

Rob interviewing Emilie Renard of La Petite Filature Bretonne

Rob: ...and the sound that you hear in the background there are the machines that belong to Emilie Renard, who is the person in charge of “La Petite Filature Bretonne”. Hello Emilie, [*Bonjour*] first of all can you tell me a little bit about La Petite Filature Bretonne. What is it?

Emilie: The Petite Filature Breton is a mini wool mill, which means that we spin small quantities of wool. People bring their fleeces, just shorn, and we will wash them and carry out all the processes to make wool.

Rob: This service that you offer to people who have sheep, in this local area, or in Brittany in general?

Emilie: The idea at the start was to work solely within Brittany, especially locally, but we came to realise that this service was of interest right across France. We have fleeces that come from the whole of France.

Rob: You’ve kept this very small-scale; why is that?

Emilie: It came from the fact that Brittany is not a region where sheep are found in large numbers. We have few large flocks. On the other hand, there are a lot of people, private individuals mostly, who have a few sheep. We realised that these people couldn’t benefit from their animals, and from that conclusion, we decided to set up this small business. We knew that there are a few woollen mills that can process large quantities, but almost nothing for the small producers. We are only the third small mill in France.

Rob: Is it because you have a particular experience with wool, with sheep, with .?

Emilie: Actually, it comes from the fact that I am a spinner, using a spinning wheel. And when people found out that I could spin, they brought me their fleeces, and I took them, more

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and more of them... And I discovered lots of lovely things. But I also found out that I couldn't keep up with the demand. I put fleeces in the garage, in the garden shed, in the house, but it was too small. There was more and more coming in. We decided then that something would have to be done in order to process faster and to do more spinning. And, as I was ready to change my job and re-train, it all came at the right time.

Rob: You've converted a little house, here in Plouguernevel; wonderfully restored with lots of eco-material inside, to make your little workshop. Your workshop is full of machines; what kind of machines are there in there?

Emilie: Each machine is different and has a specific job to do, in the different stages of the process. The first machine turns the rough wool over and gets rid of the dirt and plant debris. Then the washing machine cleans off the grease in the wool. Then there's a machine which opens up the wool and makes it lighter, ready for the carding. After the carding, which is like brushing the wool, the next machine stretches the wool, making it twice as long. Then there's the spinning machine, then one which combines the yarns and makes up bobbins, then a machine to make large cones of woollen yarn from the bobbins, then the steamer, then the maker of skeins.

Rob: That's a lot of procedures; these machines are difficult to find in France.

Emilie: These machines don't exist in France. We managed to find these machines in Belfast, in Canada, on Prince Edward Island, and they are special - and far away, too! But they are the only manufacturers of this type and size of machine in the world.

Rob: So you've had to import the machines from Canada. [*Oui*] Now this must have cost a lot of money. I'm very interested in the financial side of your company here. How have you managed to finance it?



Emilie: We had to do a lot of work to raise the necessary finances. Half the amount was a bank loan; we also managed to get a grant from the CCKB, the community of communes, but also from the ADEME, the Environment Agency. And we had another amount raised through a crowd-funding campaign, using the Kengo platform. That was important for us because it's a Breton platform for Breton projects. And we were totally overwhelmed by the success of this campaign; we collected 220% of the original target! Actually, our project was appealing, firstly because it's local, and because it's a project that values a product which is precious, even if the powers that be don't appear to think so. It's something which we have around us here, but which isn't given any value. All these things clearly pleased our contributors, and the people who supported our campaign most obviously were the knitters. There are more and more people taking up knitting, and they are on the lookout for *real* wool.

Rob: So, people who are interested in getting quality wool, can they come and buy the wool from you?

Emilie: Actually, now that our project has become a reality, about 90% of our business is offering a spinning service. People bring their fleeces, and we transform it; they come and collect the yarn when the work is done. And about 10% of our work is producing our own range of wools, which we sell here in our shop. We can't sell any more than that as the quantities are so small. So we sell here, and also at the Marché de la Laine, which takes place at Bulat every year.

Rob: Well, La Petite Filature Bretonne is in operation, a good success. Do you think it's a good idea, this crowd-funding?

Emilie: Oh, yes, it was very important, because we needed to show the bank, and the accountant, that ours was a viable idea. So the crowdfunding campaign was really successful from that point of view. It allowed us to become known even before we began trading. We had pre-orders, so many that, now, there's a lot of work and a waiting time of between 6 to 8 months for those people who bring us their fleeces.

Rob: That's a great success story!

Emilie: It's a beautiful story, a really beautiful story!
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Rob: Well, Emilie Renard, of La Petite Filature Bretonne, thank you very much for talking to us today.

Emilie: *De rien, merci beaucoup.*