

“God, I love it!
It’s a cashmere-acle!”

Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie
Bradshaw on *Sex and the City*

Wool Gathering

Quality cashmere at every price point,
plus what to look for in the fabric.

THEY SAY THE GRASS is always greener on the other side of the fence. Of course, when you get the chance to move on to those richer pastures, you often discover that what once seemed unattainably wonderful isn’t so great after all. That’s the way it goes with many of life’s pleasures and pursuits.

So now that cashmere, once a wildly expensive luxury, has gone mass-market in both selection and price, you’re apt to be a little skeptical. How do those affordable knits stack up against their costlier counterparts? To find out, *Real Simple* sent a few good finds to a textile lab. On the following pages are eight 100 percent cashmere picks, ranging in price from \$40 to \$440, in varying plies, hues, and degrees of plushness. Perhaps this will be one time when something you glimpsed from afar is every bit as heavenly as you had hoped.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY **KANA OKADA**

The True Cost of Cashmere

Lately, affordable cashmere has been popping up all over—widely enough, in fact, to make anyone raise a quizzical eyebrow. *Real Simple* scoured the market for cashmere picks at various prices, then sent them out for professional analysis. (Evidently, some retailers illegally try to pass off blends containing sheep's wool or other adulterants as pure cashmere.) The result? All of the following sweaters turned out to be the real deal, which

raises another question: Why the variation in price?

"Let me just say this: Even though we eat all parts of the cow, there's only one fillet," says Ingrid Johnson, a professor of textile development and marketing at the Fashion Institute of Technology, in New York City. "It's like buying a burger at the Four Seasons as opposed to McDonald's. They're both burgers, but of different quality. Same with cashmere." Generally speaking, high-

Cashmere: A Buyer's Guide

What you should know about your fiber intake.

Check the labels.

The Federal Trade Commission mandates that cashmere products be accurately labeled. If a sweater is a blend, its manufacturer is required to put the percentage of cashmere and of other fibers on the label. If you don't see a tag indicating the fiber content, walk away.

Touch and feel.

Does the sweater feel slippery? "This can often be an indication of overprocessing, which may mean the garment will quickly lose shape," says Kathleen Raub of the Scottish Cashmere Club, a manufacturing association that monitors the authenticity of and strict standards for cashmere production. Also, "lightly rub the surface of a garment with the palm of your hand and see if fibers begin to roll up or shed," says Karl Spilhaus of the Cashmere and Camel Hair Manufacturers Institute. "This is an indication that there might be excess short-fiber content, which leads to pills."

(continued on following page)

Under \$100

ISAAC MIZRAHI FOR TARGET, \$40

While this sweater may pill slightly more than other designer picks, it's still pure cashmere—so it's a certifiable steal.

Available in five other colors.

TO BUY: www.target.com.

UNIQLO, \$69.50

This soft yellow turtleneck is slightly thinner than its more expensive counterparts, which makes it a good layering piece.

Available in 19 other colors.

TO BUY: 732-494-6255.



MIZRAHI



UNIQLO

\$100 to \$200

LANDS' END, \$129

The ultimate weekend sweater, this cozy V neck has flattering ribbing and a tight knit. Wear it with your favorite jeans to run errands or with sweats when you curl up with a good page-turner.

Available in 11 other colors.

TO BUY: www.landsend.com.

J.CREW, \$138

Distinctly feminine thanks to its slim fit, this Henley sweater will take you from the workweek to the weekend. Available in 14 other colors.

TO BUY: www.jcrew.com.



LANDS' END



J.CREW

The True Cost of Cashmere (continued)

end retailers will carefully measure the fibers and use only those of a certain diameter and length, explains Johnson. Mass retailers tend to use coarser, shorter cashmere fibers, which aren't as desirable and may be prone to pilling. Naturally, a higher price doesn't always mean higher quality, says Karl Spilhaus, president of the Cashmere and Camel Hair Manufacturers Institute. Some mass-market retailers that produce large quanti-

ties of cashmere get a bit of a break in production cost and can thus make their knits more affordable for the consumer. And some designer labels slap their names on mediocre cashmere, then charge an arm and a leg for it. The bottom line? Be an informed consumer, says Spilhaus: "A little common sense will help you discern the real value." (To learn what to look for, see Cashmere: A Buyer's Guide, previous page and at right.)

Cashmere: A Buyer's Guide

(continued)

Buy from a label you trust. "Go to reputable retailers," says Pat Slaven, a research engineer for *Consumer Reports* who tested cashmere offerings from various retail stores. "The big retailers have labs to test samples of sweaters from their lot for authenticity and quality. If it's one store selling one kind of cashmere at a very low price, you should be wary."

Look for a tight knit. "The looser the cashmere is woven or knit, the more concerned you need to be about pilling," says Chris Lupton, a professor of animal science at Texas A&M University, in College Station.

Know that intensely colored cashmere often signals higher quality. "When you see an intense vibrancy in color, that means that the yarn probably started off very clean in its raw [whitest] state and that the dyeing process was top quality," says Jenna Lyons, senior vice president of women's design at J.Crew, in New York City. Fibers that start off dark and are bleached, then dyed, are of a lower quality and duller in color.

Go with at least a two-ply yarn. This means that multiple pieces of yarn were twisted together to make the garment, resulting in a stronger sweater that is less likely to develop a hole. The more pieces of yarn, the higher the ply.

\$200 to \$300

ISLE OF SKYE, \$285

Knit in Scotland, this traditional cable-knit pullover is a timeless transition piece. Plus, it's a bit more substantial than the other sweaters shown, thanks to a thick knit. Available in 11 other colors.

TO BUY: www.isleofskycashmere.com.

MAI, \$295

This long-sleeve T-shirt is a good option in areas where the weather gets more chilly than frigid. Pair it with a light corduroy or denim jacket on a temperate day, or use it as a layer if your winters tend to get brutal. Available in 10 other colors.

TO BUY: www.mai-nyc.com.



Over \$300

TSE, \$395

Offering warmth without all the bulk, this structured peacock blue cardigan is a perfect pick for the workplace. Wear it over a shell or a button-down shirt for a professional, polished look. Available in eight other colors.

TO BUY: 800-487-3692 for store locations.

WHITE + WARREN, \$440

This incredibly soft, chunky knit cardigan is the perfect call on a crisp fall day. Leather buttons add a luxurious detail. Available in four other colors.

TO BUY: www.whiteandwarren.com.

