

## Wearing your art on your functional, yet fashionable, sleeve

BY BETSY WOOD



**A**lpaca fleece has 22 natural shades ranging from black to silver and rose gray and white, from mahogany brown to light fawn and champagne.



Light shines through the garden-room ceiling, illuminating a cozy space that features brick floors spread with a scattering of worn Oriental rugs. Shelves and cubbies stuffed full of every imaginable color and texture of yarn line the walls and occupy the aisle down the middle. A large oak pedestal table, flanked by comfortable bentwood chairs, squats in the middle of the space. To one side, an ancient church pew is strewn with over-stuffed pillows, and a coffee table provides space for magazines and cups of steaming tea. Needles click, and conversation flows—not necessarily about knitting. “I come here every Saturday. I like the way the store is set up; it’s friendly,” comments Donna.

Mosaic Yarn Shop in Blacksburg is a community-oriented meeting place for fiber enthusiasts, and sometimes we’re like a support group for people going through things,” says Gina Dugas, owner of the establishment and avid knitter since the age of eight. Charlotte adds, “I’ve been coming here nine years.”

Samples of exquisite garments hang throughout the shop, inspiring even the novice, but Gina doesn’t stop at that. “They teach you how to knit for free. I learned to knit in December, so when I get into trouble, they fix it for me. One weekend I had to come twice,” Donna quips. Ellie adds, “I’m knitting my first sweater for an upcoming grandchild, so I came in to get directions, and people here are fantastic!”

At Mosaic Gina has something for every knitter, weaver, crocheter—color, fiber content, texture, weight, and price. There are cotton and cotton blends, acrylics, and of course, at the higher end of the price range mohair, cashmere, silk, and alpaca. Each fiber has a variety of recommending qualities, and trying to choose just one is like trying to make a decision in a candy store!

My mind, however, has wandered to the mention of alpaca yarn. When I think of alpacas, I visualize a halcyon pasture in a distant land, dotted with exotic grazing stock, but, surprisingly enough, several operations in this area raise alpacas and process their coats. One example is my next stop, the Back Country Ranch on Spring Valley Road in Pearisburg VA.

Mike and Tonya Urban and their two children raise and breed the animals and then shear their coats for a product to be spun and then woven or knitted into wearable art. Formerly from a suburb of Philadelphia, the Urbans moved to Giles County 2 1/2 years ago, looking for a quieter, less hectic place to raise their children. In Tonya’s words, “We were trying to beat the rat race.”

When asked about their decision to raise alpacas, she smiles. While commuting to work each day, the family passed an alpaca farm, and on one Saturday they decided to take the children to visit—not the alpacas, but the Great Pyrenees which guarded the flock. There they became acquainted with the docile creatures they now rely upon for their living. They also own a Great Pyrenees, but they employ two llamas that perform most of the guard duties, fending off coyotes and other interlopers.

Mike and Tonya started with four males and four females, and their flock has grown to forty-five. Members of the camel family, Suri and Huacaya alpacas are mild-tempered, inquisitive creatures indigenous to the Andes Mountain Range in Peru, Chile, and Bolivia. They are intelligent animals that learn quickly to halter and lead, and are usually even safe for children to handle. There are twenty-two different registered colors, including white, beige, faun, black, brown, rose gray, and silver gray, with the lighter colors being in greater demand.

The alpacas are sheared in late April, yielding five to ten pounds of fiber each. After shearing, the Urbans take the fiber to a co-op where part of it is processed into yarn for spinners, weavers, or knitters, selling for approximately \$8 per ounce retail. The remainder can be processed into products such as socks, scarves, and caps to be sold. Whether it be the Teddy Bear fleece of the Huacaya or the pencil spires of the Suri, the fiber contains no lanolin, is six times warmer than wool, and wicks moisture away from the body. Even those of us who are allergic to wool can wear alpaca products! This is a proven fact, too. Last week I purchased a pair of hunter’s socks knitted from alpaca fiber, and I dread having to take them off. I can’t wear wool, but, boy can I wear Huacaya!

*Editors Note: refer to the ad on page nine of Flavours for additional information on the Back Country Ranch Country Store and the December 4th and 11th sale.*

