Cashmere Kingdom

Up in the Umbrian hills, cashmere entrepreneur Brunello Cucinelli has launched his most ambitious project yet: turning the centuries-old agrarian town of Solomeo into a vibrant, modern village.

CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS checks in.
Photographed by CHRISTIAN KERBER.
Brunello Cucinelli’s Monograph

If Brunello Cucinelli weren’t so likable and successful, and if the cashmere clothes he made weren’t so beautiful, you’d have to dismiss him as just another self-delusional fashion quack. Addressing his employees at a Christmas party one year, he did not shy from comparing himself to Che Guevara, “a small but important leader.” Dinner parties at his villa in the medieval hill town of Solomeo, outside Perugia in Umbria, might begin with a reading from Cicero. Patrons fixed to the façade of his headquarters there are chiseled with sound bites from Socrates and Kafka. In 1983 he began patiently buying up and restoring nearly the entire historic center of Solomeo as a home for his business, creating in the bargain a subtle, low-key destination for culturally driven travelers, connoisseurs of Italian village life, and consumers of cashmere who appreciate a deep discount and get an extra buzz from buying at the source.

Cucinelli believes that his humanistic philosophy, a cocktail of Benedictine morality and enlightened capitalism, yields a natty blazer with coffee-colored suede elbow patches (to mention one vigorously copied signature men’s look) that is tangibly, quantifiably better. Designers consult Oujja boards to find out whether it was the 23rd horse hit on a bag that caused it to be marked down before its time. So given the unknownness of what moves a luxury product, Cucinelli’s conviction that benevolent ideology motors his company is as good as any. Last year he had gross profits of $9 million on sales of $165 million. Bocconi University, in Milan, teaches his business model, with its emphasis on social responsibility, and the professor himself has lectured on it at Harvard, MIT, and Boston College.

“From the beginning I knew that to convince 25-year-old kids from the region to come and work for me was to repopulate Solomeo, which had been practically abandoned—I had to offer them something special,” Cucinelli told me over a plate of farro risotto with tomato and Parmesan at his favorite restaurant, Malvarosa, an agriturismo in neighboring Assisi. “If you’re a young guy at the disco and you’re trying to pick up a girl and you say, ‘I’m a patternmaker at Cucinelli,’ 1 work with my hands, it’s not very sexy. There had to be some added value.”

For the lackluster that means an arcadian view from their desks in Solomeo’s frescoed 14th-century defensive castle. A strategically vague hierarchy is designed to empower employees, suggesting that each is his own boss. Mopeds and bookkeepers have it drilled into them that Cucinelli’s success in building the firm and rehabilitating the village is also theirs. And while it’s a practical impossibility for everyone on the payroll to have a key to the factory, the company has wrung a public relations bonanza and a fortune in goodwill out of this romantic fiction.

The fashion for buying up all or most of a defunct Italian village and rescuing it was launched in 1988. That year the
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ready-to-wear designer Alberta Ferretti and a group of co-investors became the owners of Montegridolfo, just inland from the Adriatic in Le Marche. Six years later they opened Palazzo Viviani, an eight-room hotel, plus a specialty-foods shop and three restaurants. Ferretti likened the project to a crusade. In 2003, Danièle Kihlgren, the Swedish-Italian philanthropist and preservationist, raised Abruzzo's Santo Stefano di Sessanio from the dead with the 28-room Sextantio Albergo Diffuso, where hand-stitched mattresses are filled with hand-carded wool and made up with vintage embroidered linen sheets. The six crumbling Italian bourgs Kihlgren acquired after Santo Stefano await similar treatment.

It can't always be easy for old schoolmates of Cucinelli's to watch the iron gates of his villa in Solomeo swing shut behind his Bentley. The town wears a happy face; if there are people nursing jealousies and asking, "Why him and not me?" they do it behind closed shutters. Born in 1953, Cucinelli grew up in the area in a family that lived off the land, cultivating sunflowers, corn, and wheat. Twenty-seven people slept under the same roof in a house that, for many years, lacked plumbing and electricity. After World War II, farmers began leaving Solomeo for jobs in manufacturing and houses on the plain, or closer to cities like Perugia and Assisi. By the 60's the exodus was complete. When Cucinelli bought his first property in the village it was almost in ruins. Today it is thriving, with a population of 400 and an air of prosperity that a place can maybe only acquire by making $600 cashmere T-shirts (well, they do have long sleeves).

Solomeo has one of the finest provincial classical music festivals in Italy. (It's also free and alfresco.) A new 240-seat theater bowed in September, inspired by the Baroque Teatro Farnese in Parma, the prototype of the modern playhouse, and Vincenzo Scamozzi's 16th-century jewel box Teatro all'Antica, in Lombardy. The theater is part of an elaborate Cucinelli-funded Arts Forum, a complex that includes a Renaissance-style public garden and will have a school and accommodations for craftsmen, based on the ancient guild system, as well as weekday classes in theology, literature, and philosophy for passing tourists. Forty apartments were scheduled to go up on the spot where the theater now stands, but the son of the man who owned the land worked for Cucinelli, the son intervened, and the man sold to Cucinelli.

A nine-day, village-wide medieval street fair held every July sounds corny and is corny, in a good way, with falconty
and weaving demonstrations, wine and grappa tastings, art exhibits, concerts, a photography competition, and stalls selling artisanal soaps and exquisite ironwork, like hinges and box locks. Any woman who lives in Solomeo and isn’t prepared to put on a long heavy velvet costume and headdress for the event and suffer the heat and look ridiculous is considered a bad sport. Many simply see the occasion as a good excuse to eat a lot of amazing food: sausage torte baked in the old communal bread oven, goose in polenta, quadracci (egg-pasta squares) sauced with chickpeas, panzanella (bread salad), formaggio di fiore (pecorino aged underground), and tortellini (the local biscotti) with rice. Some of the village grandmothers who cook for the fair also work in the Cucinelli canteen, where the young guy sitting next to you may be a buyer from Bergdorf’s. Or maybe he designed the pullover you just closed the deal on in the boutique. The subsidized price of a three-course meal is the same for everyone: $3.89. The pasta is often handmade, the meat wood-grilled, the desserts fatte in casa. Only in Italy.

Donatella and Pier Luigi Cavicchi opened Locanda Solomeo, the town’s only hotel and real restaurant, after day-trippers began to appear and it seemed the place had a shot at tourism. “You don’t build a cathedral in the desert,” says Donatella. “If Brunello hadn’t saved the village I wouldn’t be here, and La Bottega—the grocery and bar—wouldn’t exist either. There’s no post office in Solomeo, but there are two furniture stores, each owned by a brother. They had a shop together before and were the symbol of fraternity, and then kaput! The only other businesses are a beauty salon, plus a hairdresser who just makes house calls, plus two metalworkers. We share a mayor with five other villages but we’re growing.”

Still, Donatella reflects, “if you’re an American department store president from Dallas coming to see Brunello—I know, they all stay with me—Solomeo is Lilliput. Brunello produces Michael Bastian’s menswear, and he’s here so often he has his own mattress, which we store for him in the basement. Normally in Italy the big industrialists make their money and take it to Liechtenstein or buy a yacht and villa in Sardinia. Brunello restored our church and built a piazza.”

The Locanda is humble—everything, you might say, a Cucinelli pullover is not. The Cavichiis are wonderfully old-fashioned, unironic innkeepers: a Baci left on your pillow is a Baci left on your pillow, and their 12 guest rooms are sprinkled with antiques and stenciled with flowers. Donatella and Pier Luigi lodged the decorative painter who worked on the church, and when he finished he stayed on to endow the tea salon with Liberty-style scenes of nearby Lake Trasimeno, framed by charming trompe Focci pelmets and curtains identical to the real ones at the windows. The hotel’s cooking is

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lacks the gussiness of Malvarina, but then so does every restaurant in the neighborhood (except maybe L'Ulivo, in Matinelli di Trevi, for the crucial torta al formaggio, a blushing-like Easter bread made with Parmesan and pecorino, go to Sandri, in Perugia). On the other hand if you lived in New York and there were a place half as good as the Locanda downstairs from you, you'd be eating there four nights a week. It's all relative.

Many of the dishes served in the hotel—ravioli filled with masked chickpeas, rabbit galantine stuffed with fennel seed, pistachios—are also taught in its cooking school, which accepts a maximum of six students per class and is blessedly free of chefs, waiters, and anyone answering to “Chef.” Most of the ingredients for the restaurant and school come from Il Mandoleto, the Cavicchi’s agriturismo, set in the open countryside a half-mile away. Five apartments, some slightly more glamorous than the category might imply, sleep four to 13 and offer the autonomy of kitchen or kitchennettes.

Locanda Solomeo’s eventual buyer, should the couple ever decide to sell, is of course Cucinelli. In restoring Solomeo, he says he created 14 houses, not offices, even if that’s the function they fill today. Most have a working fireplace, at least one room conceived as a bedroom, and a kitchen fitted with appliances.

“Nothing lasts forever,” he says, “and that probably includes this company. The important thing is to have done something beautiful and enduring. I’m very philosophical. All those offices can be sold as individual houses, and families can move in tomorrow, if the Sweaters come out of the dishwashers first.”

Christopher Pelanhas is a T+L special correspondent.

GUIDE TO SOLOMEO

**GETTING THERE** The village of Solomeo, in the Umbrian hills, is a two-hour drive from both the Rome and Florence airports. The region around it is best explored by car.

**WHEN TO GO** The optimum weather is from May through September. The classical music festival, Villa Solomeo (theatrium musicum) is held in early July. Solomeo’s medieval festival (solomeo.it) is also held that month.

**WHERE TO STAY AND EAT**

**Locanda Solomeo**

Piazza Carlo Alberto della Chiesa, Solomeo; 39-075/529-3399; solomeo.it; doubles from $150; dinner for two $190

**Malverina & Farmhouse**

In nearby Assisi, with simple rooms and extraordinary food; Brunello Cucinelli’s favorite restaurant. 32 Via Pieve di S. Apollinare, Assisi; 39-075/816-4280; malverina.it; doubles from $136, including breakfast; dinner for two $560.

**WHERE TO SHOP**

Brunello Cucinelli Piazza della Pace, Solomeo; 39-075/529-5555; brunellocucinelli.com.