



In the Beginning...

*The exquisite craftsmanship
superlative raw material — wool,
of Tasmania, Australia, to visit Zegna's own suppliers, who prove as dedicated to their craft as any urban artisan.*

by **nick scott**

*championed all over these pages would not be possible without
in the case of a high-end suit. THE RAKE journeys to a far-flung corner*



The ultimate quality of any luxury product is dictated by what nature provides. A Steinway piano's rich, textured sound would be lamentably compromised if its craftsmen began sourcing any material other than close-grained Sitka spruce from Alaska or British Columbia — the most resonant wood available on earth — for its soundboards; top-end shoemakers are as obsessive about the source and suppleness of their leather as the Burgundy winemaker is about the maturity and complexity of his latest Pinot Noir harvest.

Which is why *The Rake* finds itself today shivering on a chilly hillside, surrounded by the amorphous yet majestic contours of the Glen Stuart sheep farm in rural Tasmania, feeling as removed from our natural milieu, truth be told, as a prime ovine specimen might in a Piccadilly tea room. We're about 10,000 miles away — literally and figuratively — from the thoroughfares and catwalks of Milan and Paris. In fact, we're several miles from the nearest place with an actual (and highly appropriate) name: Deddington, a cluster of cottages, a post office, a pub and the remains of an old gaol, in the remote northeast of the state that Australians refer to as the Apple Isle.

Yet the spot on which we stand today, marsupial remains crunching underfoot as we survey the alien surrounds to the sound of guffawing kookaburras, holds great significance to anyone with an interest in the whys and wherefores of fine

apparel. The Glen Stuart farm is one of the major wool suppliers to Ermenegildo Zegna. Anyone lucky enough to own a suit made by the Italian luxury fashion house will have noticed the fabric's remarkable softness, yield and shape-keeping properties, and can ponder on the fact that its raw materials probably sprouted into existence on the backs of the ungainly but remarkably useful creatures you see pictured on these pages.

Zegna controls the production of its garments right the way along the chain — from the selection of the animals that grow the raw materials to the final stitching of beautiful handmade clothes, via the dyeing and weaving of the fabric, garment finishing, tailoring and all the other processes in between — in fact, 500 expert hands will have been involved in the process by the time it reaches the consumer, according to Zegna. And so, to say the company takes wool seriously is a huge understatement. Over the last century, four generations of the family have devoted themselves to balancing nature, craftsmanship and technology in pursuit of the premium fabrics with which to manufacture their garments — which starts, of course, with the natural fibres involved.

So dedicated are they to a natural fibre from which mankind has produced garments for around five millennia, Zegna even launched the Ermenegildo Zegna Extrafine Wool Trophy, in association with the Australian Superfine Wool Growers'



The farm's engine room, the shearing shed. "You won't see better shearers and shed hands than these," according to the proud owner, Allan Phillips.





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Once Zegna has sourced the finest raw wool on the planet, it puts it through a production process involving around 500 expert hands before it reaches the consumer.

Association, which first took place in 1963 and was the first accolade in textile history to honour the quality of a basic, raw fibre. Its points system sees growers awarded according to weight, style, strength, evenness and micron — the last referring to the mean diameter of the wool, a measure as sacrosanct in this industry as the carat standard is to the luxury jeweller. “Superfine wool,” as Paolo Zegna, Chairman of the Ermenegildo Zegna Group, puts it, “is significantly present in both the formal and upper-casual lines of our collection.”

The farm belongs to seasoned woolgrowers Allan and Carolyn Phillips, an almost disarmingly hospitable and amiable couple who moved here 15 years ago from a mixed farming property — one where crops as well as livestock are tended — in Western Victoria. “The place just wasn’t right for producing premium quality wool,” explains Carolyn. “So we dissolved the family partnership, bought a property here, shipped our pure-bred stock south and set up.” So how did they choose a new property? “Where we are now is perfect for high-quality wool farming,” asserts Allan. “The native pasture here, the grasses, make the wool so even and fine. You need grass that’s rich, nutritionally, but not too rich, to grow wool that’s even and sound and strong.”

We’ve visited this unsung bastion of fabric production during a critical time of year for woolgrowers, the harvest: the culmination of a year’s work, according to Allan. “We have to do everything absolutely perfectly, in order that the product we put in the bales is the very best it can be,” he explains as he shows us into what is essentially the farm’s engine room — the shearing shed. Here, to the sound of rotating comb blades and a 100-bleats-per-minute ricocheting off corrugated-iron walls, shed hands and shearers set about their task in a spirit of mute diligence. The shearers have a set method that ensures the fleece stays in one piece before being spread over a slatted table, where the part from the back legs is removed and the rest inspected for quality. “You won’t see better shearers and

shed hands than these anywhere — they’re really at the top of their game,” says Allan who, as wool classer, oversees the whole operation, examining all the raw wool that passes through the shed for its uniformity, cleanliness and tensile strength.

One worker teases out a single strand of yarn from the cumulonimbus bundle on the table, and gives *The Rake* a close-up view of what those in the industry refer to as the ‘regularity of the crimp’ — meaning the number of, and regularity of, bends in a unit length. It feels squeaky soft in the hand, to the point of being almost rubbery, spongy and absorbent. “It’s the native grasses here that make the wool grow slowly, and therefore evenly, which makes the crimps even, or parallel, well-defined,” explains Allan. “Manufacturers want that because it offers the clothing resilience — the ability to bounce back into shape after creasing. Think about how many times you toss a suit jacket into the overhead storage unit on a plane — a decent crimp and compression will make that jacket back to its natural shape.” “The other thing that’s important,” adds Carolyn, “is the strength of the fleece — it needs to go through the spinning process without breaking.”

It’s intriguing to think that, with the Industrial Revolution still rumbling on in places far away from here, and gaining speed like a runaway juggernaut, the milieu in which the most commonly used animal fibre on the planet is produced is identical to how it was millennia ago. And, this will never change, according to Allan. “The better we do our job, the easier it is for the chaps along the line to enhance it, and make it something more beautiful,” he says. “We have to give them a pinnacle product for them to make the very best.” And, as the owner of a fairly decent wardrobe himself, he’s a man who knows what constitutes the very best. “It’s a strange but great feeling, pulling a pair of Zegna suit trousers and jacket on and knowing that so many powerful people around the world are enjoying the same thing, and knowing we were part of it — right at the start of it. We were the initial part in the chain.”

