

# The Grumpy Merino

WORDS —  
NICK AINGE ROY



It's impossible to escape South Island's Southern Alps. Driving north of Christchurch, the mountains bear down from the west, squeezing the Canterbury Plains into a bear hug between the coast and their steep rocky faces before snuffing them out of existence at the base of the Kaikōura Ranges.





Here in North Canterbury, in the foothills near Culverden, life can be extreme: freezing, howling winds bring snow and ice off the peaks throughout winter, while in the summer the land bakes underneath the hazy, high-country heat.

Despite the conditions, people here make a living as they have done for more than a century, farming and grazing – first on the giant stations that made this area famous and, in recent decades, on the smaller family farms that splintered from them. The Grampians is one such farm and on it live Sarah and Jono Reed, the third – and with their children, fourth – generation of Reeds to steward this land.

In many ways, the Reeds are typical high-country farmers on a typical high-country farm. On their land, which ranges from irrigated flats and rolling hills to rugged mountain faces, they run an old-school combination of sheep and beef: hardy merinos and sturdy, black-coated Angus cattle. Like farmers throughout South Island, the raw materials they produce are sent off overseas, destined for clothing racks and restaurant tables the world over.

But the Reeds also do something that is not typical on a high-country farm. While others have attempted to diversify by transforming themselves into luxury lodges or guided hunting retreats, the Reeds' approach is simple and rests on the back of

one thing they have an abundance of – wool. In May 2020 they launched The Grumpy Merino, a line of natural merino knitting yarn and luxurious blankets made right here in New Zealand and solely with the wool from their farm.

When I speak to Sarah Reed over Zoom, she tells me how The Grumpy Merino came to be. As is the case for so many farmers, the Reeds were selling their prized merino to big fashion brands overseas – a valuable client base but one that never allowed them to tell the true story of their product and the place from where it came.

They wanted to produce something that could be made here in Aotearoa and that customers could buy knowing exactly where it had come from. Traceability and transparency are the top priorities for The Grumpy Merino, as well as their customers, and this was something that Sarah knew they had to have from the outset. From the farm near Culverden, the Reeds' wool weaves its way around New Zealand as part of a complex domestic production line, a cross-country journey that customers can follow on their website.

It is time-consuming and more costly than sending their materials overseas, but Sarah wouldn't have it any other way.

Of the 30 tonnes of wool they produce each year, only one tonne of the finest, most premium merino fleeces are selected to be turned into The Grumpy Merino blankets and yarns.



“It is supporting New Zealand business, which is what we really wanted to do, and it’s part of that whole circular economy. I think there’s something quite special about using other businesses because you’re keeping them up as well as yourself.”

Keeping things close to home is something the Reeds do well. Their farm, The Grampians, has been in the family since 1973 and in addition to Sarah, Jono and their three kids, Jono’s parents, Graham and Ann, also live and work on the farm they helped build. The rams from which The Grumpy Merino flock is bred come from Glenallen merinos just down the road in Waikari - a stud that just so happens to be owned by Jono’s sister and her husband.

Of course, there are benefits to such an operation that goes beyond the feel-good aspects of running a family business. From the genetics that form the backbone of the flock to the way the sheep are cared for throughout the season, every input and aspect of production is overseen by Sarah and Jono. Of the 30 tonnes of wool they produce each year, only one tonne of the finest, most premium merino fleeces are selected to be turned into The Grumpy Merino blankets and yarns. The result is a product that few are able to match - pure, handpicked luxury from the heart of New Zealand.

Despite being only a little over two years old, The Grumpy Merino has already managed to attract overseas customers in Australia and Japan, sales that have been secured through a strong social media presence, close customer relationships, and good old-fashioned word-of-mouth. The product is beautiful, limited, and made from a material, merino wool, that has long been associated with luxury - a winning combination for any young brand.

But Sarah believes that what people ultimately connect with is the story of The Grumpy Merino: of a family from the high country putting their heart and soul into something that celebrates the land and the animals that produced it, a little piece of New Zealand that customers can pass down to their children and grandchildren.

[thegrumpymerino.co.nz](http://thegrumpymerino.co.nz)