

Positioning alpaca fibre as a luxury fibre

Paul Vallely, Art of Fibre

“The latest editions of Vanity Fair, Vogue and InStyle are packed with images of the latest fashion trends, with alpaca hailed as the fibre of choice for next season’s big-name designers.”

Perhaps we won’t see this imaginary quote in the next fashion roundups, however, a number of determined and talented people within the world’s alpaca and fibre mill community are making progress within the luxury garment sector whereby we might find quotes like this in the not-too-distant future.

Let me stress at this point that aiming for the prestige end of the apparel market is not for every alpaca breeder. There is absolutely no doubt that success is being made with alpaca in the more generic markets such as jumpers, socks and blankets, with many breeders more than happy to breed for the bulkier, mid to higher micron fleeces to produce these products.

The pursuit of supplying ultrafine fibre for the luxury apparel markets, however, not only provides potentially lucrative returns to alpaca breeders, but provides alpaca fibre with a high level of global recognition as a prestige product – recognition it rightfully deserves.

To add to this, the luxury fashion markets are rewarding products that use raw materials with elevated credentials for animal welfare and sustainability – clearly an opportunity for alpaca.

Producing and supplying fleeces for these top end markets does come with its challenges, in that the quality standards are much higher than for the more generic markets.

As part of a market appraisal in 2017, Art of Fibre, then known as AAFT, carried out a number of interviews with Australian and New Zealand high-end mills to identify what matters most with sourcing fibre for top-end garments.

Frank and Anya Walkington from Shamarra Alpaca in New Zealand who buy alpaca fibre for luxury knitwear stated “uniformity of fibre diameter was crucial for processing performance and consistently superior handle of the end product”.

Further, Adagio Alpaca Mills in NSW Australia agreed that uniformity of low micron fibre diameter was necessary if processing towards high quality end products, while Great Ocean Road Woollen Mill in Victoria, Australia stated “...from a processing perspective, we are more concerned with consistency of fibre including micron, SD, length, and cleanliness. A large variation in fibres will lead to an uneven yarn and therefore an inferior product.”

Finally, Fibre Naturally also in Victoria stated they look for evenness in length and micron and as little medullated fibre as possible.



Luxury shawl made from 100% alpaca by Shamarra Alpaca.

The above feedback provided in 2017 was remarkably similar to the feedback we received when we carried out our first appraisal in 2005.

Of note, the 2005 appraisal was carried out before we commenced the 'Premium Alpaca' quality fleece collection scheme which saw two 190 kilo bales break the world record price for bales of alpaca at \$AU80.00 per kilo. The fibre was used in garments under labels such as Giorgio Armani and Ermenegildo Zegna.



One of the world record bales of Premium Alpaca fibre. The bale weighed 190kg, averaged 17.8 microns and sold for AU\$80 per kg

Based on the market appraisals, we can summarise the feedback as falling into five main areas of concern.

Fibre diameter As with merino wool, luxury garments require fleeces that exhibit fibre diameter low enough to allow a super-soft feel. For merino wool, the maximum average fibre diameter of fleeces for 'next to skin wear' is about 18.5 microns. For alpaca, the maximum average diameter is about 22 microns, with ultrafine fleeces of up to 18 microns allowing for the ultimate in super-soft wear. Unlike merino, the variation in diameter with alpaca fleeces can have a major influence in the final feel or 'handle' of the end product. This brings us to the next point.

Variation of fibres To repeat the words of the Walkingtons, "uniformity of fibre diameter was crucial for processing performance and consistent handle". In fact fibre diameter variation was the most mentioned area of concern with both the 2017 and 2005 market appraisals. Low variation in fibre diameter has shown to achieve greater predictability of processing outcomes, reduced wastage and superior appearance and handle of the end product.

These two key traits reinforce the breeding objective of low fibre diameter and low SD, with Comfort Factor an excellent tool to monitor these two traits. As a passing note, these traits must be balanced with sound physiological traits such as conformation and fibre density. Complete focus on micron can result in breeding towards physiologically inferior alpacas.

Uniformity of fibre type Apart from diameter, fibres within a consignment need to be uniform in fibre length and colour.

Coarse fibres Another area of concern when processing alpaca is the risk of extremely coarse fibres within fleeces. These fibres can often be heavily medullated and be about 30 microns higher than the average for the fleece. Even if very few in number, their impact on the comfort of the garment can be devastating, and can lead to the garment suffering a huge loss of value and reputation.

The problem of coarse fibres can be resolved through breeding, but also resolved through proper fleece skirting. Importantly, the skirting should be carried out immediately after shearing, and be carried out by people who have received training in the skirting of fleeces for the quality end market.

Contamination Processors have often complained of finding foreign matter in alpaca fleece consignments, including baling twine, towels and socks. These items play havoc with attempts to process the fibre, with some cases resulting in the relevant breeder being 'black-listed' from further consignments.

One word of caution though if thinking of producing ultrafine fleeces. These fleeces have a genetic propensity to have lower fleece weights than the higher micron fleeces. In other words, while the price per kilo should be higher, the question remains as to whether the overall price for the fleece makes it worthwhile. Until there is a reasonable quantity of ultrafine and superfine fleeces coming onto the market, it is difficult to quote a price although Art of Fibre recently paid €30.00 a kilo for a small batch of 18 micron fleeces.

After reading the above 'areas of concern', the reader will be forgiven if they feel the pursuit of high-end fashion with their fleeces is all too much effort – and fair enough as chasing this market is not for the faint-hearted. In saying that, to see the results of your breeding and management being paraded on the catwalks at the notable fashion weeks, or sold under designer fashion labels can offer one of the greatest sense of rewards and achievements for anyone producing fibre. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, there are some alpaca breeders who have already experienced this.

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