

Milk Does a Body Good ... Even When Worn

MELISSA EDDY, Associated Press



HANNOVER, Germany (AP) —

Wear milk? Anke Domaske says why not.

The 28-year-old German is the designer of an award-winning new textile made entirely from milk that's environmentally friendly as well as soothing to people with skin allergies. Called "Qmilch," it drapes and folds like silk, but can be washed and dried like cotton.

The biochemist and fashion designer has so far only used the fabric to make dresses for her own MCC fashion line. But next year Domaske has plans to begin mass producing — and several companies have already expressed interest in using the fabric.

Qmilch — a combination of quality and the German word for milk — won the innovation award of Germany's Textile Research Association, which recognized it as a new, sustainable fiber that could revolutionize the clothing industry.

Currently, apparel depends heavily on byproducts from oil, or natural resources such as water — used in the thousands of liters (gallons) to produce just a bolt of cotton.

"We know that everything that is based on oil has a limit, that materials like cotton that take up a lot of land, water and chemicals are limited, so we need to think about how we in produce fabrics and textiles in the future," said Klaus Jansen, who

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heads the Textile Research Association.

"She has showed us how this can work."

Tatjana Berthold, a seamstress for Domaske's MCC fashion line has been cutting and sewing the fabric into dresses for the past year.

"At first I did not believe that it was made from milk, but when you work with it, you notice that it feels different from normal fabrics," said Berthold. She cast Domaske a sly sideways glance, then confessed to have privately made a pair of pajamas from a scrap she had been given.

"When you look it, you can't see such a big difference, but when you wear it, you feel the difference," Berthold said.

Domaske laughed, confessing that she, too, had sewn herself sleepwear from a sample of jersey fabric spun over the past year.

The quest for a natural, non-irritating fabric began after watching her stepfather suffer through terrible skin irritations while being treated for cancer. "There are so many people who really suffer just by wearing normal clothing. I wanted to find a way to help them."

She focused her research on milk protein, or casein. Although textiles made with milk fibers have been around since the 1930s, she said most of them relied heavily on acrylics.

"I thought it must be possible to make a fabric that is completely organic," said Domaske.

After two years of trial and error, working with a research lab, Domaske and her team of six finally landed on a process of reducing milk to a protein powder that is then boiled and pressed into strands that can be woven into a fabric.

The strands, she says, can be spun rougher for a heavier texture, or shiny smooth, to create a soft jersey that drapes and feels like silk.

She uses only organic milk that cannot be consumed because it has failed Germany's strict quality standards.

Domaske concedes that at euro20 (\$28) per kilogram (1/2 pound), her fabric costs more to produce than even organic cotton, which goes for about 40 percent less. But she hopes local production will keep down transport costs and reduce the overall price.

She also notes that only 2 liters (a half gallon) of water is needed to produce 1 kilogram (2 pounds) of fabric, or enough to make several standard dresses. By comparison, the same amount of cotton requires more than 10,000 liters of water.

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Lynda Grose, a consultant and associate professor at the California College of the Arts in Oakland, California, who specializes in ecologically responsible design, notes that the fashion industry is dependent on the idea of disposal, of people always wanting new designs.

"There is a tremendous amount of waste in the fashion world," Grose said in a telephone interview. She noted that by rethinking how such waste can be used will help make the fashion and textile industry more ecologically friendly.

German industry has been impressed by Domaske's innovation.

The designer, who works from a loft beside the railway in the central German city of Hannover, has already received queries from automobile makers that see a potential for seat covers, and members of the medical and hospitality industries interested in a hypoallergenic material for hospitals and hotel beds.

"The German textile industry can only survive against the competition if it comes up with innovative, new products," Jansen said. "Ms. Domaske has done this in taking a raw material and processing it to create a new thread that can be sold to other companies to create other products. That is very unique."

On the Web: www.qmilk.eu [1]

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