By Clara Parkes

Jackets offer a compelling yarn challenge. They usually combine bulk and tailoring in a far more structured way than, say, your average hat, scarf or even pullover. Hilary Smith Callis's Blue Daisy jacket is even more of a challenge because it blends a dense and firm daisy stitch in the front panels with a much more open, almost lace-like, little knot stitch over the rest of the jacket. Choose too heavy a yarn and those front panels will sag and pull the fabric in from the sides. Opt for too light of a yarn instead, and the panels will lack any structure at all.

The original garment was knit using Briar Rose Celebration, a smooth and lustrous traditional plied yarn that blends 60% Merino and 40% bamboo. The bamboo gives drape and sheen for the open little knot portion while the Merino gives plumpness to the daisy-stitch front panel. An overall smooth twist and low halo give stitches crisp definition throughout, while a gently flickering hand-dyed colorway adds nuance.

Since the Briar Rose yarn did such a good job of showing the jacket's smooth, lustrous potential, I decided to play with yarns that added more nuanced surface texture—a little less clarity, more halo.

I began my swatching with Berroco's Blackstone Tweed, a two-ply blend of 65% wool, 25% super kid mohair, and 10% angora. The yarn has a heathered coloring that's enhanced with periodic tweedy flecks. Knit up, the yarn gave both stitch patterns a much more woolen, old-fashioned look. I expected more of a halo from the angora, but the lustrous mohair still popped from the fabric, especially after the swatch had been washed and gently roughed up a bit.

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Next, I moved back to a yarn that appears smooth at first, but whose fibers tend to bloom after being washed and worn. Called Fez, this relatively new Debbie Bliss yarn blends 85% extra fine Merino and 15% camel down. It's spun in Italy and composed of three distinct plies. After the first wash, the 15% camel down started doing its thing, releasing a most delicate and alluring hint of cashmere-like halo that toned down the ply shadows and smoothed out the overall fabric.

In terms of color, Fez comes in fully saturated solids. While I missed the flickering tones of the hand-dyed Briar Rose Celebration and the heathered nuance of Berroco's Blackstone Tweed, I appreciated how the steady coloring let the stitches take center stage.

I decided to finish by testing the power of twist and ply. I picked another Italian-spun blend with the exact same fiber percentages as Fez—85% extra fine Merino and 15% camel down (only labeled "baby camel"). The difference? This yarn, Classic Elite Kumara, is composed of three two-ply strands that have been plied together, with all ply twist going in the same direction. Technically it's called an S-on-S cable, or crepe yarn.

S-on-S cable yarns tend to have a very perpendicular twist and ply angle, resulting in an extremely round and springy yarn that renders stitches in high relief. But Kumara has been given less twist and a more relaxed ply angle. Between the relaxed twist and the bloom of the camel down, the stitches appeared only slightly more high relief than in the other swatches.

Under the covers, much more was going on in this swatch. Camel down has a notoriously short, fine staple that can be hard to capture in twist. While Merino may add strength and body to blends, the extra fine grade (used in both Fez and Kumara) is innately more vulnerable to abrasion. The added twist of the S-on-S cable construction, and the greater depth and dimension that so many layers of twist added to the overall structure of the fabric, made Kumara a lovely contender. But don't take it from me, pull out a few skeins of your own and swatch for yourself.

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