



Attendees, from left: Ruzwana Bashir, Ned Segal, Rob Speyer, Lynn Jurich, Dick Costolo, Paolo Bergamo, Nirav Tolia, Drew Houston, Brunello Cucinelli, Reid Hoffman, Alec Ross, Trevor Traina, Ramin Arani, Lee Fixel. (Not pictured: Jeff Bezos, Sarah Leary.)

Style

## Why Jeff Bezos and a Dozen Tech Titans Made a Pilgrimage to Brunello Cucinelli's Italian Village

Fashion's favorite philosopher-designer has quietly become a Silicon Valley icon.



BY SAMUEL HINE

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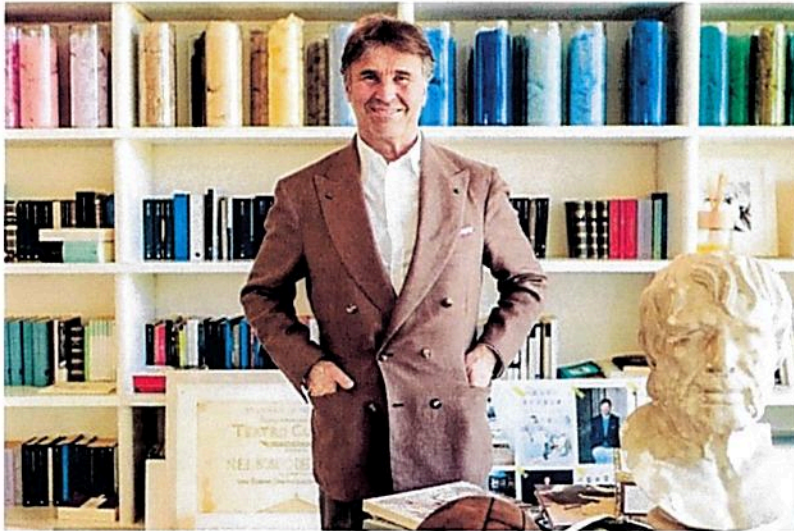






Brunello Cucinelli's Instagram account is a window into his brand's rigorous aesthetic, which can be defined as *molto-sprezzy*: think sun-tanned Italians with distinguished hair wearing gray double-breasted suit jackets and rumpled white trousers. On Wednesday, though, a photo posted there stood out. It shows a group of men and women sitting in a courtyard in the medieval hillside hamlet of Solomeo (pop: 400), which Cucinelli's turned into a home for his family and his brand. To be clear, these were not the well-tailored fashion editors who normally flock to kiss Cucinelli's ring. Instead, they were a delegation from perhaps the most swagless realm in all the land: Silicon Valley. LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman was present, as was Dropbox co-founder and CEO Drew Houston, "unicorn" venture capitalist and Juul investor Lee Fixel, former Twitter CEO Dick Costolo, current Twitter CFO Ned Segal, a handful of tech CEOs and investors, and the U.S. ambassador to Austria. Out of frame: Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world. In Cucinelli's opinion, they're not just tech and business pioneers, but the "new Leonardos of the 21st-century."

Cucinelli himself is a self-made billionaire who sells \$4,000 blazers to people with Valley-grade investment portfolios. (A Twitter wag joked: "Pretty cool that Brunello Cucinelli got together with all of the 15 people who can afford to buy his clothes at MSRP.") But he is not prone to extravagance, and his clothes are as simple and understated as they are soft and expensive. In the fashion world, the Cucinelli blazer is an in-group wink, a sign that you have reached the pinnacle of taste. Silicon Valley, on the other hand, is where you go for clothes if you hate clothes—if you see beautiful cordovan leather shoes as a problem waiting to be solved by Allbirds. So why did a parade of tech billionaires descend upon Brunello Cucinelli's rustic Umbrian commune?



Brunello Cucinelli in Solomeo

Cucinelli, it turns out, has become something of a tech-world icon. "In many ways, Brunello is an entrepreneur right out of Silicon Valley," says Nextdoor's co-founder and former CEO Nirav Tolia, who helped organize what he called the "Solomeo Summit." "There [were] people in the group who do not wear Cucinelli, they don't care about the clothes," Tolia says. "But they can absolutely appreciate Brunello's track record as an entrepreneur."

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Cucinelli has indeed built something that sounds like the stuff of young, altruistic tech CEO's dreams. His origin story is practically Jobsian: he was born into a family of rural farmers, and though bright, young Cucinelli didn't care much for school. At times he thought he would be a writer, at times a monk. Then in his early twenties he had a bold idea: what if he made cashmere sweaters in bright yellows and pinks? He now produces full men's, women's, and home collections almost entirely in Umbria, and brings in over 500 million euros in sales per year. Revenues have doubled since Cucinelli took the company public in 2012, and the goal is to hit a billion euros within ten years. Sounds like a lot of Silicon Valley titan origin stories, right? There's one difference: tech CEOs are obtaining a villain status once reserved for bankers. But everybody *loves* Brunello Cucinelli.

Tolia, who has been a Silicon Valley power player for two decades, is one of those people. After developing a hardcore appreciation for Cucinelli cashmere, he became so fascinated by the brand's backstory that in 2009 he made a pilgrimage to Solomeo to see the magic firsthand. What he found was a town rescued and reborn. Ever since Cucinelli moved his business to Solomeo in the early '80s, he has spent untold millions to save Solomeo's 12th-century church, to build a community theater and tailoring school, and to hire and train the townspeople to create his clothes, single-handedly reversing the decline of the hamlet at a time when Italy's ancient rural regions were being hollowed out. "I thought it was so interesting and so unique that he would try to build community in Solomeo instead of Rome or Milan," Tolia says.

#### The approach to Solomeo

Tolia learned that everything Cucinelli does is grounded in his code of "humanistic enterprise," a benevolent vision of capitalism in which the dignity of the worker is sacrosanct. It may sound like something Jack Dorsey would pick up at a yoga retreat, but Cucinelli has held deeply humanist beliefs since his youth. It's why he put down roots in Solomeo, why he pays his workers a 20% higher wage than average, why he feeds them three-course lunches at subsidized prices, why he provides them with a library full of texts by his favorite philosophers. Why anybody who has spent time in Cucinelli's world knows he is revered by his employees, his peers, and his customers.

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Perhaps not coincidentally, that sounds a lot like the perks a young code jockey would find at Google or Dropbox—except Cucinelli has been doing it since 1978, and speaks on it with the passion of a saint. (Or just a philosopher: he's also famous for peppering conversations with declarations by Hadrian and Kant.) “How many tech companies,” Tolia notes, “have even had a 40-year run?” In Solomeo, Cucinelli has not just constructed a moral framework for dignity under capitalism, but he has implemented it in a way that benefits his workers, his community, and his product at a public company that does hundreds of millions in sales a year.

As Silicon Valley began coming under siege for... not doing any of those things, Cucinelli's message found a receptive audience. Speaking via translator from his castle office in Solomeo, Cucinelli tells me that in 2015 he met Marc Benioff, the billionaire founder and CEO of Salesforce, in San Francisco. The famously philanthropic Benioff was taken by Cucinelli's humanistic way of work, while Cucinelli was impressed by the fact that Benioff and his friends were quite literally the agents changing the world as we know it. At the time, Cucinelli issued them a challenge: “I said, which one of you will be the first to really be a humanist in tech?”

The Solomeo Summit underway

Cucinelli and Benioff became fast friends. When an earthquake destroyed much of Norcia, a neighboring town to Solomeo and the birthplace of St. Benedict, one of Cucinelli's spiritual idols, Marc was the first person to make a financial donation to restore the town. Cucinelli was soon a regular speaker at Benioff's annual Dreamforce conference in San Francisco. Which is where, last year, Cucinelli was introduced to Jeff Bezos. (Bezos wasn't coming in totally cold: While not exactly a “style icon,” Bezos has, in recent years, began wearing Cucinelli's unstructured suit jackets.)

Cucinelli then flew to Seattle where, he says, Bezos welcomed him with a traditional Italian meal. “We spoke for two hours without him ever looking at his phone, without him making a call in the middle of it, just him fully present,” Cucinelli says. (Bezos didn't respond to a request for comment.) As it often does with Cucinelli, the discussion quickly turned philosophical, and Cucinelli offered another challenge: “I said ‘Jeff, you're the richest man in the world, and in 500 years when my soul passes by Seattle and comes to see what happened here, what am I going to find? What have you left for the future as this important presence? What did you leave behind?’ He said, ‘I'm working on a project that I hope will last 10,000 years. I'd like to go back to space.’” Cucinelli replied that people will live on planet earth for many centuries to come. “We spoke about Pericles and the Parthenon and I said I would like to come back and see something built 500 years before by Jeff Bezos.”

To continue their conversations, Cucinelli extended an invitation for Bezos, Benioff, and a group organized by Tolia to visit Solomeo in late May for a “symposium on the soul and economy.” (Benioff, who couldn't make it, addressed the group via open letter.) “I was hoping they could isolate themselves for two or three days,” Cucinelli says. “To be able to speak about being in harmony with nature. To talk about how we need to look up at the stars more. What can we do for future generations ahead of us. What can we donate to humanity whenever we make a profit. What can we leave behind.” Topics that, Cucinelli says, “you need to be away from everyday life in order to be able to really focus on and discuss.” Fashion was not on the agenda. “I don't think Brunello and I have ever had a conversation about fashion,” Tolia confirms.

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A Brunello Cucinelli employee in Solomeo

To kick off the weekend, the group met in the Solomeo theater, where everyone went on stage and told their personal backstories, an event Cucinelli characterized as “emotional.” “Brunello's role was much more an inspirer-r than he was a moderator,” says Tolia. “The stated goal [of the weekend] was to engage each other in conversation about how we can make the world better.” One could



of discussions every day. There were no Powerpoints.” Just languorous Italian meals and nature walks—opportunities for the relentlessly-scheduled executives to connect with the rhythms of the Italian countryside.

A moment on one such walk with Bezos stuck out for Cucinelli. “We were taking a stroll, and there was a guy delivering the fruit to the local market, the only store there, and what he always does is he stops and he gives me two peaches or whatever he has in the cart,” he says. “Jeff was moved by the simplicity of the gesture that somebody could stop and just give you two peaches like that.” Cucinelli says that he connected on a deeply human level with the group. “For me, the value was extremely high of these days spent together because of the intimacy of what we were able to exchange.”

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*Cucinelli's trademark aesthetic*

*Venturelli*

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Though some of his guests were rich enough to buy Brunello Cucinelli a dozen times over, Tolia says Cucinelli wasn't interested in impressing them with his business. “We all wanted to visit the factory, but Brunello was like no, no, you're not here to learn about my business, you're here to have three authentic days, and that means we get together as friends, we share great meals, we're outside in nature. He was like, ‘I'm not giving you a promotional tour of Brunello Cucinelli and hope that you buy stock or something.’ Can you imagine that? He had an opportunity to tell us all about his business. Instead he told us about how he grew up poor, as a farmer.”

So did the group jet back to Silicon Valley with newfound resolve to introduce humanistic principles into their work? *Assolutamente!* Cucinelli declares. “Everybody was motivated by the conversations and inspired all at the same level, not by me telling them what to do, but more everyone feeding off each others' commitment and energy toward the same goal.”

But as anyone who's been on a corporate retreat knows, goals set over pasta don't always materialize over a sad desk salad. Will the Silicon Valley elite start investing in San Francisco's vast underclass? Will they think about their workers first, even if it means curtailing their designs on automation? Will they consider work-life balance, living wages, privacy, and cultural access to the extent that Cucinelli does? It's hard to not be cynical about Silicon Valley, where good intentions often yield terrifying results, and an Umbrian vision quest won't fix our country's broken privacy and antitrust laws. But as technology fails to solve the problems technology has created, its inventors could do worse than spending a few days communing with a billionaire entrepreneur who also happens to be a humanistic philosopher king. Put it in this very Silicon Valley way: “Knitting sweaters by hand is not scalable, and I don't think the robots are coming to Solomeo anytime soon,” says Tolia. “But I think Brunello's version of scale is inspiring others. So if he inspires Marc Benioff, Marc Benioff has a huge platform. If he inspires Jeff Bezos, Jeff Bezos has a *huge* platform.”

The real question is: did Cucinelli's guests raid the company store before they left? “The clothes are a vehicle that transport you back to Solomeo,” says Tolia, who has a Cucinelli collection for that very purpose. “But there were people who didn't buy anything.”

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