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Alpaca: Luxurious, versatile textile makes wine country debut

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Submitted photo

Alpacas are "extremely gentle and calm ... with expressive body language."

November 08, 2013 8:55 pm • SASHA PAULSEN

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At first, it was bit of a puzzle to figure out the connection was between the Robert Mondavi Winery and Peruvian apacacs.

Then it became clear: It was Pisco Sours.

Margrit Mondavi, who serves as vice president of cultural affairs at the Oakville winery, explained that she and her long-time friend, Sandra Jordan, were sipping the classic South American cocktail in between shopping for alpaca products at Kuna, which sells high-end alpaca products in Lima, Peru, when inspiration struck.

"This is really a vision that began with Pisco Sours," said Mondavi as she welcomed guests to the first Kuna fashion show in the Napa Valley. The goal: Help the herdsmen in the high country of the Andes who raise alpacas, which in turn produce the luxurious fiber, known as "the gold of the Andes."

Jordan has long been a fan of alpaca. A native of Peru, she was educated in British schools and traveled widely with her family (her stepfather was in the diplomatic service), but she carried with her a strong memory of the crafts of her homeland, including the textiles made from alpaca fibers.

Alpaca is an ancient fiber, used by the Incas, treasured by royalty, Jordan noted. "Alpacas have been bred for thousands of years for their exquisite fleece."

Marriage brought her to the Northern California wine country, and as creative director of Jordan Winery, she began using versatile alpaca textiles in decor of the public and private rooms of the winery. Her decor caught the attention of visitors, many of whom were as interested in purchasing a item of "wine country lifestyle" as in taking home a bottle of wine, she noted.

"It was Robert Mondavi who encouraged me to go into business on my own," she said. "He said, 'Do it. Try it.'"

As a result, she founded Sandra Jordan Collection, of which, as of 2006, includes an extensive Prima Alpaca collection of creations for the home. That includes pillows, throws, curtains and upholstery in nearly 100 colors.

Among the designers who are using Jordan's alpaca products in designs is Jiun Ho, the owner of Jiun Ho Studio in San Francisco.

"Sandra and I have been close friends for years, and we've wanted to work together for a long time," said Ho, who came to wine country for the fashion show fundraiser. "My latest furniture collection, Jiun Ho IV, was inspired by my many travels through Peru and South America. Since alpaca has such a rich Peruvian heritage it seemed like the perfect fit. My furniture designs are very tailored with very pure lines and refined shapes. It's a challenge to find fabrics that will accentuate the designs and add just that touch of sumptuous texture."

Alpaca, he said, is a luxurious solution. "(It) drapes well and has an amazing memory," Ho said. "I have used it for furniture upholstery, bedspreads and upholstered headboards. I also designed bags for a private event with some gorgeous leather detailing. The bags were the hit of the party."

Alpaca is also surprisingly tough. Jordan's website, SandraJordan.com, notes that her company uses "the first shearing of alpaca less than one year old. The fiber is then carefully hand sorted for softness and luster. The unique qualities of this fiber result in textiles which are very low maintenance. They are extremely resilient and do not mat or pill and are naturally stain resistant."

"With clients, I use a demonstration — I drop a little water on the surface. It beads up and doesn't absorb into the fabric. Then I just wipe the water away. Once clients see that they are sold," Ho said.

The Kuna designs showed another aspect of the soft alpaca fiber: sweaters, coats and scarves in the natural alpaca shades; apparently there are about 40 natural shades of alpaca fiber ranging from black to fawn and rose and silver grays. The models twirled among the tables, pausing so the audience members could touch the delectably soft fabrics. Audible sighs supplemented a documentary showing the alpacas in their natural habitat, although whether this was from the feel of the products or the views of frolicking alpacas, was undetermined.

According to Jordan's website, "Alpacas are extremely gentle and calm with an intriguing inner struggle between curiosity and shyness. They interact with expressive body language and humming and have a serene manner that is contagious."

The VIDA connection

The event raised funds for VIDA, Volunteers for Inter-American Development Assistance. VIDA, a Bay Area-based nonprofit, diverts medical supplies destined for U.S. landfills sites, and ships them to impoverished communities in Latin American countries. Since 1991, it has shipped than

\$500 million worth medical supplies to places where "people have nothing," explained Adam See, director of the organization.

Money raised at the event was ear-marked for supplies for the Peruvian alpaca farmers. Kuna representative Fernando Pastor also announced his company's decision to donate funds from their sales to VIDA.

VIDA was founded in San Francisco by Carlos and Haydee Rodriguez Pastor in 1991 as a response to the devastating cholera epidemic in Peru that rapidly spread to other South American countries. In response, concerned Bay Area residents organized a relief effort and shipped supplies to the affected regions.

VIDA has since extended its efforts throughout the Americas, as its health assistance has reached millions of people in hundreds of remote villages in Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru. They continue the effort today. They ship everything from bandages and thermometers to wheelchairs, medical equipment and hospital beds that would otherwise be discarded. According to its website, more than 3,000 tons of medical materials have been diverted from the Bay Area waste sites by VIDA.

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Tags Alpaca, Sandra Jordan, Margit Mondavi, Volunteers For Inter-american Development Assistance

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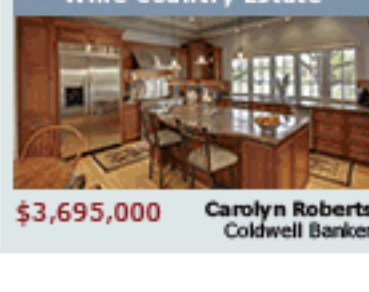
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