



# CASHMERE CONFESSIO~~NALS~~

Brunello Cucinelli has redefined luxury fashion, and now the famed Italian designer gets the biopic treatment in a new movie about his life and legacy.

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# In

September 2024, Brunello Cucinelli received a surprising invitation.

"Emily in Paris" creator Darren Star requested the fashion mogul's presence at the Rome premiere of the Netflix hit's fourth season. And frankly, Cucinelli was confused. Though he's used to being invited to VIP gatherings — from fashion shows to meetings with presidents and kings — this seemed outside his wheelhouse.

"Why should I go to Rome to see the premiere of 'Emily in Paris'? I have nothing to do with it!" Cucinelli, speaking in boisterous Italian through a translator, recalls with a booming laugh. He's seated in his stark-white, minimalist office at the headquarters of his billion-dollar clothing brand in Solomeo, Italy, but his inviting demeanor and slightly flashy burgundy-checked sports coat lend more than a bit of warmth.

"So I didn't go," Cucinelli, 72, continues. "And the day after that, worldwide — from India, China — they showered me with emails!"

As it turns out, Cucinelli had inspired an entire storyline in "Emily in Paris" — he just didn't know it. Played by Eugenia Franceschini, Marcello Muratori is an Italian heir to a luxury cashmere company founded by his late father, Umberto, and the latest love interest of Lily Collins' Emily Cooper. When she visits him in Rome, he whiskers her away to his hamlet of Solitano, where she falls in love with the way his employees are treated like family and even takes a break from posting to social media to protect the sanctity of the village.



From top: Courtesy of Solomeo; Courtesy of Brunello Cucinelli



The storyline was inspired by a visit that Star, the prolific TV creator, paid to Cucinelli. Star had been aware of the cashmere-centric brand — which he calls "the epitome of quiet luxury, refined taste and style" — for years, and in October 2023, some fashion industry friends arranged for him to go to Solomeo, a picturesque village 100 miles north of Rome, to meet the man behind it all. There, Star found the missing piece of Marcello.

"I was a little nervous, hoping he would be pleased, since I admire him so much," Star says. "The surprise was how much the reality of Solomeo and Brunello himself surpassed my imagination. As beautiful as our fictional Solitano is — we didn't do it justice!"

Star is just one of Hollywood's many power players enamored with Cucinelli. Cucinelli has been called

the king of cashmere for decades, with everyone from Mark Zuckerberg to Leonardo DiCaprio, Oprah Winfrey to Gwyneth Paltrow, drawn to his pricey yet comfy sweaters. Now Cucinelli is about to take his brand to the big screen. His life story is the subject of a new drama, mixing documentary and traditional narrative, called "Brunello: The Gracious Visionary."

The Cucinelli brand doesn't stop at the red carpet: Cucinelli strives to share his philosophy and way of life. Inspired by the ideals of Socrates and Kant, Cucinelli prides himself on "humanistic capitalism" and giving back to his community, so much so that in 1985 he purchased the Castle of Solomeo — and over time, the rest of the village in which his wife grew up — and has since renovated its historic buildings, moved his headquarters there and employed thousands of locals.

His new film is a testament to his love of collaboration. A devoted cinema fan, Cucinelli recruited a pair of Oscar winners in "Cinema Paradiso" helmer Giuseppe Tornatore and "Life Is Beautiful" composer Nicola Piovani to help recount how he went from a peasant's son to the founder

of a world-class luxury brand. The two-hour film features docu-style interviews — alongside his wife and daughters, Winfrey, Patrick Dempsey and LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman make appearances — and reenacted scenes with actors including “Love & Gelato” breakout Saul Nanni.

To make “Brunello: The Gracious Visionary,” Cucinelli had to woo Tornatore, whose 2021 doc “Ennio” about legendary composer Ennio Morricone, played festivals worldwide.

Cucinelli loved “Ennio” and wanted his film to be made by a “poet,” but Tornatore was reluctant. “It was very difficult to wrap my head around his request,” the director told journalists at a December press conference in Rome. Cucinelli wouldn’t take no for an answer. “He insisted, as only he can do — he insists a lot.”

It also helped that Cucinelli didn’t give Tornatore any financial constraints. The film ended up costing \$17 million and was mostly self-financed, save for roughly \$4.7 million in Italian tax film credit support received by executive producer MasiFilm.

Cucinelli had hoped to share his life story while he was still around to see its ripple effects. “These documentaries are made after people have died. Some of the ones I’ve seen are of people that I have known — I don’t like them very much,” Cucinelli explains. “They are not as profound as the value of the human being.”

“The Gracious Visionary” opened in Italy on Dec. 9 and has done brisk business at the box office, scoring more than \$1 million during its limited seven-day run. Other release dates have not yet been set — Cucinelli says he is aiming for the end of February in the U.S. — but the film’s posters adorn the windows of every Cucinelli store. It’s undoubtedly a love letter to Cucinelli himself, and when it’s released worldwide it will also serve as an extension of his brand — his life philosophy wrapped up in the luxury coats and sweaters that got him this far.

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**It's easy to see why Star** was so charmed by Solomeo. Situated atop a sun-soaked hill, the medieval village is anchored by a 14th-century castle — which now houses the brand’s tailoring workshop and signature boutique — known to be frequented by celebrities like Paltrow (who vacations at the nearby Castello de Reschio). Peppered throughout the village



are busts and plaques bearing quotes from Cucinelli’s favorite minds, from Mahatma Gandhi to Leonardo da Vinci. From the village’s small parking lot, one can see the vineyards where Cucinelli produces his own wine, a community soccer field — and, of course, the Cucinelli headquarters. Down on the ercu-colored campus, the office is clean and bright, with Renaissance art adorning the walls. At 1 p.m. daily, employees enjoy a meal together in the wood-beamed dining hall — antipasti, pasta al pomodoro, wine and dessert. And at 5:30 p.m., the lights in the main office turn off. Overtime is forbidden.

Much of the designer’s work ethic and philosophy can be traced to his late father, and Cucinelli was honored by the nods to him in “Emily in Paris.” The fictional brand bears his father’s first name, Umberto, and the surname Muratori evokes the Italian word for mason, “muratore.” Though his father was a farmer in the Umbrian hamlet of Castel Rigone, where Cucinelli was born in 1953, in his teenage years the family moved to the Ferro di Cavallo

Part of Cucinelli's extensive library



neighborhood of nearby Perugia, where his dad began working in a cement factory to provide a better life. This represented a major sacrifice.

“He would never complain about his wages or the fact that it was cold in the factory; what he did complain about was that he was being belittled,” Cucinelli says wistfully. “That really killed me. ... You see, human beings need dignity even more than they need bread.” Cucinelli founded his company in 1978 at the age of 25 after finding success dyeing cashmere in bright colors at a time when that hardly existed, especially for women. Cucinelli barely had any experience in fashion and didn’t go to university; instead he credits his business savvy to the card-playing skills taught to him by his grandfather, the philosophy he learned in his local bar as a young man and the stylistic eye of



his wife, Federica Benda, who already had her own boutique when he was just getting started.

Even as the company grew, his values stayed the same. Cucinelli considers his employees not just workers but “thinking souls,” and they earn about 20% more than the average Italian manufacturing or industrial wage. If one employee offends another, they are fired on the spot. After relocating to Solomeo in the 1980s, Cucinelli gradually expanded, broadening the company’s product line from sweatshirts to full prêt-à-porter and veering into menswear, a sphere in which he started to “become the new Armani,” notes Alex Badia, style director at Women’s Wear Daily.

Since going public in 2012, Brunello Cucinelli S.p.A. has consistently shown year-on-year revenue growth averaging in the double digits, with recent forecasts pointing to 10%-12% growth for 2025 and 10% for 2026. This is exceptional at a time when many estab-

lished luxury conglomerates — such as Kering and LVMH — are hurting.

“He came from nothing, and it’s really remarkable what he’s done,” says Badia, who has covered Cucinelli for more than a decade. “If I had to invest, I would invest in Brunello Cucinelli, because I see that the future is bright.”

More recently, Cucinelli’s daughters, Camilla and Carolina, have placed a renewed emphasis on women’s wear. This is now 50% of the company’s output, which Badia says is “where the growth potential is.”

That’s also where Hollywood comes into play. More than ever, celebrities are the ones moving fashion products, cutting through the clutter in an oversaturated media environment.

In the Solomeo office, a corner of the room is set up like a shrine to the stars who have worked with Cucinelli. It all started when Prince William wore a Cucinelli sweater in his official engagement photos with Kate Middleton in 2010 — their picture is smack-dab in the center of one wall. Surrounding the royals are photographs of some of the biggest names in Hollywood: Paltrow, DiCaprio, Julia Roberts, Daniel Craig, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney. From April to October, his assistant says, the office is inundated with requests from the rich and famous wanting the full Cucinelli experience, which often includes a tour of

The designer in the cellar of his winery, Castello di Solomeo; left: a view of the vineyard

the facilities and lunch in the dining hall. During our walk-through, we bump into Cucinelli on his way to a meeting. He's not fluent in English — though he is taking classes — but his greeting is communicated with a pat on the elbow and a cheerful smile. Through a translator, he offers us coffee before heading to the workshop to proof the brand's latest couture creations — heavy knit dresses with sequins hand-sewn onto the cashmere. Each dress weighs three pounds and is the result of more than 60 hours of work. "You go to see him, and instantly he treats you like you're part of a family," Badia says. "He offers you coffee. He feeds you — he's bringing mozzarella, pasta al pomodoro. Even his physicality, the way he approaches you, is so disarming. And he enchants celebrities." Cucinelli underlines that the brand does not "sponsor anyone" to wear its clothes — it's all organic. "So if Gwyneth or Angelina opt for one of our dresses, it's their choice," he says. "We don't pay them to do that."

Just like the late Armani, Cucinelli personally dresses movie stars — including Robert De Niro, who he recounts does not like the label's signature style of trousers that taper below the knee to an abbreviated cuff.

"What are these fucking short pants?!" Cucinelli recalls De Niro saying in Italian at a recent fitting.

"I made them a bit longer for him," Cucinelli says, chuckling at the memory. "But not full-length."

Outside Solomeo, Cucinelli regularly hosts star-studded events at Los Angeles' Chateau Marmont, celebrating his humanist ideals with guests like Chris Pine, Jennifer Lopez, Jon Hamm, Ava DuVernay and Sharon Stone — "who will only come if she gets to sit next to me," he says.

Cucinelli has also been hobnobbing with Silicon Valley, starting with Zuckerberg, whom he's been outfitting in \$400 custom gray T-shirts. In 2017, Cucinelli appeared at Dreamforce, Salesforce's annual conference, where he took the stage for a fireside chat with founder Marc Benioff, who sported a Cucinelli pin-striped suit.

Though it would seem that technology — especially the advent of artificial intelligence — directly opposes Cucinelli's humanist philosophy, he's learning to embrace it. When asked his thoughts on the threat of AI taking away so many human jobs, Cucinelli declares: "I love AI!"

"Let me show you something," he adds, rising from his seat and striding across the room. Amid dozens of framed news clips documenting the ascent of the Cucinelli brand is a manifesto on AI, signed and dated in Roman numerals.

"Will it substitute human intelligence? Never," Cucinelli reads from the document. "AI is born from reason; it cannot include any folly. But creativity is born from folly. Therefore, AI cannot create."

The brand has started to employ AI-powered smart boards to aid with quality control — particularly in finding flaws in the hand-knit cashmere — but Cucinelli is firm that it will never replace human work.

"I think that technology is a blessing from creation, but risks losing the soul that we have," he says. "We need to strike that balance again."

Sitting with Cucinelli is like conferring with a living history book. He casually quotes philosophers — Rousseau, Marcus Aurelius, Socrates — and speaks in riddles as if he's one himself. A theme that resonates throughout our conversation, and a message Cucinelli hopes viewers take from his film, is that there needs to be a new kind of revolution to take the world back to humanistic ideals.

"There is a very strong malaise in everybody's soul," he says. "We have now reached a very high level of harshness in how we express ourselves — in politics, in daily life, in work, in family."



**Cucinelli with Jeff Goldblum, Jonathan Bailey and Jessica Chastain at the Rome premiere of "Brunello: The Gracious Visionary"**

Part of this revolution, he says, should be returning to villages as opposed to dwelling in bustling cities. Though he often travels for work — Cucinelli has just returned from Korea and Japan — he is most at home in nature. Our photo shoot takes place in his vineyards, and Cucinelli makes the short drive there himself behind the wheel of a muddied silver Rolls-Royce. Outfitted in clothes from his latest collection, he stops to say hello to a snail making its way up a statue before expertly posing among the trellises. He picks a wrinkled red grape off the vine and pops it in his mouth with a mischievous smile, urging us to do the same. Later, he insists we try the mosto, grape juice from the September harvest that is fermenting in oak barrels in the cellar.

Though his philosophy may seem at odds with the fast-paced nature of Hollywood, it's easy to see why the famous and wealthy have been seduced by Cucinelli's way of life. It's slow and simple, focused on enjoying the little moments and giving back where possible. When celebrities like Paltrow come to visit, Cucinelli says, they spend time in the garden and pick tomatoes for that night's feast.

"There's no stardom there," he says. "Just normality."

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**Cucinelli may have been** reluctant to make the trip to Rome for "Emily in Paris," but on Dec. 4 he had a premiere of his own to host.

Held at Cinecittà Studios, just steps away from the re-created Colosseum, the debut of "Brunello: The Gracious Visionary" could have been mistaken for that of an A-list Hollywood production. Jonathan Bailey, fresh off his People Sexiest Man Alive honor, giggled with Jeff Goldblum in a "Wicked" reunion. Jessica Chastain wore a custom Cucinelli gown dripping in diamond accents and talked shop with DuVernay. Pine, Edgar Ramírez and Kyle MacLachlan looked sharp in the brand's signature double-breasted suits, and Ramírez told *Variety* on the beige carpet that wearing Cucinelli "makes me feel like my family is with me."

"I'm clad by legacy, by family values, by tradition, by subtle, timeless elegance, and that to me is very important," he added.

Front left: Courtesy of Brunello; Courtesy of Studio Sbarro

**V**  
**Saul Nanni**  
**plays a young**  
**Couturier In**  
**"Brunello:**  
**the Gracious**  
**Visionary."**

"The brand stands for something," DuVernay said. "I think about family, about advocacy for the land, something that goes beyond just aesthetics."

After the screening, hundreds of candles led guests through the ancient Rome set to a dinner space surrounded by 100,000 of Cucinelli's favorite books. As attendees enjoyed rigatoni al pomodoro, Goldblum and Pine told Cucinelli how touched they were by the film.

Cucinelli was elated by the response. "I didn't sleep for quite a few nights. I'm still a bit going gaga," he says over Zoom two weeks later.

Besides telling his story and touting his brand, for Cucinelli "The Gracious Visionary" is all about legacy. Perhaps that's why he decided to make the film while he's still around to see it.

"I want to promote the culture of our company," he says. "But it is also a time when I believe that a human revolution can start. And I want to be there." ●

