

IT TAKES EACH GOAT FOUR YEARS TO PRODUCE ENOUGH CASHMERE FOR ONE SWEATER.

A GUIDE TO VALUE

What you need to know about cashmere.

By Nicola Harrison

Cashmere isn't just for sweaters anymore: it can be found in a wide variety of clothing and accessories for men and women.



Good quality cashmere is one of the most rare, most luxurious and most comfortable natural fibers in the world, its softness unsurpassed. Who would have thought that something so extravagant comes from the fine, fuzzy hair that keeps wild goats warm in the sub-zero temperatures of China, Mongolia and beyond?

Style expert Carson Kressley once called cashmere “the flat-screen TV of yarns, the Super Bowl of sweaters.” More than just sweaters, cashmere can be found in a variety of items including suits, jackets and a wide range of accessories. But why is it special, and how do you know if you’re getting a good value?

The name cashmere comes from Kashmir, the wild and mountainous area of India where the fiber was originally sourced. Today, fleece also comes from Australia, New Zealand, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey, but quality differs by region because many places lack the harsh environmental elements of high altitude and cold that allow the goats to grow an ultra-soft

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coat. In order to survive such extreme conditions, the goats have coarse outer hair, beneath which lies a much finer fiber that insulates these animals from the bitter cold. Only this soft, fine under hair is used in the production of cashmere.

While human hair has a diameter of 75 microns, a cashmere fiber cannot be more than 19 microns, with many high-end manufacturers placing the limit at 16 microns. Because of these specifications, it takes each goat four years to produce enough cashmere for one sweater—that's four miles of yarn!

Gathering the fibers is a tedious, labor intensive procedure. After the goat is combed by hand during its shedding season in spring, the harvested fibers are sorted for color, length and fineness. They are then scoured or washed, de-haired (removing the coarser hairs), dyed and spun. Once they're ready to be made into fabric, the fibers are hand-framed to a garment's specifications.

Not all cashmere is created equal. Differentiating factors include where the raw fiber originated, whether it was collected by hand or machine, how it was separated, processed or bleached, washed, dyed and spun. A lower quality, low-priced fiber is shorter and more likely to pill and lose its shape. Additionally, if it's being made into a light colored garment, it must also be bleached, which can weaken the fibers further. Super fine cashmere yarn of the best possible quality can be made only from long fibers. The longer the fiber, the tighter the knit or the weave, which means less pilling and longer life for the garment.

While thread count is important when it comes to buying sheets, yarn count or ply count has little to do



with the actual quality of cashmere. Ply is the number of individual strands or threads of hair twisted together to make one yarn. A three-ply sweater, rather than being superior to a two-ply, is simply one strand thicker, not better. A higher ply just means more fibers in each yarn, yielding a weightier garment. Consider ply only when you are deciding between a winter sweater to keep you toasty and a layering piece to go under your sport coat.

Thin cashmere is not lower quality than a thick winter garment. In fact, summer weight cashmere is often considered even higher in quality (and sometimes price) since it requires finer, more costly yarns and highly specialized expertise to manufacture.

A quality garment will show very few loose fibers, have a consistent and tight knit with good seam construction, and be soft and sensuous to the touch. But beware of a garment that feels overly soft, almost slippery or buttery. This is due to over-processing of the fiber and could result in quick pilling, premature wear or loss of shape.

And look at the tag: just because something says cashmere doesn't mean it's pure cashmere. If it isn't clearly marked 100% on the label, then it probably isn't. Some garments have only 10 percent cashmere and the rest could be wool. Don't be afraid of blends (a silk and cashmere blend yields a fabulous touch); just know what you're getting before you purchase.