



NOBLE FIBRE

*One of the wonders of contemporary tailoring, a Zegna suit harnesses centuries of Italian tailoring tradition with peerless technical innovation. **THE RAKE** traces the humble origins of the ultimate sartorial expression.*

by **matthew pomroy**

There's well travelled, and then there's *Zegna* well travelled. Your wool suit may crumple and crease but those high-grade merino wool fibres help it to spring back into shape, ensuring you are crease-free at your final destination. The fact that this noble fibre, used by human beings for centuries, adapts to its surroundings with an ability to both absorb moisture and remain breathable makes it the perfect material for a tailored item.

The suit is of course only as good as the wool that goes into making it and Zegna's suits start with the best sheep, animals that have been raised and bred for centuries by generations of settler families.

Andrew Coventry arrived in Australia in 1837 and moved to Armidale, New England a year or two later. The pioneer set himself up as a farmer. Now, six generations later the Coventrys are still farming here. Current owner, Charlie Coventry, looks after 13,000 sheep; it's here on the sprawling 6,300-acre property that the first steps are taken in what Italian menswear brand Zegna refer to as sheep-to-shop, its seamless vertical integration. Some of the finest merino wool on the planet starts its life running around these fields.

Captain John Macarthur brought the first 30 Merino sheep with the Second Fleet that landed in Australia in 1789, just a year after the first felt had arrived. Environmental conditions were particularly favourable and he set up a farm; the breed began to spread. By 1800 there were 6,000 Merino sheep in the country and now there are over 72 million.

The Australian rural landscape is uniquely suited to sheep, with a relatively mild climate extending over vast areas of natural grassland. Wool production is this country's largest and most important form of agricultural land use, with some 55,000 wool-growing properties

spread from Queensland to Tasmania and the Islands of Bass Strait, across South Australia and to the mid-north of Western Australia.

The Australian Merino is bred for its superior wool, specifically the Superfine variety. In order to qualify as Superfine, the Merino wool's fibres must be no thicker than 19.5 microns. One micron is a thousandth of a millimeter – while a human hair is 60 microns – and it's those fine, strong fibres that go into making things such as the high performance, lightweight, crease-resistant fabric suits you see in Zegna stores around the world.

But that link between sheep and shop is one that many don't consider, especially when we are all increasingly removed from the production process. For Zegna President Paolo Zegna however, people need to understand the real value of that wool.

"Your suit is more than the name in the label," he tells *The Rake*. "It's a long process that goes back to sheep in a field in rural Australia." Ermenegildo Zegna has been involved with this for close to a century. In the 1920s, when nearly half the wool clip was still bought by Britain, Zegna started to buy Australian Superfine wool.

"Now we are directly involved through the majority purchase of a stake in Achill Farm," Paolo says, noting the deep effort of producing his signature product. "The sheep are living things and every day is unpredictable, and animals have to be cared for – nothing is to be taken for granted."

For farmer Charles Coventry, his daily thoughts are a world away from fine tailoring and beautiful Zegna suits. He tells *The Rake* about some of the challenges faced by himself and fellow wool growers. "Drought is the single biggest problem because the amount of grass we can grow determines how much income we can generate," he



The Zegna suit starts life on the wool farms of Australia, where generations of families have raised and bred sheep. The Ermenegildo Zegna Wool Trophy (as presided over by Paolo Zegna, left) recognises the finest wools annually, which are destined for the fabrics that create Zegna garments.



says. “Rainfall and the variability of rainfall is a huge challenge but aside from the weather this is a complex and challenging business because animals don’t work nine-to-five and their life is 24/7 so our program is determined by the animals needs – you have to continually be playing what’s in front of you with a backdrop of a longer-term strategy.”

Charles runs the business from his home at the farm and here in his kitchen there’s a large map marking out the various part of the land. Names like Sawpit, Coffin Creek, Gold Lease and Bottom Ham conjure up romantic notions of the pioneers in Australia who came before him, weather-beaten men and women battling the hardships of farming without modern technology in a new country, so that back in Europe, high society could drape themselves in fine cloth. These day, however, the challenges are also external.

“It’s a hard industry and I think the wool business has been even more challenging since the reserve price scheme collapsed in 1990, when it was a far more lucrative industry,” he laments. “That’s left a legacy of challenges that’s taken a long time to resolve, but the industry is now becoming fresher and taking advantage of new technology... and we’ve even seen the prices rebound in the last four months.”

Despite being one of the most essential products in the menswear industry, wool prices have been precarious and although fine merino wool is the main enterprise, they also farm lambs and beef cattle – with a head count of 1,200 – to supplement the income. It’s somewhat sobering to be reminded that the material an entire industry relies upon is essentially in the hands of family farmers in rural Australia battling against elements both natural and economic.

“Things are improving because of our strategy and cattle prices are good, wool prices have got better and we’ve just dealt with some of the worst seasons since the 1920s, so we’ve had everything thrown at us and we’ve figured out how to get through that,” Charles tells *The Rake*. “We’re becoming versatile, but agriculture is not a fast journey and we only get one chance at genetic improvement every 12 months so you’ve got to be decisive.”

The wool isn’t something that can be mass produced in a factory and that’s worth remembering. “It’s rare, it’s valuable and is the results of a lot of effort, intelligent and time devoted,” Paolo points out as we drive through the fields.

On the day we visit, it’s raining but this level of rain is rare. Drought is a real problem for the quality of the wool and throughout

the course of the year the growing may start well but be followed by a time of drought where the animal eats less thus creating a weaker point in the fibres of the wool. “If there is a good length of wool with a

breakable point in the middle that is a dreadful thing for production,” Paolo explains. “The fact we deal with 60 to 80 wool growers is because in the various areas of Australia you may have production that’s better on one region one year and another in the next all depending on the weather conditions, and we need to guarantee that each year our supply is continuous and consistent in quality. We are very serious about the criteria that we select our wool from.”

Zegna is so serious about quality that the company set up its own wool awards to honour outstanding produce. The previous night *The Rake* was at the Ermenegildo Zegna Wool Trophy Awards in Melbourne, where the finest product was recognised. The annual

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Clockwise from top left: David and Angie Waters receive the Vellus Aureum Trophy from Paolo Zegna, one of several awards handed out annually (pictured right); the raw material destined for the finest suits around the world. Opposite: One of the looks from Zegna's current collection.



event honours the wool growers of Australian and New Zealand. Zegna established the trophy in 1963 in association with the Superfine Wool Growers Association to strengthen their relationship with farmers, encourage production and help safeguard the supply of superfine wool fabrics.

Most of the winners were couples. Husbands and wives. Rod and Carol. David and Angie. Producers from all over the country who are fighting for their livelihood. Charlie's wife Dorianne is from North of San Francisco and was working in finance in Sydney before they met. "We'd been dating a month and she came up here and cried from the isolation," Charlie says before adding, "And then on the next visit she was chased by a snake – there was no injury but I felt responsible for her having been so frightened... but she's a very versatile lady and has been a huge part of what we're doing here."

These are the people that essentially start the process that leads to the finished Zegna suit you see in a store. They work the long hours to ensure the wool is up to standard and soft to the touch and highly durable and their efforts make Merino wool highly sought after.

"People come to the shop not just for the window but the story of where things come from," Paolo says, then tells a story to illustrate just how the perception of luxury is changing, especially in some of the key emerging markets. "In the last 25 years, China has come on so much, but I remember my first customers visiting our shop in Beijing and they were trying on the trousers on top of their own trousers – they didn't have a clue," he explains.

For Paolo, the idea of not being involved in the process from the start is unthinkable, for it is there that the brand can control the means of production and ensure quality.

"Then they were going through the phase where they were just coming into the shop and saying 'give me the most expensive thing' and it was just a status issue. But now the customers there go and research on the internet and actually ask questions, where sometimes even you don't have the answers, because they have read articles about us and it makes us proud of what has been achieved – this is why I believe we have a strong base for the future and are optimistic going forward."

And for the farmers in Australia, the partnership with Zegna is also creating optimism for the future. Charles explains, "It's allowed us to accelerate the plans we have and be far more precise and professional

and given us a greater purpose of why we are producing such a quality of product and where we want to take that quality. Before we were available to arrange of markets now we're specific. But now we've got intellectual property and the merging of cultures and ideas as well as equity of two business partners to help build the business that we need to get through periods of drought and tough conditions."

And for Paolo, the idea of not being involved in the process from the start is unthinkable, for it is there that the brand can control the means of production and ensure quality. "We don't see any other way. Zegna is known for quality and appreciated for what it's done all these years and we just want more people whether it's my generation or the younger generations coming through to know what's behind the shop window. I don't think there is any other company in a better position right now to show what they do and have been doing for a century. ■

