



A BEDTIME STORY

How To Make An Organic Wool Duvet

Stuart Anderson describes how a comfortable night's sleep led him to attend an unusual course.

While travelling through the Sarthe region in France, we broke our journey at the appropriately named 'Écologite' where we enjoyed the most amazing night's sleep. On questioning the proprietors, Marylène and Odile, the following morning, we were told that we had spent the night smothered in fluffy clouds of pure organic wool. They gave us details of the agriculture biologique (organic) certified farm, La Villière, run by Catherine and Charles Guillot where they were made. So it was, some three months later, that my girlfriend Gabrielle and I joined Catherine in the barn to help her shear two sheep, the first stage in making our own pure wool duvet.

La Villière's twenty-two hectares of land supports around a hundred sheep of the local and historic breed Rouge de l'Ouest, a direct descendant of the English blue-faced Wensleydale, which has been crossed with a local breed. The farm is self sufficient in fodder, producing about forty tonnes of a combination of hay, straw, oats, legumes, lucerne and flax, all of which is distributed manually.

The Rouge de l'Ouest was much prized in the nineteenth century for the quality of its wool, which could be spun into fine threads for making clothes. Unfortunately, wool is not so highly valued nowadays and Catherine, always interested in her sheep and their wool, turned her mind to thinking how she might transform the wool into something special and then share her discovery with others. The idea of a course was born: to make duvets stuffed with wool.

RESCUED SAVOIR-FAIRE

In fact, this is not so much of a new idea as a rescuing of lost savoir-faire and adapting it to the production of a light, modern duvet. This know how has been reclaimed from the memories of old women who used to sew up woollen stuffed quilts by hand over a number of evenings. Her research also took her and Charles to the Bergerie Nationale de Rambouillet (France's national school for sheep farmers). But it would now be fair to say that Catherine has become an expert and new guardian of this knowledge in her own right.

Back to the barn: handling the sheep and their wool had

Top: Organic farmers and duvet makers Catherine and Charles Guillot.

left our hands gleaming with lanolin. Although the shearing of the sheep represented the first step, the wool we would use for our duvet had been shorn previously and washed, by hand, first in a solution of soda crystals to degrease the wool and then with nothing stronger than Savon de Marseille soap. This process takes about a day for the wool required for a double-duvet. Amazingly, this cleaning reduces the weight of the wool by half.

Marylène and Odile are good friends of the Guillots and they donated an old hand-carding machine which looks like a wooden pendulum studded with bentover six-inch nails! Interestingly, Catherine says this works much better than her electric version, which now sits idle in the corner. We took turns on the carding machine, to stretch and aerate the wool (so introducing that all important fluffiness) whilst also helping Catherine prepare the material.

To make the duvet, the bottom sheet was stretched tight and pinned onto a wooden frame, the wool was weighed and the amount





needed to give the desired thickness was distributed evenly. The top sheet was similarly stretched and pinned and the chosen design drawn on in lines of chalk. I was particularly taken with the cute outline of a sheep on a duvet that Catherine had done previously, but Gabrielle insisted on something more subtle: three borders surrounding a wave pattern.

Another gem of a find was an old industrial sewing machine, which extended her capacity from baby quilts to king-sized duvets. Two large jaws travel the width of the material being worked on, which, when finished, is wound from one roller to another, so revealing the next section. Bit by bit, we stitched our duvet together, trapping the wool between the two sheets, Catherine always on hand to help us unpick and re-sew our many errors.

The finished duvets are truly wonderful. The nature of the carded wool is such that it traps air but also breathes, leading to a warm and dry night. It also seems to self-regulate the heat, being neither too warm nor too cold – it's a vast improvement on our old polyester duvet. So if you are travelling through, you can try them for yourself, as all the beds at La Villière and the Écologîte are covered with the wool of the Rouge de l'Ouest.

It's a truly permaculture experience: Catherine has

Left 1:
Gabrielle carding wool.

Left 2:
Laying wool out in a frame.

Left 3:
Quilting the duvet together.

Left 4:
The finished wool filled duvet, showing the three borders and wavy pattern in the quilting.

discovered another use for the wool, so revaluing this natural product; has rescued lost knowledge and updated it for our times; and has recycled two venerable old machines. Through the medium of the courses, Catherine has also involved the customer, who both shares the sense of achievement when it's finished, whilst appreciating how much effort and skill have gone into it – something Catherine feels to be very important. The result is a very personal and unique thing of beauty. (That being said, she can supply duvets ready made for those with neither the time nor opportunity to attend a course.)

We were, in fact, the first English people to go on one of Catherine's courses and, if you're interested in following in our footsteps, then some basic French would be necessary, along with a dictionary. That said, the nature of the work is such that a lot can be understood by action and demonstration 🌍

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