

Dressing Better Series

TO MAXIMIZE YOUR INVESTMENT IN CASHMERE, HERE'S WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW:

- Cashmere is prized for its soft hand, its brilliance and warmth. It is expensive due to both scarcity of fiber and the handwork required to convert the fiber into a finished garment.
- Legend has it that the Caesars' togas in ancient Rome were made of cashmere, and that Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III, popularized cashmere among the French upper classes when she had the fiber woven locally into her famous "ring shawl"—a shawl so fine it could be drawn through her wedding ring.
- Cashmere comes from the under-fleece of the Kel goat, originally from the Tibetan region of Kashmir. Today, most cashmere comes from the high, dry plateaus surrounding the Gobi Desert from Northern China into Mongolia.
- After Mongolian shepherds herd the goats, the first step is combing, a 30-minute process that allegedly does not hurt the animal.
- The silky fleece of the Kel goat yields a mere five to seven ounces annually. To make a sweater, an annual yield of four to six animals is needed. A cardigan takes an annual yield of 20 animals.
- Skilled artisans transform cashmere fiber into yarns and fabrics. Fibers are first cleaned in a process called scouring. After scouring, the fibers are carded into spaghetti-like strands of unspun fabric.
- Long fiber is more expensive than short fiber because it makes a stronger yarn that pills less. Pilling is caused by the abrasion of short fibers into small balls. Some makers use a high percentage of surface fiber to make low-quality garments feel softer. Buyers should, therefore, stick with brands they know and trust.
- Color plays a role: Whiter, more expensive fibers are more versatile as they can be dyed to any color; darker, cheaper cashmeres are often bleached white and then dyed, reducing the softness.
- A manufacturer pressed to reduce his price might opt to make the garment lighter sometimes just by loosening the tension of the knitting machine. This makes the fabric more porous and limp. Look for a tightly knit fabric with resilience and density. When you pull the sides of the garment apart and let them go, the garment should snap back to shape.
- Cheaper sweaters usually contain both shorter fibers and looser knitting, a combination that ensures pilling.
- Two-ply yarns are better than single ply because the torque created during the spinning process can translate into a bias in a single-ply fabric. In a two-ply yarn, the twist offsets the torque and the thick and thin paces tend to average out. Three- and four-ply yarns, however, impact weight but not quality.

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M A N ' S C L O T H I N G

