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BRITISH EDITION

THE 24TH ANNUAL GQ AWARDS SPECIAL

DESIGNER

BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

For the high-fashion virtuoso, a brand is much more than the bottom line. From his chic new collection to his Umbrian commune, the Italian maestro sets the standard for a more humanistic post-pandemic style

Story by Teo van den Broeke

Photographs by Gavin Bond



Suit, £4,050. Shirt, £590. Bow tie, £190. Shoes, £860. Pocket square, £100. All by Brunello Cucinelli. brunellocucinelli.com

A black and white photograph of a man in a dark tuxedo with a bow tie, walking towards the camera on a gravel path. He has his hands in his pockets and is smiling. To his left is the front of a classic convertible car. The background is a blurred landscape with trees.

THE GQ AWARDS 2021

'There is a Cucinelli style. It's not just in clothing, but a way of life, a way of behaving'

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'My staff need to breathe and absorb the Brunello Cucinelli look on a daily basis'

"In this company, if you offend someone you are fired on the spot," Brunello Cucinelli tells me in his expressive yet sotto voce Italian.

The king of cashmere's register is, if not quite as soft as his finest product, then at least as airy as some of the higher-quality wools with which he works and he's speaking to me by way of his perpetually hard-working translator, Chiara. "Regardless of your position, you are forbidden to offend another human being. I saw my father being offended in his work and I don't want that for anyone."

We are sitting in Cucinelli's expansive office, which is situated in the northwest corner of the main building of his headquarters in the Umbrian hamlet of Solomeo, and the designer is positioned opposite me on a small chair upholstered in chalky wool. His arms and legs are crossed neatly in front of him and his lithe frame belies his 68 years. He's wearing a pristine white button-down poplin shirt (the collar buttons left undone) with a grey cashmere tie (the back portion left dangling intentionally longer than the front) and on his legs he's sporting a pair of pale stonewashed jeans, ankles out. His sparingly lined face is tanned and his hair, which is short and the colour of one of the darker chocolate linen suits in his collection, is swept away from his face in a wispy centre parting. Cucinelli's features – which are deep-set and positioned symmetrically around his nose, a softened version of the muzzle on the mythological winged creature that adorns his company insignia – have a kind yet determined aspect.

In 1985, Cucinelli purchased Solomeo's 14th-century tumbledown castle, which was where his original studios were based, before he moved, in 2000, to the existing facility at the foot of the hamlet that constitutes his current production compound. Arranged in a U-shape, like a series of giant Jenga blocks dotted around a flat, grassy square, bisected by water fountains, the headquarters are sheltered from the hot Italian sun by the shadow of the castle and they're an impressive testament to Cucinelli's success. Indeed, in a year when tailoring sales took a significant hit and the global fashion industry attempted to claw back growth following the decimation wreaked by Covid-19, Cucinelli has come out on top. The designer made not one of his 2,000 global team members redundant during the pandemic and his company boasted an almost 60 per cent increase in revenues in the first half of 2021.

Inside, the pristine white walls of GQ's newly anointed Designer Of The Year's private lair are peppered with pictures of him hobnobbing with all manner of luminaries. There's the famous shot of Cucinelli hanging out with all the world's wealthiest tech billionaires, including Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, LinkedIn cofounder Reid Hoffman and Twitter CFO Ned Segal, whom he invited to Solomeo to eat pasta and talk philosophy in the summer prior to the pandemic (more on that later); there are manifold press cuttings of Cucinelli looking the very embodiment of *sprezzatura* (the uniquely Italian term that, rather excellently, translates into "studied carelessness"); and there are a series of framed pictures of him looking every bit the happy papa with his daughters, both of whom hold senior positions in the company. Carolina is co-president and co-creative director of the brand, while Camilla is the co-head of the women's style office.

Born in 1953, Cucinelli, who at last count boasted a net worth of £1.7 billion, was raised in a poor family in the Umbrian village of Castel Rigone. It was the manner in which his father was treated by his bosses, in the factory where he worked when Cucinelli was a teenager, which he cites as the reason for his particularly >>

Suit, £4,540. Shirt, £180. Tie, £160. All by Brunello Cucinelli. brunellocucinelli.com

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That is the truth'**

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>> tough stance on the culture among his 1,200-strong Solomeo workforce.

"When my family were farmers nobody belittled us. We had nothing but we were never hungry. It was great," he tells me. "When I turned 15 or 16 it was everyone's dream to work in a factory with a proper job. We moved closer to the city and my father would come home with his hands ruined because he was working with cement. But he never complained about the work or the wages; he complained about the constant humiliation and belittling." He pauses. "I did not understand as a teenager why I saw my father with tears in his eyes because of his treatment. And it was then that I decided: 'I don't know what I want to do, but I definitely know that I want to work to foster human dignity.'"

Cucinelli started his eponymous business in 1978, when, after dropping out of engineering school, he realised there was an appetite for the dip-dyed rainbow-coloured cashmere jumpers he'd started producing on the back of a small loan (the equivalent of about €500 today). Over the course of the next four decades, Cucinelli transformed his once cottage enterprise into a thriving multinational company. In addition to fondle-friendly sweaters, which still play a key role in his seasonal collections (alongside books by Marcus Aurelius and Pliny The Younger, the blanched shelves of his office are lined by vases filled with raw cashmere fibres dyed in a riot of bold colours in homage to his beginnings), Cucinelli branched out into the soft-handled tailoring, squishy coats and down-padded gilets, which are today beloved by the world's most tasteful plutocrats, in 2002.

And that's just the menswear. Head into one of Cucinelli's stores (he's recently opened an airy London flagship on New Bond Street) and you'll be met by rails of feather, fur and sequin-clad womenswear. There are also picture frames and cushions and squared-off scraps of ribbon-wrapped cashmere, which are as light as air but have no discernible use, earthenware platters and bespoke suits, enormous candles that look as though they've been hewn from great chunks of flint and, naturally, sweaters as far as the eye can see.

But beyond the waves of sumptuous products, none of which come cheap (you can expect to pay upwards of £2,500 for a suit and at least £4,000 for one of the designer's cashmere coats), there's more to Cucinelli's offering than first meets the fingers. And it starts here, in his factory, where all of his staff, from "the lady who tidies things" (Cucinelli objects to the term "cleaning lady" because it does not imbue its carrier with "dignity") up to the key players in the men's style department (including his son-in-law, by way of Carolina, Alessio Piastrelli) are paid around 20 per cent more than their peers elsewhere on the Italian peninsula; where giant pictures of Renaissance artworks, such as Michelangelo's "Pietà", hang above the bright and airy factory floor (as visual reminders of the importance of "respecting beauty"); and where staff are not allowed to work or be online past 5.30pm because their boss, the beneficent Brunello Cucinelli, believes that to ask them to do so would be to "ruin their souls".

"With any Brunello Cucinelli garment, 52 per cent is made with manual work, true manual work," he tells me intently. "I wanted everything to be made in Italy, using the finest raw materials in the world. I'm not talking about taste – you might not like my taste – but the main thing was that I wanted my products to be top-notch quality," he continues, gesturing at his lightly ripped jeans. "These are made from the finest Japanese denim... High craftsmanship, top quality, personal taste, yes, but I wanted something more. I wanted for everyone in the company to have their fair share of the profit. We are not a preposterously profitable company, but I wanted every step in the supply chain to make more money. I wanted the workers to work in better places and instead of making €1,400 a month, they make €2,000. In turn, their life changes."



The medieval hamlet of Solomeo, in the heart of Italy, is the home of Brunello Cucinelli's headquarters

It is in Cucinelli's Solomeo base where each of the garments that appear in every one of his seasonal collections are designed and the initial samples are created, before the patterns and finalised design plans are sent out to Cucinelli's partner factories across Italy, the majority of which he has worked with for around 20 years. I'm being given a tour of the HQ by a pair of improbably elegant members of Cucinelli's press team prior to my interview with the boss. It really is an extraordinary environment, so much so that when I joke to the greige-clad ladies that it's somewhere I'd actually like to come and work myself, they both give me the sort of kind yet pitiful look that suggests I'm not the first visiting journalist to have expressed the sentiment.

The desks that are inhabited by the less practically focused teams – the finance bods, for instance – are the size of decommissioned limousines and the colour of icebergs, the factory spaces are quiet and light-filled, by way of the expansive floor-to-ceiling windows that line both sides of the building, and the entire place is so clean that even when I rub my finger along one of the higher surfaces in one of the enormous company (unisex) loos, I struggle to find any dust. The lady who tidies up things must feel very motivated to do her job, I joke to Cucinelli, when we sit down a few hours later.

"A few years ago we were about to go to Pitti Uomo, the menswear fair," Cucinelli intones seriously in response. "We always have some kind of fun merchandise to show in the booth. I was in my office and the lady who tidies up things looked at all the footballs in my office and asked, 'Why don't you make a cashmere football?' And in a single day we made it. It was a success. I did not come up with the idea; she did. Every human being has their own nature and power. I would like to be a coordinator of all this human genius. The fact that she dared to say that to me was because she has dignity and respect in her workplace."

Arguably the most marvellous thing about Cucinelli's Umbrian utopia is the enormous staff canteen, which runs perpendicular to his office, behind the company car park and in front of the football stadium Cucinelli built for the local townspeople. Each day, Brunello's team of chefs turn out four-course lunches for each and every member of staff. I'm invited to try the menu for size after my two hours with the maestro and, from the buttery Parma ham that opens the show to the main event of tagliata di manzo (served with the best roasties I've ever eaten), I can safely report that the place is to a UK office canteen what Murano is to Bella Italia.

Although Cucinelli's munificent approach (which he refers to as a practice of "humanistic capitalism") may be part of the reason his brand is such a success, it is by no means the only one – after all, there are plenty of fashion brands who expect their employees to work all hours for pitiful wages and whose profit margins remain in rude health. The truth is that Cucinelli's collections boast an aesthetic consistency unmatched by many of the labels that occupy the same category as his. Each collection follows a similar palette of muted burgundies, greiges, taupes and caramels, his cut is close (trousers are near-universally finished with pleats and double turn-ups) and his jackets are most commonly cut to his trademark one-and-a-half-breasted style: a less restrictive, arguably more youthful take on the double-breasted suits found in the traditional English tailoring houses that inspired Cucinelli's look in the first place.

"I like to be unwavering, but also in keeping with contemporary silhouettes," he tells me, looking up at the bright white ceiling of his office, as if in search of divine inspiration. "When I designed my original tuxedo, the shape had to be the English, classic shape, but what I did to make it different was to change the colour of the tuxedo. I only changed the colour, not the shape." He points at me, *enfaticamente*. "It's a traditional English tuxedo but I added the double turn-up on the trousers. And I wore it with a pair of suede Church's chukka boots. I am always very grateful to the English. With my work I want to combine colours that are slightly different to the traditional colour palette, something more Italian. It's a painstaking job. Everything must be correct."

It's a didactic approach adopted by many of Cucinelli's more successful contemporaries in the "haute fashion meets tailoring" space. Giorgio Armani has his shades of navy, syrupy suits and Far Eastern influences; Ralph Lauren has nailed every facet of the American Dream, >>

>> from arch prep to rodeo chic; and Cucinelli, I suggest, has taken ownership of ultra-expensive sports luxe (albeit with a strong Italian accent). "I think you need to have a set of very basic canons and rules," he concedes. "For instance, I'm passionate about Ralph Lauren. In 2019 I went to meet him personally in New York. I said to him, 'Thank you, maestro, for everything you have taught us in visual merchandising.'" He smiles, showing me a picture of Ralph – not Ralph and Brunello, just Ralph – which is framed in his office. "When I set up this factory, even though we were into sweaters back then, I've always aimed for something that would make the brand recognisable. Ralph Lauren was recognisable in every scenario. I know it's difficult, but to my staff I show images of the look, the Brunello Cucinelli look. They need to breathe and absorb it on a daily basis."

'The shape of my tuxedo had to be English. I want the colours to be different, more Italian'

At precisely the moment I begin to wonder whether Cucinelli's singular approach makes it difficult for the other creatives who work with him to find their voice – not least son-in-law Alessio Piastrilli – Cucinelli cuts in with an answer. "The staff sometimes submit very creative proposals to me and [when] it's not really in keeping with what we are, I'll say, 'It's beautiful, but it's not us.'" He smiles. "What Alessio does is great. He's got all these references: James Dean, Mother Teresa, Ferrari. He's a 39-year-old man and he doesn't know many things, but his references are his dream of the world. In the pictures there's a universal humanism and respect for everyone. He's got an actor on his wall, a thinker, the young Steve Jobs – for whom I made 400 black turtlenecks to order in 1989 or 1990 – the young Michelangelo."

Cucinelli's obsession with the arts is palpable not only in his office, where portraits of Confucius and Leonardo da Vinci lock eyes with busts of Socrates and Marcus Aurelius, but also, perhaps more notably, in the pretty medieval hamlet that looks down on the factory. In 2012, Cucinelli floated his company on the stock exchange, which afforded him the financial freedom to expand on the creation of a Forum Of The Arts in the area, which had fallen into a state of disarray. Cucinelli not only established a successful boutique, but he also opened a tailoring school, an Aurelian library, a gymnasium and an impressive theatre, which he established in 2008.

Cucinelli lives in the settlement, opposite his 100-year-old *babbo* and next door to both his daughters (though Carolina is on the brink of moving to a larger property across the valley). In addition to his Forum Of The Arts, at which the Solomeo School Of Arts And Crafts was established in 2013, Cucinelli, in 2018, unveiled a Palladian-style "Tribute To Human Dignity" (carved from gigantic blocks of travertine) and

a park featuring a plant nursery, an olive oil mill and a winery, the latter of which is situated, conveniently, in the basement of Carolina's new digs.

"Solomeo is the hamlet of cashmere and harmony," says Cucinelli, smiling. "There are all these schools for tailoring, gardening, music, arts and crafts. I wanted to create a place for excellence – the spiritual, moral, civil." He adds: "This is an open-air monastery, open to the world, for your mind, for studying, for your soul, for praying and for work, [with] the highest, utmost respect for the human being, regardless of their religion or gender."

When Cucinelli invited Bezos et al to Solomeo in 2018, he explained to me in a subsequent interview that he "wanted them to open up and show me their hearts. 'No one ever asks us what our sorrows are, what our feelings are,' Bezos said. 'They just keep repeating that I'm this billionaire. I know I am a billionaire, but besides that I also have my soul and relationships.' It was a great experience to have them here. We were all moved and emotional; they had tears in their eyes." Considering Bezos' continued purported tax dodging and his much-criticised recent mission into space, does Cucinelli feel that his message was understood?

"When we toured the company, Jeff said, 'I would like all my employees to work exactly like yours, in these conditions. I know it is not easy.' But in his public statements of the past year he said he wanted to become one of the best places in the world to work. So there is an underlying feeling there." He pauses. "But it is true: there is a huge gap in terms of wealth."

Cucinelli fared extraordinarily well through the Covid crisis. In the most recent report to his shareholders, the designer explained, "This year, 2020, closed 'well', especially considering how things looked in the spring. The turnover of these 12 months, what we have defined as a 'year of transition', saw a 'small' decrease of ten per cent." Revenues dropped from €607.8 million (£519m) in 2019 to €544m (£465m) in 2020. Yet the picture this year has been somewhat rosier. According to a report in the *Business Of Fashion*, "The company said revenues soared by almost 60 per cent at constant exchange rates in the first half of the year to €313.7m [£268m] compared with the same period of 2020."

"February, March and April of 2020 were very painful," Cucinelli tells me. "But on 12 March we made three big decisions. We said: we will not lay anybody off, no redundancies. We will guarantee all our workers their full wages for two years," he says, counting his fingers theatrically. "The second decision was that we would not ask for discounts from anyone. This is not the way we work." He pauses. "Our last decision was to start 'Brunello Cucinelli For Humanity'. We sent out

packages of our unsold luxury goods around the world to our contractors, who we then asked to pass on to the needy. And then 9 November came. The best day of my life – except for the family events, of course – was the day the vaccine came." He adds: "And then 15 days ago we came out with the men's collection, at Pitti Uomo."

The collection the designer is referring to is as much a soft-edged paean to all things ivory – a fresh beginning, perhaps – as it is an archetypal Cucinelli offering. One-and-a-half-breasted jackets rub hems with peg-leg trousers in pearlescent shades, collegiate shawl-collar cardigans are worn over cashmere sweaters and with linen trousers in rich hues of clotted cream, while the designer's trademark chalk-stripe suits come paired with denim shirts and natty sand suede Derbies. "Everyone said it was the best collection in our history." He pauses. "If you combine pain,

focus and dedication you get success. I don't know why, but that's the truth."

One colour you'll never find in a Brunello Cucinelli collection is green. "When my family were farmers my mum bought me a pair of green corduroy trousers. I was eight or nine back then and she bought me them for Christmas," he tells me, leaning forward in his chair, his soft, slightly greying hair falling lightly over his forehead. "I took these green trousers to the field behind my house and I buried them because I hated the colour." He laughs. "When I was a child

I was either wearing white bottoms or a grey jumper. My family were farmers, but I didn't like green. So there's something that's born in you, I suppose."

Given the precise, businesslike way in which Cucinelli approaches both his creativity and craft, I'm intrigued to know what he thinks he might have done with himself for the past four decades had he not become a fashion designer. Cucinelli was the chairman of Italian association football club Castel Rigone Calcio for a short number of years and his passion for the sport is legendary, but it turns out that "footballer" is way off the mark. "I am a born-and-bred rigorous man." A pause. "I wanted to be a monk. Maybe a part-time monk, which is obviously difficult."

Is he proud of his achievements? "I am proud that I have done something serious," he says, looking across at me earnestly. His hands are resting in his lap and his fingers have formed a steeple at the tips. Perhaps he should have become a monk after all. "Hopefully I have not damaged mankind, hopefully I have respected creation and hopefully I have developed a style, because there is a Cucinelli style, if you think about it. And it's not just in clothing, it's in humanistic capitalism." He pauses. "The way of life, a way of behaving. And I feel, I hope, that this will not end for a long time."



Inside Brunello Cucinelli's Solomeo 'compound', which includes a suitably delicious staff canteen and football ground

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