

Brunello Cucinelli with his wife  
and two daughters.



# BRUNELLO CUCINELLI



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Known variously as a new humanist, an ethical capitalist, and the King of Cashmere, the eponymous founder of the company Brunello Cucinelli is a designer-entrepreneur like no other, whose elegant, ultra-luxurious couture reflects his tenets of quality. >

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## PROFILE

TEXT BY KATRINA BECKER PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRUNELLO CUCINELLI



Brunello Cucinelli.

With the goals of freedom and personal responsibility, Cucinelli developed an organization where each worker is entrusted with a key to the factory but not required to punch a timecard, and employee creativity is enhanced by beauty inherent to the workplace. Along the way he not only shaped a unique enterprise but also restored an ancient village, converting it to a center of culture nestled in rural Italy.

Born in Perugia in 1953, Brunello Cucinelli founded his business in 1978, turning from his university studies in engineering to the lure of cashmere knits inspired by the success of Benetton. "He saw that cashmere was mostly used for men's sweaters and in darker neutral shades, >



“ His [Cucinelli's] signature style is an elegant, relaxed look focused on impeccable craftsmanship and quality. ”

**GIORGIANA MAGNOLFI,**  
Senior Public Relations  
and Marketing Director  
of Brunello Cucinelli.

From the fall/winter 2013 collection.



The ancient village of Solomeo.

Spools of thread at the Cucinelli factory.



so he built a line of 30 women's cashmere tunics in bright colors and got his start by selling them to clients in northern Italy and Germany," explains Giorgiana Magnolfi, Senior Public Relations and Marketing Director at Brunello Cucinelli.

In 1985 the designer established himself in Solomeo, an ancient Umbrian hamlet 2½ hours north of Rome. With the growth of the business came the reinvigoration of the community, says Magnolfi. "The spirit and heart of the village have remained unaltered, but the historic town center...the main castle in the center, the piazza (or main town square) and all major buildings around it have all been restored respecting the old facades and style." Cucinelli carefully worked to renovate the hamlet -- originally built between the 12th and 14th centuries -- by refitting a medieval fortress with offices and workshops and converting an old farmhouse into a company canteen serving traditional food. He restored neighboring churches and helped build a local sports center. Today, the company thrives in its new-old home.

"I dream about a form of modern capitalism with strong ancient roots," says the designer, "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." To that end, he maintains a close relationship with the monks of a nearby Benedictine monastery, who collaborate in performance during the annual concerts of the Festival Villa Solomei. The festival is one aspect of the culture of Solomeo, which plays a major role through the Forum of the Arts and the Theater. Both were built by Cucinelli, and the area for meditation. From October to May the theater, amphitheater, and philosophers' garden host classical music concerts and plays selected by the Teatro Stabile Dell'Umbria, a theater company overseen by Cucinelli.

In other philanthropic endeavors, he also supports the University of Perugia and the Region and Provinces >



A Cucinelli seamstress at work.



View of the village from the Cucinelli factory.



A converted farmhouse is now the company dining room.

of Umbria. He established and manages the Cucinelli Foundation to fund restoration and nonprofit projects, including the building of a hospital, a library, a daycare center, a school, and a well in the African country of Malawi (a cause particularly dear to his daughters). These efforts, along with the quality of his products, have led to numerous honors for the designer, including recognition from Robb Report magazine, Ernst & Young, and the Italian government.

Cucinelli often quotes Socrates, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Alexander the Great, Goethe, and Saint Francis of Assisi. He deeply admires the humanist writings of the Roman architect Vitruvius from around 25 BCE, particularly

espousing the idea, says Magnolfi, that “man is at the center of the universe and because of this he should be treated as the center of the work force, as it is an activity which enhances his worth.”

What sets Cucinelli’s company apart are his strong personal ethics of respect and dignity; some of his favorite goals include “making work more human, with people at its core,” and “giving business a meaning that goes beyond profit and reinvesting to improve the lives of workers, to enhance and restore the beauty of the world.” “He attracts individuals to work for him [who] care about the same values,” explains Magnolfi. “This creates an environment where all employees are loyal.” >



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“He’s very unusual,” says Lisa Schram, Cucinelli brand ambassador for Saks Fifth Avenue Phoenix. “His philosophy, the way he lives his life really appealed to me -- it...spoke to me. The way he creates and designs, and the way he treats his employees...his philanthropy...it’s very meaningful.”

“People are really engaged with the culture of Cucinelli,” she continues. “So it’s not just that the clothing is luxurious.” Cucinelli’s ethical approach adds a special appeal to his work. “He’s a humanitarian...and that really does matter to people,” adds Schram. As far as his design, she says, “the collection...reflects his sensibilities and not just his ego.” She explains, “I think that’s the difference...he’s a pretty simple guy, and...he doesn’t really like to leave Solomeo.” Schram smiles. “He’s not interested in being in the public eye all the time -- he likes his soccer team, and eating homemade Italian food...so why would you leave?” She laughs. “Why would you leave this place? I just can’t even imagine.”

Step into the Cucinelli shop at Saks Fifth Avenue Phoenix at Biltmore Fashion Park and you enter an intimate, serene space with decorating touches from the Italian countryside. “His signature style is an elegant, relaxed look focused on impeccable craftsmanship and quality,” says Magnolfi. “The importance of ‘Made in Italy’ and handmade finish are also at the forefront.”

For his signature cashmere creations, Cucinelli uses wool combed from the fine undercoat of Hircus goats raised in Mongolia and China, chosen by the designer and long-time spinning partner Cariaggi and processed with great care and skill in the workshops of Solomeo. “His textiles are all Loro Piana or Zegna fabrics, which are the two finest mills -- there are none better,” says Schram. “And...he is meticulous about the way his cashmeres are dyed, treated, handled...I have never seen a garment of his pill.”

“They’re investment pieces,” she continues. Surprisingly, >

even though many of the fabrics are delicate, most don’t require dry cleaning, Schram explains. “They’ll last you forever if you hand-wash them carefully.”

Spring and fall collections bring a variety of silks, linens, organzas, cottons, and cashmeres light enough to wear year-round, even in the demanding environment of the Valley. “This season is a little different,” says Schram. “There’s...more of an urban sort of appeal. Typically...all of the colors have been inspired by nature and the countryside where he lives, and so we always saw...very neutral kinds of tones with a little bit of...very muted color.” She gestures to the racks. “This time we saw...more depth of color in this collection...with the blues, the prune colors, which are these deep burgundy colors...

the fox and beaver, which are kind of the rusty colors.” Schram turns to another color palette, and points out shades described as “anthracite,” “galaxy,” and “volcano” -- blues and greys.

“We did see a little tiny bit of black this season...[that’s] very unusual,” Schram continues. “He’s always said that black is the color of the city, and so he’s sort of steered away from it. But this season...some of the pieces were a little more urban-inspired than usual, and it was much more androgynous...and I think it just lent itself to a little black in the collection.”

She holds up a sweater, and its sparkling weave catches the light. “The paillettes, which are a signature of his...it >



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just adds another little element of beauty and luxury to the garments. It's actually part of the yarn -- they're not sewn on later," she explains.

Comfort is just as important as elegance, says Schram as she points to a soft top. "This is called a felpa, but it's all cashmere...it's like a jersey sweatshirt. Honestly, you put them on and you're...in the lap of luxury...you just want to curl up in front of a fire."

Cucinelli has broadened his designs beyond clothing to belts, sensual cashmere gloves, handbags, hats, and organic jewelry using semi-precious stones. The collection's rich textures include alpaca, leather, shearling, and other distinctive mixed-media elements like monili, finely-wrought sterling silver strands hand-stitched to accent collars, shoes, and plackets.

"The fabrications are unlike any others," says Schram. "You'll see these beautiful cashmere appliques...cashmere over the silk. And many of the silks are reversible."

Skillfully hand-knitted scarves and sweaters are intricate but lightweight. "This piece takes 30 hours to make," she says, running a hand across a chunky sleeveless top, "and each piece is made by one individual -- no one else can pick up where the other person left off." Schram continues, "So the workmanship...it's couture elements in a casual lifestyle collection. We have clients that range from their 20s to their 70s...all shapes and sizes, all different lifestyles...and they all find a way to wear it differently. ::

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**Get a glimpse inside the world of Cucinelli's humanist enterprise at Solomeo through the company's website, [brunellocucinelli.com](http://brunellocucinelli.com), and explore the designer's work with brand ambassador Lisa Schram. As Saks Fifth Avenue Phoenix celebrates its 50th anniversary at Biltmore Fashion Park, the store hosts an extensive Brunello Cucinelli trunk show on October 9 and 10, showcasing shoes, handbags, accessories, and all of the company's ready-to-wear clothing.**

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LISA SCHRAM,  
Cucinelli Brand  
Ambassador for Saks  
Fifth Avenue, Biltmore  
Fashion Park.

