European designer stores. In Milan several years ago, Andrew Hundy came across an elegant suit bearing the Windradeen logo, selling for €9000 (\$14,730).

But today Hundy is less interested in the end product and more focused on how to control Gundi, his unruly sheepdog. “My dog and my son are very similar,” he says as the sheep scatter. “They don't listen.” Eventually he nudges the flock into a corner, so father and son can wade in to pick one of their finest to show off.

As the Hundys specialise in “protected”

wool, 1200 of their flock wear covers. Not the cosy tartans you might expect, but cheap off-white nylon from China. The covers protect the wool from grass seed, UV light and dust, and improve the quality, as the sheep stay warmer and drier. Since first protecting their flock 13 years ago, the average yield per sheep has increased by between 55 and 75 per cent.

Hundy senior, a lifelong shearer, tickles one of his sheep under the chin. “I love my sheep,” he admits. “I don't think you'd grow superfine wool if you didn't.”

Pulling back the ewe's greasy cover, the stark difference between the fleece's protected and unprotected areas is revealed. The “tip” – the wool's top area – remains cleaner under the cover. Wool buyers base their purchasing decisions on the length of the staple (a piece of wool pulled out of the fleece), the strength of the fibre, and the tip. A finer tip translates into a finer micron, a softer end product and higher price. What a difference 0.7 of a micron makes. In July, the Hundys sold 106kg of 14-micron wool for \$170/kg; 122kg of 14.7 micron returned \$67/kg. At the same time, an 11.6-micron fleece from a “shedded” sheep operation sold for \$2690/kg.

“Shedding sheep is like crossing battery hens with dairy farming,” says Andrew. “The sheep are penned and live in a ▶

controlled climate 365 days a year. They are fed a certain amount of food every day so the infrastructure, labour and feed costs are enormous.”

With the volatility of the ultrafine wool market, that’s not a viable option for the Hundys. Nor does it appeal. “While we have a lot of work to do, we can have a day off,” continues Andrew. “In that environment, it’s a never-ending job.”

The Hundys let their sheep run free in the paddocks. Apart from feeding their lambing ewes and young sheep extra lucerne in winter, and giving them salt-lick, the sheep are given no vitamins or treats. Only if it’s snowing will Ed Hundy bring a sickly lamb into the house by the fire.

The way the Hundys improve their micron and fibre strength is largely genetic. “But feed plays a pivotal part,” says Andrew. If the sheep have too much food, they will produce meat instead of wool. Conversely, lack of food will stop the wool growing, making the fibres tender and easily breakable. This is known as starving the wool fine. “There’s no benefit in starving it fine. This is what they do in the shed, by regulating feed intake.” Such wool may produce a lower micron, but it lacks “handle” (bulk).

In part, the family puts its success down to constant monitoring. Ed can immediately tell if a sheep has worms and requires drenching. Andrew takes care of the land and points out the degradation caused by feral pigs. Lambs are weaned at five months, shorn at one year and, three months later, in December, those with a micron under 15.7 are covered.

It’s also because their sheep are genetically bred fine. “You can get bad sheep in good bloodlines,” warns Ed Hundy. “We’ve paid good money for rams over the



years and I’d have been far better playing the poker machines.” They once spent \$16,000 on a ram called Billy. Instead of “throwing good stock”, he “threw yellow”. Now they breed their own and scrutinise the progeny.

“You see a certain ram, you see a certain ewe and you say, ‘If I mate those two together, that might get you a Zegna.’ I love looking at the sheep that I reckon will win a show, that’s my hobby. A lot of people have got just as good a sheep, but they can’t find them.”

The Hundys can’t keep count of the number of competitions they’ve won. In 2000, they picked up the World Record

Wool Challenge Cup for the then-finest bale of wool, at 12.9 micron, grown in the paddock. Their six Zegna awards, for protected and unprotected fleeces, still sit in boxes in Ed’s and Jill’s dining room. Ed proffers me a piece of wool from this year’s Zegna award-winning fleece.

“This is near as perfect,” he says. “See how fine the tip is, only 3mm. Those little fine crimps, the serrations, they’re exactly the same at the top as at the bottom.” For spinners, it is this crimp or wave of the wool strand that makes the fabric hold its shape. The right style of wool will produce exactly the cloth that textile manufacturers want, with the correct drape and recovery.



FOUR BAGS FULL The Windradeen clip is 60-70 bales a year, more than half 16 micron or less.

“For ultrafine wool, the market is strong. For the inferior quality, it’s come back quite a bit,” says Ed. “It’s impossible to put a price on how much it would cost to grow a kilo of best-quality wool. You put a lot of effort in to get the return.” The Windradeen clip is usually around 60 to 70 bales a year; around 45 of those would be 16 micron or less.

Ed Hundy left school at 16 and worked with his parents to build up the property. They have never had any external farm help. When Ed married Jill in 1964, she took over in the woolshed, retiring only when Penny married Andrew in 2002. “Since then, Penny’s been my right hand,”

says Ed. “There’s not been anyone outside the family in the woolshed since 1955. That’s quality control. The wool comes out of the boxes the way we want it to.”

Shearing begins when the camellia on Andrew and Penny’s front step is in bloom. The next 10 weeks are spent in the wool shed shearing 5000 sheep. The shed has also doubled as a nursery over the years.

The production line begins with Andrew, who shears a sheep in about three-and-a-half minutes. “I’ve had it drummed into me,” he says. “You have to shear the fleece in one piece with no second cut and no skin pieces. The quickest way to ruin 12 months’ production is by doing a second cut.”

Ed and his daughter-in-law then “skirt the fleece” – removing any soiled wool around the edges to create an even product – and painstakingly extract any grass seed. A sample is taken to be micron tested, it’s classed into lines and then is ready for the bale. To demonstrate, the pair gets to work. Within minutes, the “skirtings” are off and the fleece sits like a powder puff on the worn table. Gus junior dives in and starts to pull it apart like candyfloss. His grandfather’s face lights up. “Now that fleece has got bloom. See how it’s light, white and fluffy.” He plunges his gnarled hands into the frothy mass and they sink without trace. ❖