Kit Carson park abounds with woolly cheer Oct. 1 and 2, for the 33rd annual Taos Wool Festival. Sheep take center stage, joined by llamas, rabbits, and goats at the Critter Corner, a mini-zoo set up for the event.

Among the highlights of the event are delicious foods, including regionally raised lamb, live music, and a profusion of hand-spun and dyed yarn, knitwear, felted accessories, decor, rugs and toys, all ready to be brought home. This free, family-fun market for civilization's oldest fibers attracts visitors worldwide.

Traditional crafts are abundant, with rugs, scarves and hats galore. There will also be opportunities to try your hand at spinning and weaving.

Artisans also take ancient skills into inventive dimensions by drawing upon the innate characteristics of natural materials. Plant- and insect-based dyes yield subtle spectral and tonal effects. Painterly wall hangings evoke meditative gazes. Luscious hand-spun yarns can transport your fingers into creative nirvana.

Contestants vie for acclaim in the following categories:

- Fleece quality
- Hand dyeing
- Hand-spun yarn
- Garments and home accessories
- A Dog Sweater Fashion Show and contest
- A silent auction fundraiser (on Sunday).

Demonstrations and workshops reveal time-honored and modern techniques in knitting, dyeing, felting, spinning, and weaving. Patrons can experience wool from a variety of animals, and learn how its worked.

“We support exhibiting any kind of wool—llama, yak, bison, rabbit, angora, goat,” says Merce Mitchell, the Mountain and Valley Wool Association (MAVWA) chair and site coordinator. “To be juried in, the factors weighed are regionality, quality and value-added—the last being key. It’s what makes for really unique products from our vendors.”

The festival recognizes regional wool-centered labor and celebrates efforts to preserve the Navajo-churro breed, whose status the American Livestock Conservancy ranks as threatened.

“Since 9/11, people want warm and cozy. Thirty-year-olds don’t know how to make these things, but they’d really like to live with them,” says Sandy Voss, a master rug weaver whose guild, Art through the Loom, teaches fiber skills.
SHEARING

At the Tierra Wools Spring Harvest Festival in Los Ojos in late April, rancher Antonio Manzanares shears a sheep, using electric shears that cut like hair clippers. A thick fleece (up to 10 pounds) separates from the animal, a warm, moist living product of lustrous fiber.

“Back when shearers worked by hand, those guys had forearms hard as rocks,” he said while cleaning up.

FELTING

Minna White has been involved with churro since 1991. “They’re wonderful fiber sheep,” she enthused about their qualities. “I’m proud to talk about maintaining the genetic diversity of the flocks. And to do that, you have to buy the products of the ranchers that put the effort into growing heritage animals.”

After traveling the world as a documentary producer for the PBS Science series Nova, National Geographic and iMax, White now resides near Taos and devotes her time to exploring the intricacies of felting. “Churro wool is superbly suited, as it is low in lanolin (grease). In scarce water environments, the wool needn’t be washed. Mongols would make felt to cover their yurts. It’s big in Scandinavia and Russia. I give the sheep a job. Even as you and I are speaking, the sheep are growing more wool—about ¾-inches a month.

“Wool fiber has scales that open up when wet and warm,” White continues. “Air passes through them. To felt, you wet the wool, press fibers together and agitate them. They slide by each other. Press the water out. As they dry, the fibers shrink and the scales lock together.

Voila! Felt.”

At her festival booth, Lana Dura (locally available at Las Comadres Gallery) you’ll see felting’s elegant simplicity. White uses undyed wool. “Churro comes in so many colors—blacks, greys, browns, reddish browns, whites—the Navajo-Churro Sheep Association identifies at least 15,” White says. Her creations range from decor to very durable felted purses—all hand-washable and chemical free.

DYEING

The alchemy of natural dyes is as ancient as botany. As New Mexico State Archaeologist, archeobotanist Glenna Dean wondered, “How did it feel to live in the past, to go out into the wild for your raw materials—which aren’t available all the time, so you have to learn by observing? How people map to the landscape yields insights into how they lived.”

At her Abiquiu Dye Studio, she dyes churro yarns with dyes authentic to the Spanish Colonial period for colcha embroidery. Her wool-on-wool colcha embroidery kits revive a stitchery technique practiced in Northern New Mexico since the 17th century. Like needlepoint, the dyed yarn is stitched through the voids of sabanilla cloth, the canvas of handwoven wool, using tiny anchoring stitches to keep the scarce colored yarn on the surface of the fabric.

Dean sells her yarns and kits at the Española Valley Fiber Arts Center, at seasonal shows at Las Golondrinas in Santa Fe and during the Abiquiu Studio Tour.

“Red is the color that made Spain rich,” Dean says. The dye is extracted from the cochineal insect, a scale that lives on prickly pear cactus. It takes about one ounce of bugs to dye one pound of wool a deep red. “Cochineal really wants to be red.”
The technique was developed 3,000 years ago in Oaxaca and used by the Aztec and Maya peoples. Cochineal was a lucrative export—second only to silver.

**KNITTING**

Faith Welsh's involvement with fiber has no limit.

“I come from a lineage of women immersed in hand work,” she says. This includes knitting, needlework and crewel embroidery.

Origins of Santa Fe, where her work is represented, describes her vision as “knitting the finest threads into visual paintings, as shawls, sweaters and scarves.”

In her two-hour Make N Take class, Welsh will share technique-expanding combinations of basic stitches on a circular needle with a special cast-on method.

“I use a lot of yarn-overs and knit-togethers, which give the work an airy feeling,” she says. Each piece will incorporate some of her hand-spun art yarn. “Because Möbius are knit from the center out, I start with the hand-spun and its colors define the palette.”

Welsh spins all her yarn on a drop spindle, using locally hand-dyed, variegated roving or yarn, including silk, merino and alpaca. “When I spin, I feel like I’m connecting with ancestors, because [the process is] so ancient.”

Her drop spindles are finely turned by exhibitor, Ken Ledbetter, of KCL Woods, who specializes in tools for the Fiber Artist.

“The Wool Festival’s the most wonderful thing that happens here,” Welsh says. “I love it to pieces!”

**WEAVING**

Consider the panorama—Hispanic Río Grande and indigenous Navajo—the basis for innovative design. No wool craft is more esteemed than weaving.

Back in the day, weavings were one of the few objects of value traded for goods. Irvin Trujillo, a seventh-generation weaver, recalled stories, “That it wasn’t until my granddad’s day when things were generally traded for money.” Renowned for their weaving work, Trujillo and his wife Lisa Trujillo demonstrated at the very first Taos Wool Festival.

For Thelma Brown, whose Twin Grey Hills rugs are sold by the historic Toadlena Trading Post in the village of Newcomb outside Farmington, becoming a weaver occurred at her mother’s Navajo loom. At her own loom, her fingers move from the edges in, counting the threads.

“First I find the center of the warp. Weaving itself is intuitive,” she says. Brown defines her pattern by passing the batten through the warp threads to separate them, then using a weaving comb to press the weft tightly to the fabric.

For Brown, weaving represents autonomy. She remembers her mother putting a batten and a comb in her hand and saying, “These are always your money.”

**RESOURCES**

The Taos Wool Festival was established in 1984 by the Mountain and Valley Wool Association (MAVWA), to promote flow between wool producers and the specialty wool market of fiber art. Its network members are passionate about keeping the industry viable—it’s their way of life.

For more than a century, Tierra Wools in rural Los Ojos, has been an oasis for local weavers to hone their skills and share in community.

TDLT (Tejedoras de las Trampas) Fiber Artisans in Peñasco is a weaving, knitting, felting collective whose multi-generational outreach includes reclaiming textiles for woven rag rugs and other nifty things.

The Española Valley Fiber Arts Center (EVFAC) was established in 1995, when a “small group of local artists/weavers saw unused looms sitting outside homes in the valley [potential kindling!], … passed on to next generations by elders [who wove], and observed that weaving was no longer being taught [at home].”

Olimpia Newman, EVFAC’s director of development, notes that community effort led to what is now a nonprofit member-focused hub that promotes the region’s rich textile heritage and community.

While acknowledging that “wool fiber, despite its many virtues, has diminished in today’s clothing and has become a niche and luxury product, … for us, Fiber Arts begins with the shepherd or farmer and ends with the client who values the locally handmade product.”

The Taos Wool Festival highlights Northern New Mexico’s fiber ecosystem, creative entrepreneurship and fine craftsmanship—an abundance of well excellence. Come see for yourself.