

## **Why breed for Ultrafine Alpaca? – Consider the Vicuna**

By Julie McClen of Oak Grove Alpacas

Over recent years my interest in fine alpaca fibre and my involvement with the creation of the first Ultrafine Bale, has led me to research the role of Ultrafine alpaca fibre in relation to the world fibre market.

The word Ultrafine is a term commonly used in the merino wool industry, and was first introduced into the Australian Alpaca Industry by Alpaca Ultimate to describe the micron range in that first Ultrafine Bale.

In merinos the term ultrafine loosely applies to fibre around 16.5 – 15.5 micron or lower, and since Alpaca has on average a 2-3 micron finer handle to the equivalent micron in a merino, it was thought fair that the term Ultrafine could be applied to Alpaca of around 18.5 micron or less.

So why all this interest in 'Ultrafine Alpaca'?

The answer is simple, the finer the fibre, the more valuable the fibre is on the world fibre market.

Why is finer fibre more valuable and why has it always been this way, and will probably always be so?

Because as humans we possess a sensitive outer covering called skin. Our skin enjoys the sensation of softness, producing a pleasurable experience. Ultrafine camelid fibre offers this softness as well as exceptional warmth without the weight associated with other fibres.

We value those things that bring us pleasure and comfort, and ultrafine alpaca fibre is highly prized for these reasons.

Combine this desirability factor with the natural scarcity of very fine fibres & you create a situation where demand is greater than the supply, this increases the value & therefore the price paid per kilo for ultrafine fibres the world over.

This premium price factor is nowhere more evident than in the trade of Vicuna fibre. The Vicuna, the scientifically proven ancestor of the Alpaca, has the finest natural fibre in the world averaging around 12.5 micron.

The Vicuna however only grows around 5cm of fleece every two years & this biannual clip weighs about 500 grams. The Vicuna only produces fawn fibre & also has to be dehaired.

Vicuna are a wild animal that has to be rounded up in an event known as the 'Chakku', which has traditionally involved many hundreds of Peruvian farmers & villagers.

So all things considered, why do the Peruvians bother to go to all this trouble for such a small amount of fleece?

Because, this rare fibre sells for around \$700 - \$1000+ a kilo.

The vicuna fibre is processed into an incredibly light weight, soft, warm fabric which is sold to exclusive tailors the world over.

Recently I interviewed John Cutler of J.H.Cutler, bespoke tailors established in 1884, and located in Sydney, who create high end clothing for their clients.

They purchase Vicuna fabric wholesale for between \$2500 and \$5000 per metre, from which on one particular occasion they created a world class full length men's coat which retailed at \$50 000.

John talks of the vicuna fabrics unique qualities of superior warmth coupled with a luxuriously soft handle, but without the bulk and weight normally associated with such high thermal properties.

He knows it is hard for Australians to value the degree of warmth offered by vicuna since we live in a relatively warm climate, but the European market sets a premium on these traits where keeping warm can in the coldest of countries sometimes be a matter of life and death.

He believes that if we could supply sufficient quantities, there would be a market for Ultrafine alpaca fibre that could come close to matching the vicuna in micron, but be superior in length and quantity. As well as open up new colour options, as white fibre can be dyed, whereas vicuna is limited in this area.

Australian Alpaca breeders already breed some of the finest Alpacas in the world & we have the benefit of a wool fibre technology background.

Aiming for alpacas to start Ultrafine and be around 20 micron or less at 5 years old is a goal already being achieved by some in our industry, and then to maintain blow out to no more than 25 micron in it's lifetime would enable the grower to extend the financially viable life span of an alpaca's fibre production.

Breeding for Ultrafine alpaca is the logical path for those wanting to maximise the financial return per animal on their fleece.

With Ultrafine Alpaca fibre achieving up to \$66 a kilo in recent times which is at least conservatively 5+ times that of the price paid for 23 micron fleece, you would have to cut over 10 kilos of 23 micron fleece to match the value of only 2 kilos of Ultrafine.

Combine this difference over a few years and you have quite a substantial difference in return on the fleece of these two different micron Alpacas.

Furthermore, the husbandry, shearing and feed costs for both animals are the same, so it is much more viable to breed a herd of Ultrafine alpacas than a herd of mid twenty micron alpacas, even if they do cut higher fleece weights.

Despite fluctuations in world fibre prices, the finest fibre has always made the most per kilo, so breeding an Alpaca that stays Ultrafine to Superfine for several years at least, will ensure the grower is positioned to maximise the return on their fleece production.

Once numbers of these Ultrafine alpacas increase, we will start to have a viable amount of Ultrafine fibre to negotiate higher prices with textile manufacturers on the world market.

It's not going to happen in a hurry, but as the saying goes 'all good things take time!'