



Photographs by Christoffer Rudquist

THE NATTY PROFESSOR

Italy
Special

By Johnny Davis

Brunello Cucinelli's conscious capitalism

Italian men enjoy a reputation for being the best-dressed in the world, and with some justification. In a country where the police uniforms are designed by Armani, unpolished shoes are frowned upon and a well-cut jacket is a must. It has been said that the objective to Italian dressing is not to blend in. But actually, the best Italians tread a line between self-expression and refinement. You notice them, but never in a bad way. There's a panache. A nonchalance. An *Italian-ness*.

"Fit is really important," Brunello Cucinelli tells me one afternoon. "You basically wear a sartorial [tailored] kind of top, a blazer and you pair it with some kind of sporty detail. In my case corduroy trousers."

Today, Cucinelli is wearing a fitted navy jacket, white cords, a crisp white shirt, a thin grey tie under a fine navy V-neck and polished derbies showing at least four inches of sock. As always he looks immaculate but comfortable with it.

"Dressed like this I can go to university with friends, but if I remove my tie, I'm more sporting in style," he says. "It's this way of mixing and matching the elements."

What about colour, I wonder? Whereas British men often have wardrobes coughing with clothes, Italians typically spend less and know what suits them. They match two or three colours and tend to stick to a uniform.

"Navy, white, grey, brown," Cucinelli says, counting them off on his fingers. He eyes *The Big Black Book* photographer – a Swede – on the other side of his office. "For example! The way he's dressed."

Then the boyish 61-year-old is up and across the room, the blazer off his back and on to the photographer's, his hands darting here and there, tugging on my colleague's shirt and pulling the whole look together with a tailor's expert eye.

"Don't look at the green trousers!" he says. (In a tale he often tells, Cucinelli explains that when he was eight or nine years old and living as a peasant in the countryside, his mum gave him some green trousers for Christmas. He was so offended, he dug a hole and buried them in the garden and hasn't touched the colour since.)

That's not to say Cucinelli is averse to fashion risks. A basic tenet to Italian style is *sprezzatura*: a detail that's intentionally a bit off. One of his style heroes is Gianni Agnelli, the 99-per-cent-immaculate, late Fiat chairman who would wear his watch over his shirt cuff, forgo buttoning his button-down collar and fasten his tie so the thin end was longer than the thick. (Gilets over City suits and hiking boots under tailored trousers were two more Agnelli favourites that have featured heavily in Cucinelli collections.)

"It's important to mix and match, to make you look beautiful," Cucinelli says. "Also, what you do with your hands is important. We tend to move our hands a lot because we've always been conquered by people, so we have to communicate like this. Otherwise, how would we be understood?"

With that it's back to the photographer. "Sporty, chic, very youthful altogether, with the blazer," he approves. "Yes, he's thirtysomething and I'm 60, but if you hide my face" – he holds a folder in front of his head to demonstrate – "people will think I'm 30. This way of dressing is ageless."

This was the difference between style and fashion, I suggest. Style is forever, whereas fashion comes and goes.

"Exactly, yes," Cucinelli says. "We're not fashion as in 'coming and going'."

Brunello Cucinelli speaks about such matters with authority, as well he might.



LEFT: BRUNELLO CUCINELLI IN HIS OFFICE. INSET: A TAILOR AT WORK

For 37 years, his company has been producing some of the most luxurious and desirable clothing in the world, much of it cashmere and all of it handmade in Italy from a centuries-old base in Solomeo, a hilltop village in Umbria, a mountainous region two hours drive from Rome.

In 1985, Cucinelli began buying up and then restoring Solomeo's medieval centre where his fiancée (now wife) Federica Benda lived as a home for his business. He started by paying £100,000 for the 14th-century castle and today owns, or has helped renovate, almost everything else, from the meticulously restored 18th-century brick-and-stucco church to the 240-seat Cucinelli Theatre, inspired by two Renaissance landmarks: the Baroque Teatro Farnese in Parma, which gave us the modern playhouse, and Vincenzo Scamozzi's 16th-century Teatro all'Antica in Lombardy, the world's first free-standing theatre. It is part of Cucinelli's Forum of the Arts, a complex that also encompasses an amphitheatre; the Aurelian Neo-humanistic Academy that hosts seminars on philosophy, history, architecture and spirituality; a vineyard; a library that's open to all with its grand piano and "precious texts" by Dante, Kafka, Rawls, Derrida and Proust; and a school of arts and crafts that teaches masonry, gardening, farming, tailoring and mending, with lodgings based on the ancient guild system. It's amazing, if a bit unnerving: in a country where you can't move for crumbling cathedrals, domes and buildings from the 12th century, this version is brand-spanking new.

Brunello Cucinelli donates 20 per cent of its profits to the Brunello Cucinelli Foundation, to be used "for humanity". Projects have included building a hospital in Malawi and the construction of a soccer field in his nearby hometown, Castel Rigone. He's rebuilt Solomeo's piazza, repaved streets and nurtured orchards. Thanks to Cucinelli, the town boasts one of the best provincial classical music festivals in all of Italy. When I visit, upcoming concerts include *Cantiones Sacrae* (Sacred Songs), featuring the acclaimed soprano Roberta Mameli.

As we are being shown around by Cucinelli's assistant, a woman so elegant and stylish you feel like bursting into tears every time she looks at you, there is evidence of the latest chapter in this 30-year development: builders hard at work on a private guest house to accommodate visitors who wish to linger longer. Below that is an even bigger enterprise Cucinelli has called "A Project for Beauty", the creation by 2016 of three parks totalling 215 acres. That involves the dismantling of an industrial settlement in order to return the land to its millenary nature: "Turning into a simple, rural garden, full of the colours, fragrances and sounds of nature," according to Cucinelli. "Preserving the territory in all its beauty and leaving behind lovely, harmonious places for those who will come after us."



Solomeo is split into two levels, referred to by the inhabitants as "up there" and "down there". Below are the company's corporate



SEWING CASHMERE BY HAND IN ONE OF THE RESTORED 14TH-CENTURY WORK ROOMS

headquarters, a set of modern white buildings that includes the visual merchandising department and Cucinelli's own offices. Above is the old village where dozens of his workers are ensconced at tables in the renovated 14th-century castle with its arcadian views of cobbled streets, weaving fine Mongolian cashmere that's the USP of both the Brunello Cucinelli men's and women's lines. Rooms here are less like workstations or a production line than front rooms in a hamlet, flooded with natural light. (This set-up is big enough to make the sample collections and oversee quality control: most of his production is

farmed out to 2,500 satellite craftspeople in Umbria and Tuscany.)

"It feels like a sewing group at a house, rather than a factory," notes Cucinelli's assistant. "The feeling of a family life for everyone."

Cucinelli practises something he calls "conscious capitalism" or "a humanistic approach to luxury", meaning he's big on his workers' welfare. Since starting out as a one-man operation, he has expanded this quasi-medieval company town to 900 employees, a number that's doubled in the last five years. Almost all Solomeo's inhabitants now work for him. His employees earn 20 per cent more than their peers (an Italian factory worker typically earns £740 a month), and they all get a key to the premises. The place is empty by 6pm and a 90-minute lunch break is enforced. There's also a subsidised cafe where grilled meat, handmade pasta, *minestre* and wine are available, and a three-course meal costs €3 (£2.20). Cucinelli dines with his staff.

"I believe in a humanist enterprise: business should comply in the noblest manner with all the rules of ethics that man has devised over the centuries," Cucinelli writes in *Solomei, AD MCCCXCI*, a hefty leather-bound volume, part-biography, part-treatise, gifted to Solomeo's visitors. "I dream about a form of modern capitalism with strong ancient roots, where profit is made without harm or offence to anyone, and part of it is set aside for initiatives that really make a difference in people's lives: services, schools, places of worship and cultural heritage. I believe in the quality and beauty of craftsmanship; I don't think you can have quality without humanity."

This is against a backdrop of economic freefall in Italy, where unemployment stands at 13 per cent. What's more, the country has a terrible reputation for ease of doing business – according to the World Bank Index, it comes 56th, below Armenia and Rwanda. But when the financial crash hit in 2008, Cucinelli made a pledge and stuck to it: he would lay off precisely no one. Even before that, during the explosion of yuppyism in the late Eighties, Cucinelli says that rather than look to the American super-managers for inspiration, his models were Socrates, Seneca, St Benedict and St Francis.

"I wanted to maintain a relationship with people," he says.

This humanistic approach is literally written on the walls in Solomeo, in the form of ceramic plaques quoting various Cucinelli inspirations, a sort of scholarly version of those laminated motivational posters you get by office photocopiers. "Love of knowledge echoes in our hearts and nourishes great thoughts," from Socrates. "When our

soul is full of feeling, our words are full of meaning," by Vauvenargues. "Behind every problem there's an opportunity," one of Galileo's. In Cucinelli's office the far wall is lined with framed pictures of his heroes, starting in the 13th Century with Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and ending in the 21st with Steve Jobs. Indeed, it's almost impossible to get through any conversation, about anything, without Cucinelli invoking the words of one of the great social thinkers, Plato, say, or the Greek philosopher Xenophanes, or John Ruskin, who was apparently the inspiration for last spring/summer's advertising campaign. So often does the Emperor Hadrian pop up, it lead a previous interviewer to note you'd think Cucinelli had just seen him for lunch that day.

Still, scoff if you like: Cucinelli has lectured on business ethics and humanism at Harvard and MIT, while Bocconi University, in Milan, now teaches his socially-responsible business model. In 2011, the University of Perugia gave him an honorary degree in philosophy and ethics of human relations. The year before that, he was presented with the Italian Order of Merit for Labour, essentially a knighthood. The day after we meet, there's another big engagement: he's due to attend the grand opening of the restored Etruscan Arch, or Arch of Augustus, built in the third century and one of the symbols of Perugia. Cucinelli has donated over £700,000 to the project.

"Tomorrow the city is actually giving me a gift," he beams. "I'm being presented with the keys to the city."

accessible, Cucinelli is neither of these things. The clothes he makes are gorgeous, timeless, beyond such footling concerns as seasonal trends. They're also fantastically expensive. A cardigan can set you back £2,800, a blazer £5,000 and you could pick up a second car for the cost of one of his winter coats. His website currently advertises a pair of brown socks for £220.

Cucinelli has a couple of answers to this. One is that all his products are handmade here in Italy, using the very finest materials and artisans (who, remember, are paid appropriately). The second is that since his clothes are the best, you don't need to bother buying anything else. In fact, we could all do with buying a lot less, of everything.

"I like the idea of absolute luxury very much because otherwise I couldn't manufacture all my goods in Italy," he says. "It's true we are very expensive. But you should be able to understand the reason why it costs so much is because it's a lot of manual work, and I want to pay the right price, the fair price [to my workers]. I want to manufacturer something beautiful. And I like to have authentic things. I'm Italian: serve me spaghetti, seasoned with olive oil then Parmesan cheese. If you want to invite me for dinner, and you want to cook me the best meal, that's what I want. But, of course, the taste of the oil must be fantastic. The Parmesan must taste great."

He says he's kept the same pair of Ray-Bans for 35 years, the same Jaguar for 25. At school he always wore the same trousers: his mother

Brunello Cucinelli proves success and kindness aren't mutually exclusive. He's a fashion designer — but also a man of the people

"He is a great asset to our local area," Andrea Romizi, the Mayor of Perugia, tells me. "Not just in terms of employment but also for the international recognition of a district that has to catch up to approach modern challenges, despite its heritage. Brunello has interpreted business in an extremely original manner: values such as respect for the human being and the community — considered so far marginal — have become his company's identifying features and strengths."



Brunello Cucinelli proves that being successful and being kind are not mutually exclusive. He is a fashion designer as a man of the people, then, in all aspects but one. And that's his clothes. Cucinelli operates in what he calls the "absolute-luxury" sector. If Gucci and Zegna are aspirational and Hugo Boss and Calvin Klein are



THE BRAND ESCHEWS MODERN FACTORIES FOR AN OLD-FASHIONED ENVIRONMENT

would iron them every night. And anyway, he never said he wasn't a capitalist.

"What I want from the company is for it to make a healthy profit that is worthy of respect from mankind. Because you see, by the way, I will not buy anything if I know you make a preposterous profit from it. You do the right thing, the fair thing and then the rest comes on top of it. I'm convinced that in life you reap what you sow." (For the record, he says the shops' mark-up is seven times what it costs him to produce the clothes.)

Still, it's an odd message for a retailer. Buy less. But it's one he's sticking to.

"We are facing a new world," he insists. "We have to go back to a better kind of relationship with things. It boils down to possessing better things, and maybe a lower number of things, too. You see, 'consuming' is not a nice word. Epicurus →



said that every day you have to look after your soul, and that you have to use the things that the world provides you with: but you should not over-consume, because otherwise the world goes to waste.”

Whatever Cucinelli thinks is right for the greater good of the world, it's possible the world isn't listening. Since the recession you might think £2,000 cashmere cardigans would be in for a tough time of it. In fact, Cucinelli's workforce can't weave them fast enough. He had already crafted a company with no debt, a £20m turnover and a solid trajectory when he went public in Milan in April 2012. Since the IPO, the brand has doubled in value, giving Cucinelli a net worth of at least £650m (\$1bn) according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index and making him one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Italian history. In the first quarter of 2014, sales in America grew by 13 per cent, Europe by 16.5 per cent and China a whopping 26 per cent. (By contrast Italy was down 2.7 per cent.)



EACH SUIT TAKES 50 HOURS TO MAKE BY HAND

His preliminary results for the year ending 31 December 2014 suggest a net turnover of £263m. This is at a time of some uncertainty for the luxury sector, but perversely that may be exactly why Cucinelli is doing so well. He maintains that a cashmere sweater is the one item of clothing you're unlikely to throw away. Here he quotes Ruskin: "If it's beautiful and true it will be useful."

"I do not think the absolute luxury segment will encounter any difficulties in terms of sales," he told his staff in last year's company address, a copy of which you can find online. "There will always be someone wanting to buy, to purchase these special handcrafted products."

In a time of transparency, when there's little hiding from the consumer, when even the most trusted brands have been revealed to be tax-dodging sweatshop practitioners, Cucinelli's credentials may be everything. Or, in other words: he can continue to

command lofty prices, so long as his goods are rooted in artisanship. And artisanship requires artisans.

"So, we have to invest in these special hands that really manufacture, craft these products," he told his staff. And for that a nice canteen and decent working hours seem a small price to pay.



Cucinelli's rise is even more mind-boggling when you consider where he came from. He was raised by a family who lived off the land, cultivating sunflowers, corn and wheat and where 13 people slept under the same roof in a house that for years had no electricity or plumbing. At school, he was teased for his rural accent, called "peasant". When his family moved to the suburbs after his father "traded up" to a cement factory job, things didn't improve. Brunello says his dad was treated like "a slave". "It was difficult," he recalls. "That's why I work to foster human dignity. Because when you have experienced harshness, it drives you to change. My father, who is now 92, says, 'Do you want to be the richest guy in the cemetery?' And I say, 'That's not what I want.'"

Aged 12, Cucinelli briefly flirted with joining the priesthood, but after spending one night in a seminary decided he missed his parents and returned home. Having dropped out of university in 1975, his

eureka moment came when he realised Benetton was making millions producing multicoloured Shetland wool jumpers for women, whereas cashmere was usually grey or black and reserved for men. With barely two lire to rub together, he charmed

his way into 20 kilos of white cashmere yarn, and brought pastel-coloured cashmere to the ladies market. His first run was of 53 sweaters. "I was forced to make people believe I had 72 employees. Often I would answer the telephone using voices of non-existent secretaries and factory workers. In fact, I was a one-man band." The jumper business only became a clothes business of "total looks" – trousers, shirts, coats, shoes, accessories – in 2000.

Now he's "the cashmere king", and worth as much as a real one. Did he treat himself after the IPO?

"Well, I wouldn't call it a special gift," he says. "What I was more intrigued by was to restore a church that I was fond of. Maybe if you ask me what was the best gift I ever gave someone? That was to my two daughters [Camila, 33, and Carolina, 24]. I gave them 1,000 books each. These are the best books of my life, the best 1,000. Because at the end of the day, a book is always going to be there. As Hadrian the Emperor used to say, 'Books lead you in life.' And when you are grown up, you understand that life has made you understand books."

And perhaps one day all this – the business, the village – will belong to his daughters, too?

"Well I hope so, but in life you cannot inherit anything. You only inherit ownership, not ability. Who knows? My father was a farmer and I'm an industrialist. So this is not something that worries me."

He has been asked before whether he harbours any political intentions. It's something Mayor Romizi doesn't rule out. "When journalists ask Brunello this question, he says he is happy with what

he is doing, because he knows how to do it. However, he could have all it takes to start a successful political career, as he embodies both common sense and sensitivity. Last but not least, he has the ability to look beyond the present time to the future and beyond, to future generations – as shown by his recent 'Three Parks' project. These abilities are lacking in the ruling political class."

That would cap a remarkable ascent.

"When I started, I had absolutely no knowledge, no skills in life," Cucinelli says. "But you see this is the only job that I've ever tried and done. When you specialise in one single thing in life, you become more competent. It's been 37 years now, that I've been touching cashmere. In the end, you hone your skills."

It's surely more than that. By all accounts, he is extremely disciplined when it comes to business. Company meals have been an excuse to play video projections of speeches Martin Luther King and Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*. ("It's time now that people have to rediscover values," he says.) And he once called a staff meeting of 100 because two people didn't smell to his liking, and it was important that everyone got the message.

"I am a strict boss, yes," he agrees. "My nickname is 'The German'. I've always enjoyed rules. Rules are the same for everybody. But I'd like to quote St Benedict now, and he basically speaks to the abbot, the boss of the monastery, and he says: 'You should try and be strict and sweet.' A demanding master and a loving father."



For all its global success, the brand remains surprisingly low-key. Yes, it's a favourite with the jet-set, even royals – Prince William wore a taupe Cucinelli sweater to cuddle up to Kate in those Mario Testino engagement photos – but outside of fashion circles it really isn't well-known. It turns out that's the way the boss likes it.

"Maybe tomorrow we should be slightly less known," he nods. "I would like to try and remain a bit more offside. My strategy has always been that of remaining smaller and growing slowly, but always maintaining the Made in Italy concept. Take a look at the way nature does it: everything follows suit and grows graciously."

This is what Cucinelli thinks: respect the land and nature, ply your trade with dignity and those values will in turn be passed on. Beautiful things really can make you a better person.

"I think that each and every one of us, regardless of their social class of belonging, you wear something more eagerly if you know it was manufactured without harming anyone. If you see something beautiful, it can be a beautiful sun, a beautiful object, you feel better. Emperor Hadrian said, 'I've never met anyone who did not feel better after being paid a compliment.' Also on our website, on the landing page, you'll see: "Beauty will save the world," by Dostoevsky."

Cucinelli is terrific company, and generous with his time. When it's time for him to go, the energy seems spirited out of the room with him. But go he must: from the windows of his office, we watch him striding across the quad, blazer buttoned, trousers skimming his legs just-so, phone pressed to his ear. He's off to have lunch with his stonemasons – to thank them for all their hard work. **ENDS**

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