

The rise of Ansotana wool

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At the heart of the Aragonese Pyrenees, in the valleys of Ansó and Hecho, we find the origins of the Ansotana sheep.

In the Middle Ages, wool was a natural part of people's lives, the staple material of their everyday clothing, and the traditional dress from that period is now the focus of a nationally renowned cultural event, which takes place on the last Sunday in August.

The popularity of Ansotana wool has grown in parallel with increased collaboration between private stakeholders and social organisations in the rural areas of the Pyrenees where the breed is kept. Building on the enthusiasm of breeders — represented by the regional association ACOAN — to harness the value of the wool from their flocks, guidance was sought from government specialists for the *comarca* of Jacetania, and with support received from the Leader initiative of the ADECUARA regional rural development programme.

This energetic local dynamic has been accompanied since the outset by broader international development, reflecting the intrinsic importance of cross-border relationships established with various associations in the French Pyrenees, Catalonia and the rest of Europe, particularly through the European Association for Study, Liaison, Innovation and Research into Textiles, [ATELIER European Wool](#).

Since 2010, Ansotana wool has formed part of the European exhibition 'Wools of Europe/Laines d'Europe', which was opened in Paris and is currently based in Biella (Italy).

Funding from the Leader initiative, complemented by the expert advice of regional authorities, led to the creation of a research and development programme to explore the possibilities of this unique wool.

The production and commercialisation of Ansotana wool was the subject of a 2010 study by Julia Gladiné, carried out as part of her work placement for a master's degree in Protected Natural Spaces. Among her key findings was the minimal value placed on this type of wool at the time of the study.

To look at the issue empirically, 90 kilograms of Ansotana wool were sent to the French Pyrenees to be cleaned and spun by one of the few [family-run business](#) still operating in the region. This was the first time that Ansotana wool



Photograph by Ricardo Comparé Escartin. Photographic Archive, Huesca Provincial Council.

had been machine-spun, and the resulting yarn was put through a series of tests, coloured with natural dyes and hand-woven into shawls. The inconsistent results of the washing and the varying properties of the finished yarn, however, suggested that an initial selection at source was required.

In parallel to the technical processes involved in this transformation, the commercialisation of Ansotana wool has gradually found an outlet in forums for local development. The first of these, in Bagnères de Bigorre (France) in 2011, was the first trans-Pyrenean and cross-border forum between wool professionals and marked the start of a close relationship with regional associations in the French Pyrenees involved in the commercial development of native sheep breeds.





Since 2011, Ansošana wool has become a permanent feature of regional events:

- At the stand set up by ACOAN, the association of Ansošana breeders, at the principal regional livestock fair.
- In practical courses for the creation of wool felt, with women from local rural communities and staff of the ATADES holiday centre for people with disabilities, in Martillué (Jaca).

Through these and other events, Ansošana wool has become an intrinsic part of the local identity in Los Valles Occidentales (the westernmost area of the Aragonese Pyrenees) and is marketed alongside other designated tourism products registered in the protected natural area, an initiative that has been incorporated into the provisions of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas pertaining specifically to the Valles Occidentales Natural Park.

In 2012, the cooperative framework established with associations in the Pyrenees won the Working Community of the Pyrenees (CTP) award for French-Spanish cooperation in the Pyrenees region.

Having achieved these initial results with the first “public presentation” of Ansošana wool, ACOAN members aimed to develop the product further, and

Blue woollen shawl displayed at the 'Wools of Europe' exhibition.



Yarn and batting from Anso wool, displayed at the Expoforga fair on 4-5 May 2011.



Presentation of items made during the practical course on felts at the PIR festival of cultures, Anso, 2-3 July 2011



a competitive selection-at-source programme was trialled during the 2013 shearing season with a view to improving the qualities of the yarn obtained.

Part of the 400 kilograms of selected wool were processed in 2014, some spun into yarn and the rest made into batting. Clear improvements were seen in the quality of the final yarn, with a markedly softer and gentler feel obtained.

The batting was used for a new series of practical training courses with felts over the course of 2015, again for ATADES staff, who continue to organise workshops that have proved immensely popular with the centre's users and with young monitors involved in social leisure programmes and training workshops (including the *Trastolillo* craft events, organised in villages throughout Jacetania by the regional Department for Youth Affairs).

Ansotana wool has acquired a consolidated social value, becoming part of the cultural identity of the region, for all that it is under-used as a resource in its own right. Alongside this cultural significance, however, there is a desire among producers to harness the wool's potential as part of a broader portfolio of extensive ovine exploitation across the whole of the Pyrenees.

The [ACOAN website](#) showcases the results of part of this process: balls and skeins of wool carrying the logo that certifies them as 100% local-breed products.



Ansotana wool yard is being sold provisionally in Ansó, with considerable success, and thanks to the spirit of cooperation that exists between businesses in the region it has also been sold in the Catalan Pyrenees, raising sufficient interest to feature in an article in Vogue in January 2015.

The following grade of Ansotana wool is used for the manufacturing of 100% Pyrenean wool jackets: wool sheared in Ansó, washed in Niaux (Ariège, France), spun in Montagut (Girona) and knitted and sewn in Olot (Girona).

At present, the market for Ansotana wool is still awakening. The future of ACOAN-produced wool will be tied to efforts to promote the 100% local brand, linked to an extensive existing system of quality Pyrenean meat production whose successful sale to end customers attests to the effective construction of regional relationships over the last few years. ●