

TIME WELL SPENT

# PASSIONS

FASHION

## Care Label

Brunello Cucinelli's Old World values make him a radical forward-thinker in the world of fashion.

**BY EMILIE HAWTIN**



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► **"TODAY I LOOKED** at the calendar and thought, 'How is it possible that every year the swallows arrive on the same day, to the same place?'" Annual bird patterns are top of mind for the CEO of one of the world's most prestigious luxury fashion companies. It might not be what most expect, let alone after a year like 2020, but few corporate leaders indulge themselves in natural wonder like Brunello Cucinelli, Italy's prophetic cashmere emperor.

Forty years in, what he calls his "humanistic" approach to capitalism—based on trust and respect for people and nature—remains quite simple. In an era when brands and leaders are scrambling to understand the meaning of accountability or sustainability, Cucinelli's long-held values provide something of a playbook. "I want to work with true, honest people. If they're concerned one day, I would like to see that in their face. If they're happy, I want to share their happiness.

I want to share difficulties and fears," Cucinelli says.

Solomeo, the medieval Umbrian hamlet that he has magnificently restored (and which is a stone's throw from where he grew up), serves as the forum of the Brunello Cucinelli brand. Any visitor will quickly notice Solomeo's striking equilibrium of past and future: Amid the stone towers and statues of Greco-Roman philosophers are members of an impeccably cool, multigenerational staff who produce men's and

women's tailored sports-wear and knits in Cucinelli's signature relaxed style. The materials are superlative, the construction is impeccable, and nothing is compromised to meet a price point.

The team work in tandem with hundreds of local artisans in a futuristic production compound adjacent to Cucinelli's Old World tailoring school. Glass buildings in the style of Mies van der Rohe connect staff with the natural world. Large courtyards serve as gathering places for long, communal lunches each day, prepared with the harvest from biodynamic olive groves, vineyards, and gardens. The belief is that every natural element affects the

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other, so care for all. This applies to more than the food grown or olive oil cultivated, but to all materials, production, people, and business practices.

During our video interview, Cucinelli sits in his bright, modern office surrounded by colorful books and soccer balls within a frescoed-stone tower from the 1400s that has survived plagues and earthquakes. He can't wait to discuss subjects from his pandemic learnings to the almost-full moon to his Einstein-inspired physical regimen to, yes, bird migration—with theatrical hand gestures and a warm, paternal demeanor.

"How many times can we say, 'Today my soul is serene'? It's only a few.

You know why? Because you need to find it. And you can't find it through the financial or economic side of things, only the spiritual." Cucinelli runs a tight ship, but rather than exerting power over his team with evening emails or weekend texts, he's ruled it out completely. Everyone must disconnect at 5:30 every day and take time for themselves, which Cucinelli explains is the most constructive. "Last night I spent two and a half hours in front of my fireplace, no television, just beautiful thoughts. We need to rediscover time with our souls," he says.

Of course, the test of such lofty principles is how they're applied in a crisis. The pandemic hit

## THE SECRETS OF SOLOMEO

[1] Cutters create Cucinelli's signature soft tailoring. [2] The beautifully restored hamlet is a factory town like no other.

Cucinelli's sales significantly, and the publicly traded company reported revenues of 544 million euros (\$640 million) for 2020, down 10% from 2019. But Cucinelli, who operates his company as if it will last 100 years beyond him, was steadfast in his 10-year plan to double sales by 2028 and took no drastic action. His employees all kept their jobs and full salaries. Global partners were not asked for discounts, and

\$36 million worth of unsold goods were wrapped and donated. The company's shares are currently trading at pre-pandemic highs on the Italian stock exchange.

"I didn't tell my employees that everything will be okay. But I did tell them that the world needs us. And that I'm here, that they can count on me. In return, I asked them to share this thought process and allow me to count on them," he says. (The staff agreed to take one week's holiday in August instead of the usual two, but they ended up accomplishing so much that they wound up taking two anyway.)

All these efforts distill into a workforce that is diverse and talented, extraordinarily devoted, gracious, and noticeably finessed. They're in luxury, but without frenetic, too-packed schedules. Even their emails are sent with warmth and delight.

"Don't get caught in all of these daily tasks. To me, tasks kill the human soul," Cucinelli advises. What he really means: Make time to think about your place in our shared space and how you can exemplify something better.

While few brands are surrounded by rolling hills and medieval churches, Cucinelli's mindset is one that any business could adopt. His company is proof that doing good is possible, without compromising profit or allure, and that turning off might be the most productive way forward for all. ■