

A Hard Fight for Soft Wool

Europe Tries to Ease China's Grip on Cashmere

By John Tagliabue
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RADDA IN CHIANTI, Italy — Nora Kravis grabs a goat by the horn and ruffles its coarse hair.

A New York native who has lived in the soft hills of Italy's premier wine growing region for 24 years, Ms. Kravis is breeding the kind of ornery goats that produce what looms spin into cashmere wool, a mainstay of Italy's fashion industry.

Her operation, nestled between Florence and Siena, is tiny. On the Tuscan hills around her home, about 40 goats and kids romp. At the end of the season, the combings of each yield about 11 ounces, hardly enough to keep the huge European textile industry, which consumes about 60 percent of the world's annual cashmere production, running for very long.

But her farm is interesting because it is a sign of how Europe's textile makers are fighting to protect the cashmere business. Europe raises virtually no goats for cashmere and for generations has purchased what it needs principally from China, whose Inner Mongolian goat herds are the world's chief source of the soft down.

As China has advanced economically, Ms. Kravis said that people in the business believed that China was doing with its cashmere "what the Arabs did with oil." Rather than sell the crude wool freely to the Europeans, who spin and weave it into \$1,000 sweaters and costly scarves, coats and gloves, Beijing is increasingly putting pressure on European manufacturers, mainly in Italy and Scotland, to transfer their textile technology, and the added value it affords, to China.

"We are in the grip of the Chinese," says Carlo Piacenza, whose family runs Piacenza SpA, a leading cashmere manufacturer that is now spinning some yarns there.

So three years ago the European Union began the European Fine Fiber Network to promote the production of luxury fibers such as cashmere. In the case of cashmere, government planners believe, the goats will not only supply wool, but also create work in farming regions whose traditional crops are wiped out by automated agribusiness.

Portuguese farmers are also experimenting with cashmere, and Finnish farmers with angora rab-

bits; a Swiss businessman, Josef Kuonen, imports alpaca to the country's alpine pastures.

Colin Plumbe, the managing director of Todd & Duncan, a major dyer and spinner of cashmere in Kinross, Scotland, said that doing business with the Chinese was risky. "Nobody likes to be tied to a single source," he said.

Yet, he added, though the industry "has been interested for decades" in developing home-grown alternatives to suppliers like China, "now it's probably true to say it has lost interest."

Ideally, cashmere-bearing goats thrive in extreme cold climates, which promotes growth of the soft down that is their protection, and dry climates, which keeps out oil in the down. Experiments of the last 20 to 30 years, he explained, had yielded goats suitable to European climates, but bearing unsuitable cashmere, or goats with good quality cashmere that could not stand the climate.

So the big producers invest in China. Besides Mr. Piacenza's spinning operations there, is Loro Piana SpA, a major Italian weaver, which last year formed a joint venture in Outer Mongolia, another cashmere region.