

# Brunello Cucinelli On Lessons Learned Over Seven Decades

Cucinelli turned 70 on Sept. 3, marking the birthday with a celebratory event in Solomeo attended by 600 guests. Here he looks back at what helped shape his life and turned him into the man he is today.

BY LUISA ZARGANI



Brunello Cucinelli at the celebratory event for his birthday Sept. 3.



Brunello Cucinelli

**Brunello Cucinelli believes souls are eternal** and any project he takes on is conceived to be long-lasting – even stretching out for centuries.

Turning 70 on Sept. 3 was clearly a milestone, as the designer and entrepreneur that evening staged a celebratory event in the medieval Italian town of Solomeo, where his home and headquarters are located, inviting 600 guests who ranged from his employees to journalists to celebrities such as Patrick Dempsey, Ashley Park and Ava Phillippe. But Cucinelli continues to keep his eye on the future, confessing a wish for his company to stand for generations after him. Building a theater and an amphitheater, as well as a monument paying tribute to human dignity, in Solomeo is aligned with this goal.

That said, Cucinelli was willing to look back to the past for WWD to reflect on what each of his seven decades has taught him.

## First Decade The Farm

Ever the optimist, he believes “every decade is beautiful” and his first images are of his life in the countryside. Born in Castel Rigone, about 10 miles away from Solomeo, the son of a farmer, he imagines his sense of style could be handed down by his father, who insisted that the furrows plowed should be “straight and accurate. The idea of beauty and order is the first law of the universe,” as per the classical conception and Aristotle – one of Cucinelli’s oft-quoted mentors.

He admits his memory is strong, and attributes this to

the fact that he doesn’t “seek things on Google” but rather exercises his memory – a sort of brain training.

One way to recover his energy, he reveals, is that he takes a nap every day from 1:45 p.m. to 2:10 p.m. “It works wonders,” he says with a knowing smile.

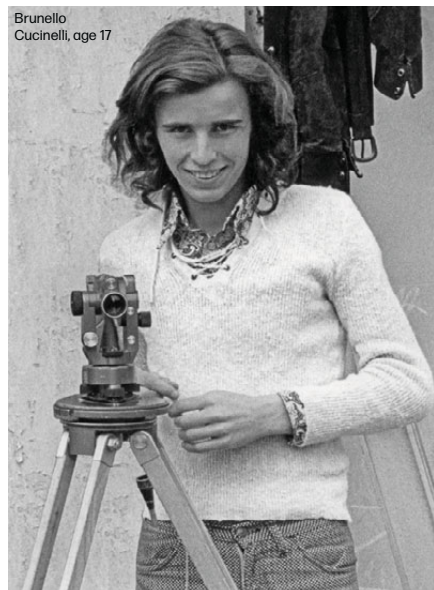
## Second Decade Moving to the City

The second decade was less carefree, as it coincided with seeing his father’s humiliation – an image Cucinelli has worked his whole life to reverse through his commitment to preserve human dignity.

“We left the country and went to live in the suburbs of Perugia in prefabricated buildings made of reinforced concrete. Back then it was a farmer’s dream to live in the city and work in a factory, but it turned out to be a hard and repetitive life. My father did not complain about the pay or the hardship, but I would see him with tears in his eyes. He did not understand why he should be so humiliated, looked down on. Humankind needs dignity more than bread. And my father always told me I should be a good, decent person.”

This is a motivation that continues to shape his actions today, aiming for a balance between profit and giving back, underscoring the need to pay taxes as “a value, a duty and at the same time an act of respect to the society we live in and to other people. Just like profit, which must be harmonious and commensurate. How can excessive profit be justified?”

True to his word, Cucinelli has, for example, invested in many restoration projects over the years and established ▶



Brunello Cucinelli, age 17



Cucinelli married his childhood sweetheart in 1982.



Brunello Cucinelli



Brunello Cucinelli and his family.

### Sixth Decade IPO, Honors

The following decade represented a sort of seal of approval, he says with a smile, as he was honored in 2010 by Italy's then-President Giorgio Napolitano with the title of Cavaliere del Lavoro, or Knight of Labor, one of the country's highest recognitions. In November 2010 he received an honorary degree in ethics and philosophy from the University of Perugia. "That was the best gift ever on a cultural level," says Cucinelli. That same day, his first granddaughter, Vittoria, was born, delivered by Camilla, he recalls fondly.

In 2012, Cucinelli publicly listed his company, "the most beautiful moment of our history at an entrepreneurial level." One of the goals was to secure the company's longevity. At the time of the road show, he candidly dissuaded investors who were looking for financial speculation and fast gains through the IPO. He still stands by his mantra – "to grow in a healthy, gentle and graceful way" – and continues to believe it was the right decision for his company, learning to open up to the market and cherishing the exchange and relationships with and support of analysts and investors.

### Seventh Decade Dealing With the Pandemic

The decade starting 2020 will be forever remembered for the spread of COVID-19 around the world, but Cucinelli never lost hope during the pandemic, despite the tragedy of losing some friends. He quotes 15th-century humanist Thomas More and the rules of the universe that mankind can't dominate. Long a champion of Made in Italy, he realized it was the time to focus on creativity, continuing to support his company's suppliers and the manufacturing pipeline and to stand by the retailers and wholesalers with which he had worked all his life, without letting go of any of his employees – a vision that he says has paid off and actually gave him a leg up on competitors when the pandemic ended.

He singles out the announcement of the Pfizer [and BioNTech] vaccine as one of the most hopeful moments. "I went to my father's house, and he said it was the most beautiful day since

May 8, 1945 when the war ended." Cucinelli's father, who lived nearby and died last year aged 100, was a key point of reference. "I remember how in March 2020 he was hopeful that spring would return just as swallows do, every year," signaling better times ahead.

In 2021, Cucinelli was invited by Italy's then-Prime Minister Mario Draghi to speak at the G20 Summit in Rome about human sustainability and humanistic capitalism. Despite the nerves before the speech, it was a highlight for Cucinelli, "a beautiful sensation," and one that allowed him to understand how high-profile politicians, such as King Charles III, then Prince of Wales, and former Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, "the first to arrive" at the location, are "not dissimilar from anyone else, humans, with their own concerns and worries." ■

the Solomeo School of Crafts to train new generations. "Every single day I try to pay the utmost attention to ensuring that earnings are in line with the morality of my entrepreneurial business and with the high quality of my product."

He recalls how moving away from the country, his family suddenly had a television and electricity. "Before, we only had the sun, the moon and the stars." Cucinelli discovered Immanuel Kant at the bar, where he befriended a group of students that introduced him to philosophy. "I couldn't be part of the discussions," which led him to be self-taught and to a lifelong interest in the subject matter.

"Two things move me: The sky above me and the moral law inside me," he says.

### Third Decade First Cashmere Pullovers

Learning to sew from his mother, when he was 25 he sold his first 53 women's pullovers, a milestone moment representing the seeds of what would become his calling. They were in six colors, from azure to orange and light yellow, slim, and to be worn under a fitted jacket. He wanted them to be feminine and sexy and says they were somewhat inspired by Gianfranco Ferré's style.

He was driven by the idea of a Made in Italy product, leveraging the expertise of the artisans in the Umbria region, a storied knitwear hub. "I chose cashmere because you don't throw it away," he says, a precursor of today's sustainability goals.

### Fourth Decade The Family Man

The following decade sees Cucinelli as a family man, getting married in March 1982 to Federica, his childhood sweetheart. "We had a three-day honeymoon in Piedmont; I had to get back for our sales campaign," he recalls with a shrug.

His first daughter, Camilla, was born on July 19 that same year, followed by Carolina on Feb. 23, 1991. Carolina is now co-creative director and copresident of the



Brunello Cucinelli and University La Sapienza Rector Antonella Polimanti.

Brunello Cucinelli company, and her sister Camilla is co-head of the designer brand's women's style team.

### Fifth Decade Stoicism

The onset of the following decade was clouded by the sudden death of his mother when Cucinelli was 41. She was 71 and did not recover from a stroke, but Cucinelli recalls he did manage to spend two hours alone with her in the hospital, a conversation he still cherishes. "We said beautiful things to one another – after all we'd always had a nice relationship. I am not afraid of death now because I believe our souls live forever and I still talk to her." He cites Aristotle and Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius practicing Stoicism, as well as Seneca and the acceptance of pain tackling what is beyond our power.