

Crowdfunding for superfine idea

A Benalla business constantly pushing the technological boundaries of what can be done with superfine wool, recently ventured into crowdfunding to further develop its latest product, Warmsilk®.

Dr Jeffrey Gill, CEO of Jemala Pty Ltd said while there had been a lot of interest in the fine wool/silk mix, trying crowdfunding meant he had to learn how to use more digital tools.

"I had to create a pitch video, which meant video-taping and editing; it is quite nerve wracking when it is you being videoed," Dr Gill said.

Dr Gill, a post-doctoral biochemist, returned from working in the UK, Switzerland and America to run the family company.

"I moved to Benalla for two reasons; to take over the family company and support my father. The lifestyle is the prime reason we are still here as it would make more business sense for our head office to be in Melbourne for networking opportunities. But that, and having to travel a bit, are a price we are well and truly prepared to pay," he said.

Started by his parents in 1985, the family business initially used breeding technologies to produce the finest wool quality and in 2002 equalled the world record for the finest bale of wool ever sold. From there they worked with the CSIRO to develop methods for processing ever finer wool fibres.

"We are the only company that uses wool this fine in sweaters and shawls. Mostly it goes into men's suiting where prices are up to \$40,000 per suit.



Jemala deals with Italian manufacturers and the brand is better known internationally than it is in Australia.

"Globally, Australian products often can't compete on price, volume or labour costs but our high quality certainly gets attention," he said.

"We produce the finest woollen sweaters on earth and we are very excited about Warmsilk®; a blend of silk and ultrafine wool that looks like silk, but out-performs pure silk."

"The product had already received a lot of support from designers and from the Friends of the Earth for its environmental benefits."

"We are delighted that neither wool, nor silk, require arable land which could be used for growing food, like cotton does. Nor do they damage the land and create deserts, like cashmere goats do. Therefore, our products align with our aim to use natural fibres while protecting people and the environment," he said.

"One of the big advantages of being so small is we can be flexible and try new projects," he said.

In 2012, Jemala engaged local indigenous artist Dennis Baksh to develop Yorta Yorta designs for their luxurious woollen scarves.

Currently, the business is working on a project in Kashmir that uses traditional hand spinning and hand weaving techniques that were originally used to make Shahtoosh shawls. These relied on the hair of antelopes, which are now critically endangered.

"We now supply them with extremely fine fleeces of less than 10 micron. That's finer than silk and too fine for current machine spinning technology. The resulting work maintains the stability of the local culture and supports a mix of people who are otherwise suffering pressure from Pakistani insurgents."

How did this opportunity come about? The connection was made online.

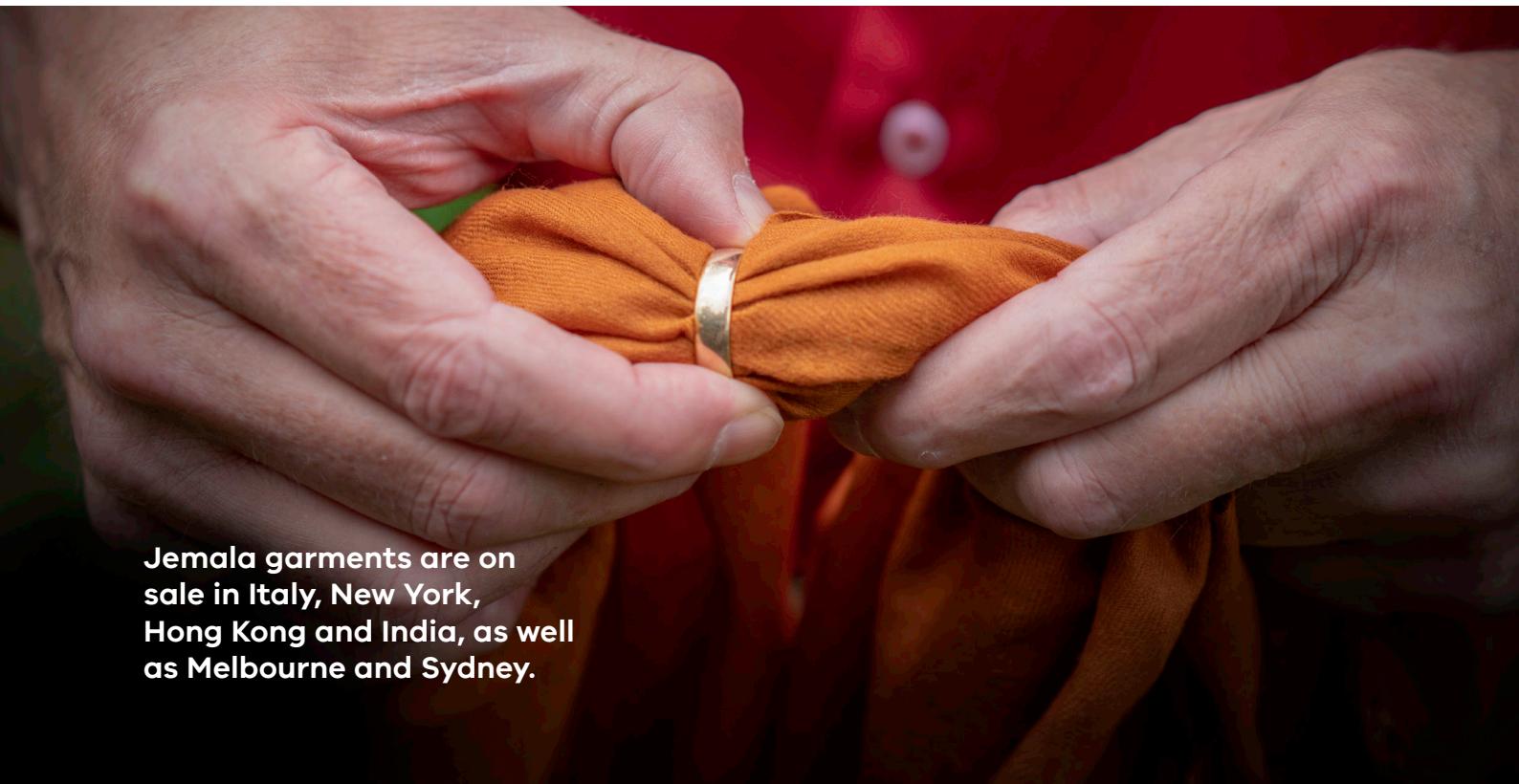
"We're really using digital tools to support several cultures to maintain their traditional ways of operating and offering jobs locally and around the world," he said.

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Jemala garments are on sale in Italy, New York, Hong Kong and India, as well as Melbourne and Sydney.