FUN WITH DEAD BUGS
The last thing I signed up for was an all-day lesson in how to dye wool with dead bugs. Oh, did you not know that carmine red dye comes from the crushed exoskeletons of an insect called cochineal that lives on cactus? Yes. And it's back in fashion, even for food and cosmetics because it is, oddly, not toxic.

This yarn's color is achieved through natural means.

Cochineal (co-chuh-KNEEL), which lends its name as well as gives its body to the dye, is an incredibly intense, effective dye that was popular among the Aztec and Maya. It was quickly adopted by Spanish colonialists and applied to the wool of the sheep they brought with them. You can see its characteristic tones from colcha embroidery to Navajo blankets.

I'm already big into knitting, but I'd never done any dyeing until I stumbled on the schedule of classes at this mecca of fiber nerddom in Española. It's a yarn shop specializing in local churro wool and native dye ingredients; a weaving studio where you can walk in and immediately start working on a rug; and a community education center where you can learn how to make lace, knit a hat, piece a quilt, felt a bag or, yes, dye wool with dead bugs.

The workshop I signed up for, "24 Colors From One Dye Pot," was taught by a traveling teacher, Diana Armes Wallace. She showed us how, by dipping yarn in one kind of pre-dye bath (maybe containing alum or tin), then in a bubbling pot of cochineal, and then into a post-dye bath, and varying the order of those dunks, we could achieve 24 different shades, from mauve to blood red to deep purple.

We carefully measured colored powders, pulverized bugs in a coffee grinder and stirred bubbling cauldrons. And, like magic, the yarns took on colors and then changed, again and again. We each came home 24 tiny skeins of yarn, each labeled with a code for the precise recipe we'd used to make it. The whole thing felt like witchcraft. And it was awesome.