



In a small
Umbrian
village, Brunello
Cucinelli has
built a world that
more closely
resembles a
philosophical
experiment than
a luxury brand;
one that happens
to be extremely
profitable.



The ART of LISTENING

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BRUNELLO CUCINELLI IS SITTING AT THE vast expanse of his white lacquered desk – it is so big it could easily seat 20 people. The 72-year-old is bursting with energy, drawing diagrams of circles and squares with black pen on tabloid-sized paper as he talks. He starts a fresh page for each idea as he illustrates the growth in his business, or a philosophical theory. As he scribbles, he insists there have been no changes to the framework he’s followed since 1978, the year he founded his eponymous label. “We want to survive for hundreds of years,” he says. “If you grow by 10 per cent every year, you grow slowly but steadily, and you stay exclusive.” You also play by your own rules.

The last time Cucinelli and I spoke, in 2020, Italy was mid-COVID lockdown. Cucinelli was working from this same office, surrounded by soccer balls, books, framed letters and the sound of water from the fountain outside. He had

guaranteed all staff their salaries, and went so far as to create poetic letters of gratitude to lift spirits. Six years on, the scale of the business he oversees has changed. Steeped in restrained elegance and made-in-Italy craftsmanship, the brand is on track to surpass last year’s record €1.41 billion (\$2.3 billion) revenue; the first quarter alone rose 14 per cent at constant exchange rates. The all-important Americas market is up more than 20 per cent.

His brand is known for its clean aesthetic and sumptuous, predominantly ivory fabrics – which come with exceptionally steep price tags. The collection is flush with tonal shades – milky white, beige, grey and navy, and occasional layers of faded pistachio and dusty rose. The largely logo-less men’s, women’s and children’s lines are defined by soft tailoring – cashmere blazers sell for around €4000, knits with a hint of silver sparkle range from €900 to over €3000. Mark Zuckerberg reportedly wears the brand’s T-shirts. Stores are built in an airy, glass-walled style that could be Milan,



Models pose during a dinner in Florence in June 2026. Below: Cucinelli and influencers Christian Sieber and Alex Rivière-Sieber at the event.

or anywhere, appointed with modern furniture radiating the quiet confidence of quality, status and a very healthy bank account.

All the collections are designed in the town of Solomeo, a medieval hamlet in Umbria near his childhood home. The clothes are produced here, as well as in workshops across the region and Italy. Solomeo, carefully tended and restored, serves as the company's anchor. In many ways, Brunello Cucinelli, the business, is a conservation project that happens to sell clothes.

At exactly 1pm, Cucinelli tells me to look out the window – his employees are walking along the courtyard to eat lunch at the staff restaurant; 600 will be served during a required 1½-hour midday break. It's a dignified affair – a light-filled trattoria with ivory walls and long wooden tables fully set with branded placemats, cutlery, olive oil and glasses for Castello di Solomeo, a sangiovese made from the property's vines. The food is prepared by the house cook – not a chef, says Cucinelli, who insists on its homemade nature. During my visit, the lunch menu consists of fresh bread, prosciutto and pickled vegetables, a dish of *al dente* rigatoni in a tomato sauce and a sliver of paper-thin apricot tart. The same meal is served to every employee.

Back in his office, the walls feature framed photographs of philosophers and Abraham Lincoln. There's a framed letter from King Charles – his partner on a project to produce cashmere in the Himalayas in a way that's less harmful to the environment. Cucinelli keeps the panoramic window open for a soundtrack of birdsong and church bells. The building, dating back to the 1960s, had none when he bought it. "There was no way human beings could work with no windows," he says.

PLENTY OF COMPANIES PROCLAIM THEIR TRIPLE-bottom-line and ESG credentials. Some are even for real; Patagonia has been doing it for decades, provocatively telling its customers in newspaper ads "Don't Buy This Jacket" in a bid to promote sustainability (back in 2011, no less). Its



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founder, Yvon Chouinard, gave the company to a not-for-profit trust in 2022. B Corp certification is increasingly chic – a qualification that for-profit companies can use to prove their commitment to environmental and social principles.

Cucinelli's company is not B Corp certified (which, after all, involves following someone else's rules). He prefers an ethos of "humanistic capitalism", a poetic way of stating that the company cares for its employees – and the environment. The brand is reducing greenhouse gas emissions, both its own and those of its suppliers. It has regenerative farming

initiatives and uses renewable energy at its headquarters. Clothes remain at the root of it all; neutral tones and easygoing tailoring for a customer who values discretion.

The man himself is a walking lesson in style. His personal uniform of a white T-shirt, beige sweater and light trousers has become a signature and, he says, a way to remain ageless. "How I combine and mix things is what's changed for me," he says, picking up a navy blazer and a pair of thin-wale ivory corduroys. "Let me show you ... the base inspiration is from British style. Colours, silhouettes and fits are more Italian. In Italy, it's sunny, so you need ivory. See, this navy blazer can be worn with a denim shirt and ivory corduroys or with jeans. The blazer needs to be strong, to give you an identity. At the same time, you need to have a youthful shape that is contemporary. If I was to hide my face and you look at my attire, I could be 30, 50, 72 ..."

When Cucinelli listed the company in 2012, he told prospective investors not to buy the stock if they wanted a business chasing profit at any cost. The shares opened at €7.75, with the book oversubscribed by 17 times. Suddenly Brunello Cucinelli was a company worth €527 million. These days the company is worth €6.2 billion, and yet his sentiments haven't changed. Cucinelli and his family retain 50.05 per cent ownership – and nearly 65 per cent of voting rights. The rest trades on the Milan Stock Exchange.

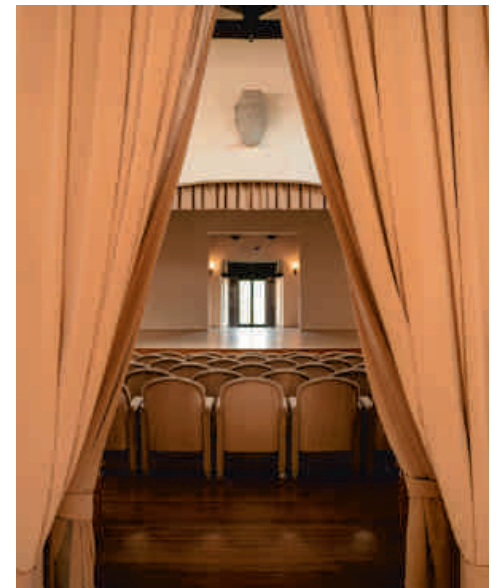
In many ways Brunello Cucinelli is like a mini, Italian version of Hermès, which is also listed but the founding Dumas family own two-thirds of the stock and three-quarters of the voting rights (which became crucial in 2010 when Bernard Arnault attempted a hostile takeover). Both companies, by dint of being largely family-run, can do things their own way. Hermès doesn't have a marketing department. At Brunello Cucinelli, advertising is approached radically; a 2025 print ad showed the man himself standing in a sea of books. No product was named, you could barely read the logo, buried at the bottom of the page.

And, like Hermès, while the shares have come down from their 2025 peak they are still trading strong (at around €90, down from €106). Brunello Cucinelli's retail stores drive close to two-thirds of revenue, with 136 directly run boutiques. The brand has 400 wholesale partners worldwide. Australia, long served through stockists and department stores, received its first boutique in 2023 – a two-level destination at Martin Place in Sydney.

The brand stands apart from the landscape for other reasons. In late 2023, Italian authorities kicked off an investigation into fashion brands over their manufacturing conditions. They found it was common for luxury brands to contract manufacturing to shell companies, which would then subcontract the actual production to smaller entities that exploited workers through poor wages and limited time off. Loro Piana, owned by LVMH, was placed on judicial administration for a year; Giorgio Armani was forced to pay a fine for misleading ethical and social responsibility statements.

Brunello Cucinelli has had to hand over key supply chain documents around its use of third-party suppliers, but no formal examination was launched. Asked about this, Cucinelli is resolute. "[We have] chosen to manufacture [the] entire production exclusively in Italy, consistently devoting the utmost attention to the quality of workplaces and the fair remuneration of everyone involved, with the aim of ensuring both the economic and moral dignity of work."

When I visit, Cucinelli tells me about his company-wide five-year plan to support staff through life's ups and downs – suggesting extra time off and resources when they seem to need a break, or to focus on their personal lives. Day to day, this means leaving at 5.30, no matter what. "What we are doing is looking after each other." In practice, that means 1 per cent of profit is directed back to staff who, at every level,



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Cucinelli says, receive higher wages than the industry standard. The company receives some 25,000 job applications a year, 4000 for craft roles, which Cucinelli believes is proof that craftsmanship is very much alive.

Solomeo itself is the total expression of his project, scrupulously restored as Cucinelli’s dream village, which he envisions as a mini Athens in its golden age. There’s a theatre with ivory walls and carved wood, and attendees have included Tilda Swinton and John Malkovich. Its former owner took a bit of convincing to sell it. “The graveyard is just down the road – sooner or later we’ll end up there, and it will be so boring,” Cucinelli told him. “With a theatre close by, we’ll have a good time for hundreds of years.” He annually donates 20 per cent of profits to cultural preservation and land restoration.

It all feels rather perfect, perhaps impossibly so. No email is to be sent at Brunello Cucinelli to more than two addresses at a time. No mobile phones can be used in meetings. “You must look me in the eye. You must know things by heart. You must know all of your business with a 1 to 2 per cent error rate,” he explained of his work practices in a 2015 interview. He has never called a workmate on a weekend, because, he said, “if individuals rest properly, then it is better”. Workers speak in hushed tones and are asked to use cups, not bottles, at their desks.

Eating “al desko” is, unsurprisingly, off the menu. Ninety-minute lunches are not just recommended, they are mandated. If they have time left, Cucinelli suggests a nap. Or soon they’ll be able to visit the library, under construction, where they can read the works of Dante, Kafka, Proust, Ruskin, Rawls, Nietzsche and Derrida. When I sit for lunch, at 1.40pm, most have already enjoyed their three-course meal, and are lounging outside on large chairs and sofas.



Neutral tones and easygoing tailoring are hallmarks of the brand.



BRUNELLO CUCINELLI WAS BORN IN CASTEL RIGONE, a hilltop hamlet above Lake Trasimeno, in 1953 to a family of sharecroppers. The family lived simply – without electricity or running water, he says – 13 of them shared one home. His father quit farming to take a factory job but he faced harsh treatment from his supervisors. It’s a defining memory of Cucinelli’s adolescence, and has influenced every element of his business. “Arrogance is not profitable, as it does not last long” is one of his company’s “10 rules”.

Cucinelli, who was a whiz with numbers, enrolled in an engineering degree at the University of Perugia. But after less than two years he dropped out to teach himself philosophy. At 25, playing cards at the local bar to earn money, he had an idea to use cashmere in new and unexpected ways. Until then, cashmere was primarily sold to men in navy, grey and beige. He decided to incorporate bright, bold colours – inspired by Benetton – and focus on women’s silhouettes. A yarn merchant believed in the project and agreed to provide him with 20 kilos of raw cashmere for a small sweater run – he could be paid later, the merchant said, once the business had taken off. The dyer he approached told him he was crazy to use colour, but Cucinelli convinced him to try and he managed six sweater samples. The first customer order, for 53 sweaters, went to a boutique in Alto Adige.

In 1985, he bought an abandoned 14th-century castle above Solomeo, and moved in his small operation. This marked the beginning of his restoration project in the village where his wife, Federica, was raised. The stone hamlet now includes the company’s tailoring school, the family’s three homes (one for Cucinelli and his wife, one for each of his two daughters and their families), the Renaissance-style theatre and a Garden of Philosophers – a courtyard adorned with statues of great thinkers. Cucinelli’s tower office overlooks

the vineyards, olive groves, park and soccer field, all of which he built and planted. Below the medieval quarter, the hillside gives way to a glassy production compound where hundreds of artisans, designers and creatives work away, dyeing ethically sourced natural fibres organically and washing them in limited amounts of water. This process creates what has become Cucinelli's signature earthy tones, beloved by celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey and Leonardo DiCaprio and anyone else who can spend €5000 on a cardigan.

Given all the emphasis on craft and human connection, it is somewhat surprising that Cucinelli is deeply interested in artificial intelligence. In fact, the company's AI-powered e-commerce platform, Callimachus, has garnered the attention of Salesforce's Marc Benioff; in July the companies agreed to work together to expand what the platform can do. "Our idea was to offer a product that is simple, intuitive and speaks the language of humans: a kind of new web, without pages, categories or predetermined paths, able to follow each visitor's intent," said Cucinelli in announcing the news. The interface is more like a magazine than a website, without a traditional "path" for a visitor to click on. It does not collect user data, but allows shoppers to browse more freely – almost like being in a store.

He views AI as a co-worker, "an assistant, somehow, who is conversant in data. It is the reason speaking through it – we are the reason." It's not the only tech play he's making; Cucinelli hosts a symposium of technology every couple of years, inviting guests to Solomeo to discuss concepts such as "human artificial intelligence" and "the philanthropy of the soul". Jeff Bezos has been, so has LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman and Microsoft's CTO Kevin Scott. Cucinelli considers them "the Leonardo da Vincis of contemporary culture".

At 72, Cucinelli is thinking about what he's leaving behind. Nearly 50 years of clothing, yes, but also the foundations that have made the clothes possible. *Brunello: The Gracious Visionary*, directed by Giuseppe Tornatore (and commissioned by Cucinelli himself), premiered in New York in late 2025 and continues its international rollout through 2026. True to form, Cucinelli treated the Lincoln Centre



Brunello Cucinelli in his office.

Below left: Inside a Brunello Cucinelli workshop; the Sydney boutique.

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Brunello Cucinelli



premiere as an extension of Solomeo's hospitality rather than a red carpet event — his own cook flew to New York to make sure the pasta was up to scratch.

Unlike the *Succession*-style mess that plagues Bernard Arnault and LVMH, the next 50 years of Brunello Cucinelli are already mapped out. Cucinelli stepped back from day-to-day management in 2020, installing two co-chief executives: his son-in-law Riccardo Stefanelli, who oversees product and operations from Solomeo, and Luca Lisandrone, who runs global markets from Milan. His daughters, Camilla and Carolina, who are both vice chairmen of the board, run the creative side: Camilla co-leads womenswear design, Carolina is co-president and co-creative director, and her husband, Alessio Piastrelli, co-leads menswear.

If that sounds like a lot of co-working, it is, and it's by design – all executives must be in conversation with each other, even the C-suite, which perhaps explains the vast expanse of Cucinelli's desk. Cucinelli serves as executive chairman and creative director. "No one is allowed to make decisions by themselves here. That is the art of listening. And the art of listening without judging." The strategy may sound exhausting. It also works. "[Philosopher] Spinoza said: I've not come to the world to pass judgment, even less to condemn or blame others; I've come to the world to learn," says Cucinelli.

It's an ethos that trickles to every part of the company, including personnel. Cucinelli makes a point of letting me know that most of his employees don't have a fashion background; in fact, this is what makes them attractive to him. "All these people working in fashion here, none of them went to fashion school – even those designing the collections," he says. "Someone working in the warehouse was a football player." Perhaps not da Vinci, but a Renaissance man nonetheless. ●