

by Clara Parkes

This issue's swatching journey begins with Gudrun Johnston's sweet little cropped jacket with mid-length sleeves and a busy ribbed stitch pattern. I chose it because it is both breezy and substantial, providing an ideal framework for showing what happens when you make the simplest of yarn substitutions. I saw three particularly intriguing scenarios here: a glamorous flickering single; a pebbly but languid two-ply; and a crunchy, worsted-spun two-ply that begs for the great outdoors.

The initial project was designed for Valley Yarns Northfield, a smooth, well-rounded yarn that blends 70% Merino, 20% baby alpaca, and 10% silk. The fibers are spun into super-fine strands that are plied together in tiny two-ply strands that are then further plied together, always in the same direction, with other two-ply strands. This ply-upon-ply construction, with all the twist moving in the same way, gives an extremely bouncy, strong yarn with concise stitch definition. It's a lovely choice for this sweater, delivering a rather clean, tailored look with medium body and a bit of drape.

Gauge was an issue here, though. Northfield normally knits up in stockinette at 5.5 stitches per inch on US 6 (4mm) needles. Gudrun used smaller needles (US 5 [3.75mm]) to achieve a denser 6.5 stitches-per-inch gauge in the pattern's Tunisian rib stitch. When I was looking for suitable substitutes, I used the yarn's stockinette gauge and needle size as my starting point.

While Northfield does a great job of providing this bouncy yet smooth and clean look, I wanted to punch up the glam a little with a yarn that gave greater sheen, a touch more drape, and a very smooth stitch surface. I chose Malabrigo Silky Merino, a nearly 50/50 blend of Merino wool and silk that's spun in a smooth, worsted fashion into one single strand, or ply. In stockinette, it knits up at 5.5 to 6 stitches per inch on US 4-6 needles, which crosses over to our target gauge range nicely.



Silky Merino has two things going for it: the fibers, which are extraordinarily soft but with that telltale glow from the silk; and the colors, whose flickering changes in saturation are the result of a kettle-dye process. Together, the fibers and colors shine brightly in a knitted fabric that is not marred by any visible ply structure. The result is almost like a slightly textured kimono.



The only challenge was in the actual knitting. In basic knitting and purling operations, this loosely spun single does beautifully. But it required a little more concentration when knitting two stitches together through the back loops, which is an integral part of the Tunisian rib pattern. It's not a deal-breaker, just something to know going into the project.

Next, I introduced a heavier yarn that still had plenty of shimmer and drape, only this time with a ply structure to give the jacket some shadows and texture. I chose Plymouth Yarn's Baby Alpaca Worsted, a wonderfully slinky and soft worsted-weight 100% baby alpaca yarn that normally wants to be knit at 5 stitches per inch on US 8 needles.



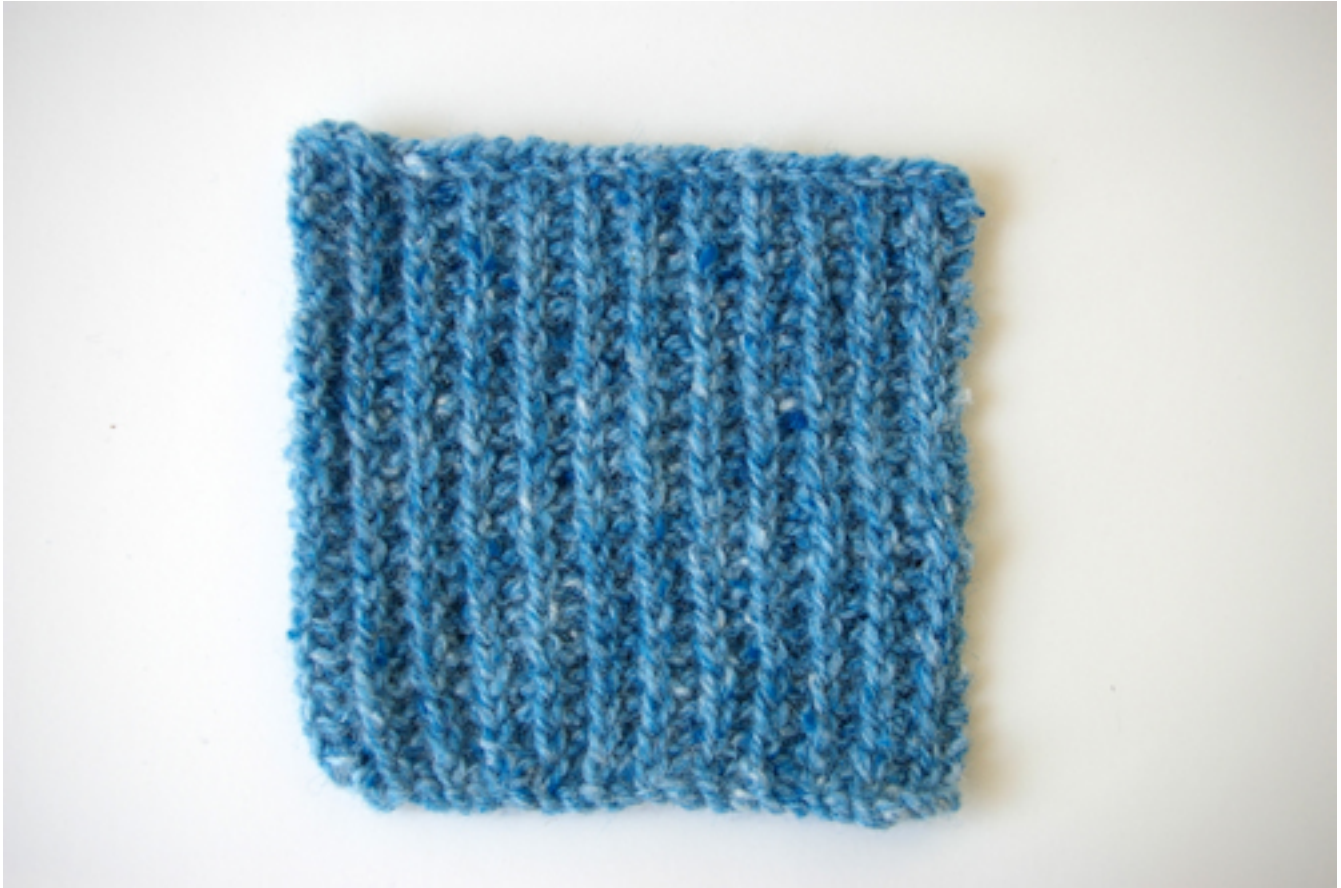
It put up no complaints on size US 5 needles, however, producing a flowing swatch with a much more pebbly, shadowed look than the Malabrigo. As an added bonus, the greater dimension of two plies instead of one provides a little more “oomph” to the fabric—especially when you squeeze it.



Despite their visual differences, the smooth Malabrigo and pebbly Plymouth deliver equally elegant styling to the jacket. But what happens if we bring some barnyard into the picture? I mean a nice crunchy woolen-spun yarn, and Rowan Scottish Tweed DK is one of my favorites. It contains a robust, heathered wool with lots of air, bounce, and a somewhat crisp, crunchy finish.



Here the previously silky styling gives way completely to a much thicker, airier jacket with almost no drape at all. In fact, it looks a lot like it had been lightly fulled in a washing machine. The woolen-spun halo conceals a lot more of the Tunisian rib pattern, allowing only a hint of the stitch texture to show through the moss-like fuzz.



The results are so strikingly different that if you were to knit this sweater in Northfield and Scottish Tweed, and wear them on successive days, I'd bet most people wouldn't even know they were knit from the same pattern. Which is just another reason why yarn is such an endlessly fascinating and entertaining companion to our creative endeavors.