



Photo by Gideon Levin

a beautiful life

# Brunello Cucinelli

by Aliza Davidovitz

When Brunello Cucinelli weaves a tale, it is as delightful and beautiful as the luxury line of cashmere garments that he produces. His language is poetic, his thoughts profound. It almost seems incongruous coming from this very rugged and handsome man. His English is limited, so while he freely speaks in his native Italian tongue, he holds a cigar in one hand waving it in the air, and with the other he draws circles on a small piece of paper as if both hands are collaborating to relay the story he is conveying.

Brunello Cucinelli Cashmere is located in central Italy in the small village of Solomeo. The factory, housed in a 14th-century castle that Cucinelli restored over the past 20 years, spans 40,000 square feet. Solomeo is a remote town with only 400 inhabitants, but in the walls of its historic castle, Cucinelli, together with the 300 people he employs, produces fashion splendors that are exported internationally to high-priced

retailers. In the United States alone he sells to 120 specialty stores in addition to high-end stores such as Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus.

His cashmere comes from select goats in the Mongolian mountains and his company is regarded as the number one cashmere manufacturer. As a result, he is one of the richest men in Italy. Certainly the life and work of Cucinelli have the semblance of a soft, cuddly, luxurious fairytale.

And indeed his life has been a modern day fairytale, one with a rags-to-riches motif. Brunello Cucinelli, born in 1956, was raised in the town of Castle Rigone by very poor parents who were farmers. They produced wine, rice and corn but never quite earned enough. He remembers the days when they didn't even have electricity or water. He tells how his father was a very quiet man who didn't speak very much, but when he did, he spoke words of wisdom that stuck forevermore in Cucinelli's soul.

"My father would say that the most important thing in life is to always have a dream," Cucinelli shares. "Life without a dream is not a happy life." Ironically, his youth and dreams were nurtured in the shadow of a castle just three miles away that would one day house his multimillion dollar business and bear his name.

Cucinelli gleaned another lesson from his father's experiences. In the 1960s, when the trend in Italy was to leave farming and go work in the city, his father joined the wave and found himself working in a terrible factory where the conditions were subhuman. "When I would see my father come home from work he was very down, very sad," Cucinelli recalls. "I decided then that whatever I'm going to do in life it would be to better the living conditions of humanity and focus on the dignity of humankind."

As a young man he began coloring cashmere, which in those days was always navy or brown. After studying the philosophy of business genius Theodore Levitt, Cucinelli decided that he wanted to produce things for very rich people. Levitt predicted that consumer trends for the next 20 years would be towards high-quality products and that was motivation enough for the young Italian dreamer. He didn't have one penny to spare he tells *Lifestyles*, but he was lucky to find a bank that lent him \$4000 for his business endeavor. "This bank invested in me as a human being," Cucinelli says, "and I too was going to invest in people."

He began his business with four workers and the philosophy of St. Francis, Socrates, Dante, Palladio and Seneca, which is that economic value is nothing without human value. Today each of his workers has the key to the factory. Each is respected; each is treated as an equal. They do not have to punch a card. That is his ode to his father.

The 47-year-old husband and father of two was not always busy philosophizing throughout his youth; he was often busy playing practical jokes on people. And though he once considered becoming a priest, he said that he enjoys people and living life too much to forsake those pleasures. He studied engineering in university but says that he never finished because he really didn't like studying very much and preferred to have fun.

Today, he is a widely demanded guest lecturer in Italy and throughout Europe for his

business acumen. He makes a point to tell his university audience not to study too much. "We have to find life and humor to understand humankind," Cucinelli says, "because that is where creativity is found."

He tells how as a university student he would write love letters to one of the girls in class and pretend it was from another boy. Then he would do the same thing to the boy and pretend it was from the girl. Or, on other occasions, he and his fellow engineering buddies would set up their engineering equipment in the town square and pretend the town was going to be torn down in order for a highway to be built. All the residents would run to the town square in panic thinking it was really true. Another prank he pulled was at the coffee shop where he often hung out until early in the morning. There he would fix up patrons with a prostitute who also frequented the coffee shop without revealing her profession to them. "Making jokes makes a beautiful life," he says with a big, provocative smile.

Although Cucinelli likes to laugh, each time his father sees him in the newspapers or being interviewed on TV, he cries. "My father cries not because he can't believe my financial success, but because he sees every ideal that he taught me as kid," Cucinelli explains. "He sees that his son's dreams are realized. He sees not only a profit formula, but also a human formula."

His parting words to his mother before she passed away were not about his success but rather praising her because she raised quality children. Goodness and kindness are what count most for him. Cucinelli says that it doesn't matter to him if the success of his company doesn't last forever. He says that what is most important is that every human being has to represent something important in the world that lasts forever. For him it's what he gives back to the community. He also says that he doesn't mind if his own children do not want to take over the company one day. What is paramount to him is their personal happiness, wherever it may lead them.

Cucinelli's company generally gives back 2% of the profit to the community. He is now building a new town theater in order to encourage young artists, philosophers and poets—all the people that he feels bring creativity to the world. When he announced that the company profits would be used for that purpose on the 20th anniversary of Cucinelli Cashmere, all the employees began to cry, for Cucinelli's philosophy is to make them feel not

like beneficiaries but rather like participants in the bettering of their own communal lives. He has literally rebuilt the whole town of Solomeo, where his wife Federica was born—the nurseries, the church, the town square and much more. He has also rebuilt the entire town of his own youth. It's all about giving back for Cucinelli and thus his company retrospective is appropriately titled *Solomeo: A Humanistic Enterprise in the World of Industry*.

Even while Cucinelli concerns himself with humanity, he doesn't forget to be human and have fun. It is in the very living of life that Cucinelli gets his inspiration and creativity. He will also often go to discotheques to see what young kids are wearing and to take note of what's in and what's out. Every night he plays soccer for two hours. He loves cigars and his favorite drink is a martini. He wines and dines with the Who's Who, including actor/producer Roberto Benigni. Just one month before September 11th, the American Ambassador to Rome was at his home in Perugia for dinner. They sat until two in the morning listening to Mozart, eating prosciutto, drinking wine and smoking cigars.

Cucinelli was in his office on 9/11 when his wife called to tell him what had happened. It was incomprehensible to this pacifist and humanist. He hopes that September 11th will lead to the beginning of a better world. He feels that all countries will have to ultimately move together in a joint effort to ameliorate the suffering of the world.

He remembers looking at the 800-year-old frescoes in his office just after the attacks, and asking himself, "How many people have died? How many people have laughed? How many wars have there been? And still life goes on. It made it easier for me to accept what had happened," Cucinelli shares. "Life is not always beautiful, but I think we can increase the beauty by reducing the desperation of mankind and helping people much more than we do."

After meeting Brunello Cucinelli, slipping on one of his cashmere garments becomes an even warmer experience. His philosophy takes the superficiality out of his fashions and endows them with spirituality and humanity. "Work, thus understood as an expression of human value, itself becomes a participant in spirituality," he writes, "and achieves the higher aim of true good..." [lifestyles]