THE GRACIOUS VISIONARY

Fresh from the Hong Kong premiere of his documentary, Brunello Cucinelli discusses the million-dollar order that changed his fortunes, the philosophy behind his humanistic capitalism, and why he believes a successful business should give something back to the people who make it possible.

Words: ALIX LEFEBVRE





From left: Federica Benda, Brunello Cucinelli, Camilla Cucinelli, Carolina Cucinelli, and Riccardo Stefanelli.

From left: Solomeo headquarters of Brunello Cucinelli; Brunello Cucinelli.

To have 90 minutes set aside for an interview amid the frenzy of Milan Fashion Week is a luxury in itself. Yet the morning after his Spring/Summer 2027 show, Brunello Cucinelli sits down with *Prestige* to reflect on the encounters, values and turning points that have shaped both the man and his brand. These stories are now at the heart of his new documentary, Brunello: The Gracious Visionary, which premiered in Hong Kong this October.

As writers, we're taught to make ourselves invisible and let our subject take centre stage. With Cucinelli, that's easier said than done. Before the interview begins, he greets me with a "Bonjour!" – having learned I'm French in advance – and asks about the origins of my name. Rather than easing in with small talk, he makes the exchange itself a lesson in "Human Capitalism", the philosophy at the heart of his business. He is as interested in the person asking the questions as he is in the questions themselves, putting into practice his belief that every encounter deserves genuine attention and every individual the same respect.

Cucinelli tells stories with his hands as much as with his words – animated, wry, never short of an anecdote. Many of those stories circle back to Italy, where his name may travel the world, but his roots remain fixed. "Everyone dreams of going back and reviving where they grew up as a child," he says. Solomeo, a small village in Umbria, is the realisation of Cucinelli's dream: a place where he has built not only his business and home, but an entire ecosystem. Here, employees find more than work; they find a way of life, with space to belong.

Cucinelli stands out as a fierce advocate of reverse migration – bringing people back to the countryside to rediscover a slower, more rooted way of living. In 1985, he began restoring Solomeo, determined that his headquarters would not be an island apart but the beating heart of the village itself. Dating back to 1391, the Umbrian village counted just 300 residents at the time; today, the population has almost tripled. Last year, 26 children were even born there – a record Cucinelli credits to the "serenity" of village life. "I am sure that wherever you are born, that is where your soul abides," he says. "I believe that we are meant to preserve the place of the soul."

He knows the quiet of the countryside intimately; it's where his story begins, and where his new documentary opens – with a scene of him watching his younger self in these same rural landscapes. The Cucinellis were a large family, all of them sharing a house with no electricity and drawing water from a well. "From the outside, you might think we were poor," Cucinelli says. "But I did not experience any poverty, really." They were sharecroppers, living off the land – years he remembers with real fondness, never for what was missing.

Italy's *miracolo economico* – the rapid industrial boom of the 1950s and '60s – eventually drew the Cucinelli family away from Umbria and into the city, chasing the promise of better prospects. His father and brothers took up factory jobs, and Cucinelli, still searching for his own path, witnessed up close the realities of industrial labour. "Those scenes left me with the bitterness of how my father had been treated in my heart," he recalls. If he didn't yet know what his future would hold, he had the conviction that the moral and economic dignity of the human being would become the foundation of everything he'd built later on.

"My early adulthood was full of jokes – maybe it's just in the blood, being Italian, being Tuscan," Cucinelli says of his late teens and early twenties. "In Tuscany, we have Lorenzo the Magnificent, who taught us to take life lightly, to be happy. That was my real university, you could say." Philosophy, religion, mathematics, women: Cucinelli could spend hours debating just about anything, provided there was a bar or café and someone willing to argue back. He enrolled in engineering but sat just one exam, spending those years exploring ideas and possibilities. "My father once told me that when you know what you want in life, you know," Cucinelli recalls. "By that, he meant pursue your dream."

Cucinelli has always trusted instinct. At 25, with no money to his name, he launched his label while working as a model for a manufacturer and falling in love with his fiancée, who owned a small clothing store. Fashion became a way back to the best part of himself: his roots in Umbria, also the historic heartland of luxury knitwear and cashmere.

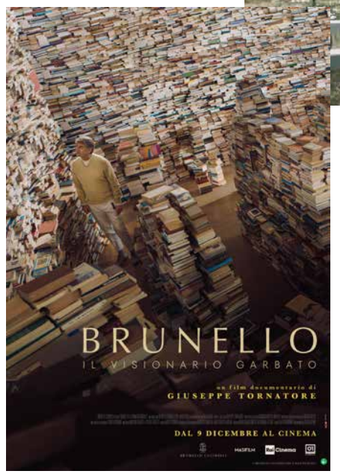
The early days of the label stood out for their use of colour in cashmere – still a novelty at the time. Cucinelli says he's always had an eye for colour, recalling how he once



Brunello Cucinelli in his documentary



Saul Nanni as young Brunello Cucinelli in Brunello: The Gracious Visionary



Brunello Cucinelli Documentary poster



Brunello Cucinelli's Winery Cellar in Solomeo

buried a pair of green jeans from his mother simply because he couldn't stand the shade. But durability was just as important. "I never met anyone who threw away a cashmere sweater," he tells me.

Brunello Cucinelli was navigating a luxury market dominated by retail gatekeepers such as Bergdorf Goodman in New York and Le Bon Marché in Paris. In the East, Hong Kong retail icon Joyce Ma, founder of Joyce and renowned for her discerning eye, was among the first to recognise his potential. In the brand's second year, Ma placed an order for US$1 million in cashmere sweaters, nearly half of Cucinelli's annual turnover at the time. She offered a letter of credit; Cucinelli waved it away. "Why would I need one from someone I trust?" he says.

Ma became both a valued collaborator and a friend, appearing in the documentary to reflect on decades of shared anecdotes and evolution. "Joyce has always impressed me – such a fine lady, always gracious," Cucinelli says.

Such connection speaks to a wider principle in Cucinelli's business: success is built on trust, respect and relationships that last. His philosophy of "Human Capitalism" puts dignity, fairness and responsibility to the community alongside profit. "Philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed in individuality," he says. "It means we're all different, and that's why I want to show respect for everybody." In the company's early days, he hired a man and a woman on equal pay, far from standard practice at the time. His reasoning was that people deserve more than a job. They deserve a fair wage, a good office view and a reason to want to come back tomorrow.

Cucinelli's commitment to "Human Capitalism" has only intensified as the stakes have grown, sometimes to the bemusement of industry observers. Today, Brunello Cucinelli employs 3,600 people, with another 9,000 working through third-party manufacturers. As the business has grown, so too has his determination to hold on to the principles on which it was built. "The pillars of the company are simple," he says. "If the person who signs the balance sheet believes in them, we're achieving a vision, because these rules apply to everyone."

In an industry obsessed with social-media virality and rapid growth, Cucinelli refuses to chase quarterly spikes. Seventy per cent of his company's goods are still handmade in Umbria – a deliberate choice that speaks to what he believes a business owes its people. "There is a difference between being expensive and being dear," he insists.

Cucinelli has little interest in trends that risk diluting a brand's identity. His clothes have never needed a logo to be recognised, and he has little patience for labels such as "quiet luxury". What matters is not how the brand is defined today, but how it continues to evolve. "You must always be in the moment," he says.

Modest returns are enough, provided dignity is upheld throughout the supply chain. It is a principle he hopes to pass down alongside the business itself. "For our Italian culture, having a business is like having a child," he says. "What you envisage is for your child, your grandchild, your great-grandchild to walk through the premises of your company one day."

Cucinelli isn't just about leaving behind a successful business but passing down the values and mindset that have shaped his life. He often cites philosophers and poets, or what he regards as "the greatest human beings on earth", for their understanding that intelligence comes not only from education, but also from the soul.

This is a belief that runs through his vision for Solomeo. Today, his Umbrian castle houses his offices, while workshops, gardens and public spaces bring work and village life together. Beyond the restored buildings, Cucinelli has established a school for traditional Italian crafts, the Universal Library, a theatre, a winery and spaces for reading and gathering. The estate stretches across more than 100 hectares and is home to industrial facilities, agricultural land and public parks. The ambition is to create a place where work, learning and leisure can exist alongside one another, rather than compete for space.

Solomeo's bella fabbrica, designed around natural light, greenery and sweeping views, also reflects Cucinelli's belief that dignity is shaped in part by the environment in which people spend their days. Here, employees can look up from their work and see the sky.

"We neglect our soul, which needs to be tidied up and nourished daily. So my goal is for all of us to lead a normal life in a small village," he says.

The working day at Brunello Cucinelli ends at 5:30p.m.,

With Brunello: The Gracious Visionary, Cucinelli wanted to put his life and work on record in his own words, leaving future generations an account of the values behind his business. "I wanted them to hear my own voice. I wanted to leave them a legacy, to show them who I was and who I wanted to be." The documentary serves as another of his secular temples; alongside those he has established in Solomeo. Each is intended to preserve something beyond its immediate function, passing knowledge and values on to the next generation.

For the film, Cucinelli turned to Giuseppe Tornatore, the Academy Award-winning director of Cinema Paradiso, whose poetic sensibility he felt suited the task. Moving between drama and documentary, the film resists the conventions of a straightforward business portrait.

"This year is the year of the spirit," Cucinelli says. "It's a year where we should all lift each other's spirits when needed...I want the people coming after to look up at the stars and remember to dream because a life without a dream does not make any sense." P



Brunello Cucinelli's office



Internal view of the production department