

STORY BY SIGOURNEY GUNDY

Photos by Meaghan Flesch

# SHEEP TO SHOP

*Local spinners create yarn from wool*

**THE SCENT OF HAY WARMED BY THE SUN LINGERS** in the barn as a flock of sheep spring up to the fence in hopes of receiving a treat from their approaching owner. Yvonne Madsen extends her arm past the eager animals, reaching under them to offer a green alfalfa cookie to a little black sheep waiting patiently for her turn.

Nuzzling her nose into the palm of Madsen's hand, the black sheep, named Olive, makes an approving "baahing" noise as she munches on the cookie.

"She's a good girl," Madsen says, looking fondly at her sheep.

Olive has a special coat of wool that fades from black to grey. Inside Madsen's yellow farmhouse, a soft shawl knitted from Olive's unique wool hangs delicately draped over a coffee table that sits next to an old wooden spinning wheel. Without the spinning wheel, Madsen would not have been able to turn Olive's wool into soft strands of workable yarn.

Spinning is a process that takes the fluffy wool coat worn by a sheep and turns it into colorful strands of yarn to be sold in shops around the world. Madsen's sheep Olive is one of the 3.7 million sheep that were used for wool production in 2013, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Placing one bare foot on the wooden lever, Madsen begins to rhythmically pedal her leg up and down, setting her spinning wheel into motion. She allows the wool to glide through her fingers before it

wraps around the wheel, turning from black fluff into long strands of smooth yarn.

"Spinning is rare — it's one of those things you don't find everywhere," Madsen says. "It's a niche market. There aren't that many of us."

Madsen and her husband, Doug Madsen, own Spinners Eden, a small farm in Bellingham and home to 38 California Variegated Mutant Romeldale sheep, each of which they know and call fondly by name. Sheep at their farm are primarily used for their uncharacteristically soft wool, Madsen says.

In order to get the wool from sheep to spindle, a shearing process must take place. Once a year, Madsen uses a large razor to remove the wool in as close to one piece as she can. Sheering is like a choreographed dance meant to cause the sheep as little stress as possible, Madsen says.

Once the sheep are sheared, Madsen cleans,

*(below) Using an antique spinning wheel, Yvonne Madsen creates unique strands of yarn from the wool of one of her Romeldale sheep, a breed used for their soft coat. The sheep's wool is multi-colored, which creates gradient-colored yarn.*







combs and spins the wool into the kind of yarn that appears on the shelves of Bellingham yarn shops.

Spinners such as Rachel Price and Kate Henifin, owners of Spincycle Yarns, appreciate local sheep farms that supply ethically produced wool, especially with the rising demand for yarn.

“There has been a revival of things that are handmade,” Price says. “The demand for local yarn has gone up just in the 10 years we have been in business — it is a good time to be spinning.”

Price was drawn to spinning after becoming frustrated with the corporate career her graduate studies were pushing her toward, she says. Now, in the peaceful space of her shop, she strives to create something that is ethical, beautiful and useful.

A portion of the yarn handspun by Price and Henifin lines the shelves at Northwest Handspun Yarns, a Bellingham yarn shop where colorful bundles pour off every surface.

Shop owner Meg Jobe runs her business with the main goal being not to make a profit, but to create meaningful connections through the







*(previous, above) A shawl crocheted by Madsen shows the change in color of the wool produced by her Romeldale sheep.*

*(previous, below) After the wool is cleaned, Madsen uses a technique called carding the wool before spinning it into yarn.*

*(left) Doug Madsen shows affection during feeding time to one of 38 sheep at Spinners Eden farm in North Bellingham.*

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friendships formed from working with wool.

“Owning a shop and selling people things they don’t need is not a valuable thing,” Jobe says. “But having a yarn shop that creates something that allows connection is worth it to me.”

When purchasing yarn, Jobe considers where the yarn originates and pays attention to the working conditions and labor laws of factories overseas, she says.

Although some shops import their yarn from foreign countries, Madsen continues to spin her own yarn from the sheep she cares for every day.

On a calm evening, the last bit of sunlight

falls over Mount Baker and casts Madsen’s farm in a soft pink glow. Pulling on her black rubber boots, Madsen walks out to the barn. Sheep in variety of shades surround her, nibbling gently on her coat buttons as she scoops, scrapes and shovels — cleaning the barn as she does every night.

Noticing the thick coats on her sheep, Madsen knows the time for shearing is quickly approaching, where she will gather the wool and then begin the spinning process of turning the black, brown and white fluff into strands of silky yarn. **K**