



An HJS Studio Tutorial:

Spinning Silk Caps



I am proud to welcome Carol Weymar, a self-taught spinner and dyer of silk caps. I was much struck by the beauty of her work when I saw her website, so I asked her to write an article, as silk is something I have no skill spinning. I hope you'll be as inspired by her explanation as I was!

About Silk Caps

Silk caps are made from cultivated cocoons that have been degummed and stretched over a frame shaped like a bell. They consist of a number of extremely thin layers; each layer is one cocoon. A cap "bell" is roughly two dozen caps, weighing about a pound altogether, which are fastened together at their tops and covered by one large cap whose edges are drawn out and tied together at the bottom to make a neat bundle.

Cap silk is one of the most underrated types of silk available to the handspinner. It has its quirks, certainly, but mastering this form of silk is well worth your effort. It displays the beautiful luster of all its sister silks, but has the advantage of being a nearly continuous fiber. This means you can spin it to a very fine thread and it will be strong. It makes an excellent warp. It is very versatile; you can spin it into beautiful yarns, you can draw it into fine roving and knit or embroider with it in its unspun form, and you can blend it with other fibers to add bright color and gleaming highlights.

Getting Started

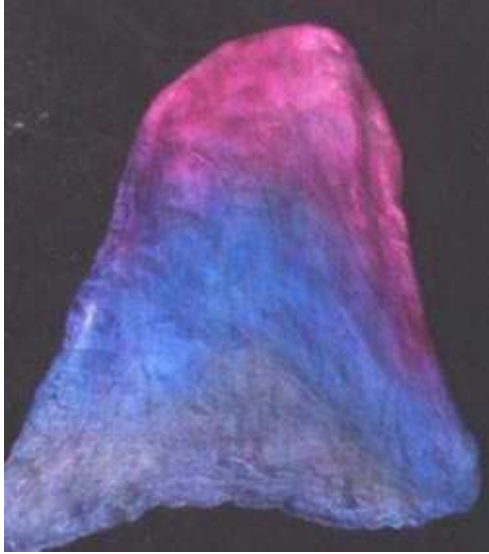
It is important to have a "take charge" attitude when approaching caps. You will not treat cap silk as delicately as you would a combed top. In fact, you may find that in some ways working and spinning the cap is hard on your hands. The very thin rovings that you will sometimes want to achieve can dig into your fingers as you stretch them out. Also, the silk fibers are extremely fine and they will catch on rough places on your hands or nails. If you have this problem, apply handcream before you begin working with the cap. (Editor's note: I've heard of using olive oil and sugar, and when I finally tried it I was surprised how well it worked. Pour a little white sugar on your palm, followed with a dab of olive oil. Rub over your hands very thoroughly. Rinse off, using soap to cut some of the olive oil if necessary—leave a little behind to soften your hands.)



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Lay the cap flat on a table with the narrower 'dome' at the top, the open 'skirt' edges at the bottom, and smooth it out if it has been folded or wrinkled. You will notice that the edge is not one piece, but is made up of many layers. These edges are thicker than the rest of the silk and it is these "hems" that you will grasp and peel back to separate the cap layer by layer.

Take up the cap and inspect the inside of the edge until you can see where to separate the front and back of the cap, opening it into a bell. With some caps the bottom opens easily, with others you will have to pull gently until the layers come apart and reveal the center opening. Put your fists inside the bell and begin to stretch it outwards, expanding it like taffy. Then hold the cap at top and bottom and

stretch it lengthwise gently all across its width. This will loosen the layers a little.

Separating Individual Caps

Silk caps can be spun by draping them over a distaff or swift and spinning directly from the cap. The more common way is to remove the layers one at a time and extend them into roving.

Separate a layer from the cap by peeling it apart at the edge. To do this, pick at the edge until you release one thickness. Peel it back all the way around from the edge toward the 'dome' –then twist off the tiny filaments still attached and you have your separate, thin layer. Finding where the layers come apart at the edge is not always easy. The first layer may be a little stubborn and you might not get just one layer - sometimes you will get two that don't want to come apart. Sometimes it is possible to separate these two layers even after they have been removed from the cap. Do your best to get only one layer to work with.



You will find that trying to work with more than one layer at a time can require some real muscle to elongate the fiber into a circle of roving. If this happens, and you have a thick section that does not want to draft, pinch a small amount of fiber from the edge of the thick portion and pull it down and away slightly, forming a "D" shape. Then go back to drafting and the loop will close as the thick section drafts.

You may find yourself peeling back a bit of fiber that seems more like a wisp or cobweb rather than a full layer. Don't worry or give up on it. As flimsy as it may seem, follow the instructions for stretching and you will still get a couple of yards of roving.



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Making Roving

Now that you have removed one layer of silk from the cap (it looks like a very thin miniature of the whole cap) (photo 1), poke a hole in the center of the layer at the dome. Hook your thumbs into the hole and begin stretching the fibers into a large round band (photo 2).

Photo 1

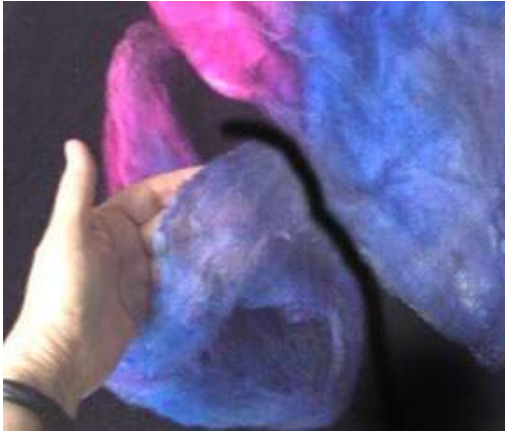


Photo 2



Keep extending the circle carefully, dropping it off your thumbs and pulling the circle thinner and thinner with your hands about eight inches apart. Experience will teach you how thin you want the roving to be for the kind of work that you have in mind for it.

When you are happy with the diameter of the fiber, break the circle at a thin point and you have a strip of roving. A layer of cap can be drafted out to a 1/4" diameter roving of several yards in length. Because of the thickness of the cap edges, which do not usually 'draft out', your yarn will have some texture to it. If there is a particularly thick spot, you can sometimes pull it off with your fingernails.



If you are going to spin right away, lower the roving in loose circles into a big bowl to place at your feet as you spin. If you will be spinning later, or are preparing more than one roving, wind the roving around the core of a paper towel roll or toilet paper roll. Be sure to roll it up



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jelly-roll fashion, by holding both ends of the roll and turning them both at the same time. Using one hand to hold the roll and the other to wind on the roving will add twist to the roving and you will be surprised at how little twist is required to hamper your drafting as you spin.

Spinning

You may find the actual spinning to be a struggle at first. It will help if you begin by drafting the roving as thinly as possible before you begin to spin. You can adjust the diameter of later rovings as you gain experience with drafting and with the thickness of the yarn you prefer to spin.

Since wheels differ so widely in the way they spin various fibers, you should plan to spend a little time at the outset to adjust your wheel for spinning cap silk. I can speak only for my Louet S10, which requires the highest speed and the brake band flipped off to release all tension.

Short draw or point-of-contact will work best with this fiber. Remember that the fiber length here is very long and you will find that your drafting triangle will be as much as a foot in length at times. Expect to involve both hands in the drafting, at least in the beginning, because often cap silk fibers will not slip apart as easily as other rovings or tops. There will be times when the drafting goes easily and others when you will have to use some strength to pull the fibers out.



Silk caps are often dyed in multiple colors and when they are stretched out into roving, the colors merge in very interesting combinations. When spinning, you will be entertained by the color changes that follow each other onto your bobbin.

Blending Silk with Other Fibers

Silk adds drama and beauty to every fiber it encounters. Blend your cap silk into wool, mohair or other fibers for color and luster. The advantage of blending cap silk into other fibers is that, unlike combed tops which blend smoothly into the preparation, cap silk will retain a good deal of its form throughout the process, giving short bursts of color and shine to the finished yarn.

Although fiber purists scream when I suggest cutting anything, my method of using the rovings is to draft them out to about 3/8" diameter and snip them into 2" or 3" pieces. The pieces will slide apart as they are carded and will not show hard, square cut ends. Using longer pieces only results in bands of silk wound tightly around the carder drum and dug into the fiber.



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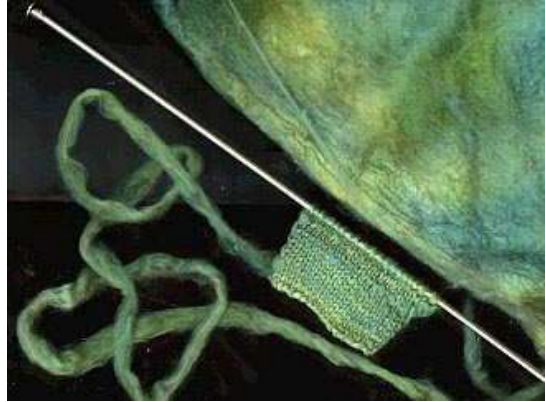
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Be sure your wool or other fiber has been thoroughly prepared before adding the silk. The silk will only tolerate one pass through the carder to look its best. A second pass will cause some nepping of the silk which may or may not spin out.

Using Unspun Silk Roving

The unspun rovings can also be knitted as yarn. For this, it is important that you pull out the roving as evenly as possible since thick and thin places will show up sharply in knitting. It is best to use these rovings only in small accent areas or with knitting done in very lightweight companion yarn.

My preference is to use the silk roving to embroider patterns in duplicate stitch over finished knitting. This way you don't change your gauge and the silk works nicely across the surface of the knitting, giving almost a third dimension. When the caps are dyed in several colors, the roving has subtle color changes that add even more interest to the stitches. Thread the drafted roving through a tapestry needle and the silk stitches will cover up to worsted weight stitches, and sometimes bulky, depending on how thinly you've drafted the silk.



Silk caps are fun--your imagination will come up with many more ways to use them. Enjoy!

A native New Yorker, Carol now lives with her husband, a former art director and illustrator, in semi-exhaustion on their 40-acre farm in northeast Pennsylvania, where they work on antique cars and are tyrannized by a flock of thoroughly spoiled registered Romneys. Carol began spinning as soon as they moved to the farm because she couldn't find a good yarn store; the sheep followed a few months later. The love of silk was a natural outgrowth of her tendency to blend together every kind of fiber she can find. Once Carol began working with silk, she was addicted.

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