The Cool King of Ca

For Brunello Cucinelli, success begins at home.
By Richard David Story
Photographs by Paolo Leone
Styled by Donatella Sartorio
shmere
"I have to admit it. Every time I go into Saks Fifth Avenue in search of a lipstick on the first floor, I invariably find myself in Brunello Cucinelli on the second floor. It just makes me feel good—those colors, that cashmere, the look and feel of it all. I love every single thing there—for him and for me."  

— ANONYMOUS NEW YORK SHOPAHOLIC, SEPTEMBER 20, 2010

There are many interesting facts about Brunello Cucinelli, the 57-year-old founder, owner and divine inspiration of the high-end fashion house bearing his name: how he would much rather quote Marcus Aurelius, Kant or Henri David Thoreau than talk about spreadsheets, thread counts or global branding; how this past year he won the coveted 2010 Leonardo Prize for his contribution to Italian industry and culture; how the man who has been called "the King of Gray" for his devotion to a softer, more muted palette started out selling extremely bright-colored cashmere sweaters from his garage in Perugia 33 years ago.

But two details I find particularly telling are how Brunello grew up in rural Umbria, the son of a farmer and, at one point, how he studied to be an engineer. For despite the extreme sophistication of his brand—The New Yorker described his high-priced duds as "just the thing to keep you warm while walking between your Cessna and your limousine"—its casual, off-the-cuff chic, is perfectly suited to the country as it is to the city, is the result of a rigorous, hands-on craftsmanship; well-thought-out detailing; and, yes, even engineering. It's what makes everything seem so timeless yet so modern; why both garment and inhabitant seem effortless. It's why the pants fit just so and the cashmere sweater falls over the shoulders unlike any other. Having expanded his business from a rural garage to a galaxy of boutiques from Capri and Kiev to Athens and Bali Harbour, Brunello is The Cool King of Cashmere, rivaling larger and more familiar brands.

Solomeo is a medieval town with walls, castle, turret and ancient villas—one of which is Brunello's own home, complete with swimming pool and landscaped gardens. From here he often shuttles between cities on a private plane kept some 15 minutes away. Two and half hours north of Rome and 30 minutes from where he was born, Solomeo is nestled amid the dreamy hills of Umbria. His wife is from here, and thanks to his determination and humanistic zeal to create a better, more authentic workplace (and the money to do it), he has literally rebuilt the village: repairing ancient avenues and walkways, establishing a theater for the performing arts and building factories and workshops for 80 percent of Cucinelli's production. Tonight Brunello is dressed in the same effortless chic he sells to the globally well-to-do.

THE DETAILS

Brunello Cucinelli boutiques worldwide, with the most recent openings in London, Paris, Bal Harbour and Las Vegas. The Solomeo factory outlet is at 9 Piazza Dalla Cerna, brunellocucinelli.com.
Spools of cashmere yarn and samples of the collection fill the Brunello Cucinelli workshop.
BRUNETTO’S BOYS: Shot in the village of Solomeo, the Cucinelli staff wear looks from the fallwinter collection, which includes double-breasted bermudas, cashmere blazers, washed cargo pants, long-sleeve plissé polos, Japanese denim, cashmere and cardigans, cashmere cardigan crew neck sweaters, trenchcoat sport jackets, washed cardigans, suede moccasins, flannel ties and leather belts with brass buckles. Prices range from $220 to $4,250.

We’ve just finished the last slice of endless and variously prepared pizzas, all baked in a big woodburning oven in the town square, where we’re joined by about 50 of the town’s 500 inhabitants. It’s the sort of evening Brunello loves to have as often as he can to make as many people as possible feel part of the Cucinelli family business. There are mothers and fathers with children, grandparents and their Cucinelli-clad offspring (a company store just up the road ensures that most everyone gets a little piece of the Cucinelli style). Brunello explains how the pastries, spread out on a giant oak table, were made by his wife and a few friends, one of whom has breast cancer but is celebrating her last round of chemotherapy this evening.
Brunello takes a puff on one of his prized Havanas, sips some Umbrian red and relaxes. This is a man who knows how to enjoy life, and he wants to make sure the rest of the world does as well—whether at a pizza party in the town square or dressed in his signature clothing on New York Lane in East Hampton or Hauptstrasse in Gstaad. But how does he define that person? How is Brunello Cucinelli different from, say, the much larger and more famous Loro Piana, which also produces timeless classics in an array of unbelievable fabrics?

"I have great respect for the Piana family," he says, "their work ethic, their beautiful company and their product. The fact that we buy our fabric from them should easily confirm that."

CONTINUED...
THE COOL KING OF CASHMERE
(continued from page 201)

If I had to highlight the difference between us, I would say our
collections, even if not trendy, are far from the standard classic.
We appeal to people who are interested in fashion but don’t
like to dress like they are.”

Brunello Cucinelli, despite its cult status, is today a
$200 million-a-year business. Brunello has grown his
company slowly and carefully. It’s still very much a local
operation, centered around his two factories in Solomeo, where
he employs about 300 workers to create wonderful things of ex-
traordinarily simple-looking beauty for both men and women—
though it’s perhaps the menswear that has made the brand most
famous. To enter his Madison Avenue store—or even the outlet
(yes, for all of you outlet lovers, Solomeo’s very own factory store
should be on your list of 100 boutiques to visit before you die)—
is to be swept away by a world of cashmere blazers, washed-suede
sneakers and nylon bomber jackets with suede elbow patches.
The word “sweatshirt” will never sound, feel or seem the same
after you’ve slipped into Cucinelli’s version in dove-gray cash-
mere, perhaps with a pair of what are described in the catalog
and on the website as “vintage-look” denim jeans.

“High quality and uniqueness” are key, Brunello says. But
his clothes are also modern, innovative and manage to create a
certain look, a true Cucinelli style. This style may be tradition-
ally classic in its colors and components—blue blazer, gray
slacks, denim shirt—but in cut, fabric and detailing, it’s some-
thing quite unique. Much in the way that Armani created an
Italian profile in the eighties with his constructed architectural
designs, Cucinelli has also developed a look. Take, for example,
the blazer, which buttons high, is cut shortish, and is very fitted
and body-conscious, tucking itself in and around one’s frame
with an impossibly light cashmere flannel—perfect for those
of us who loathe a bulky fall/winter jacket. It has a sort of
sporty, youthful chic that bypasses the merely trendy or, worse,
the ridiculous. Cucinelli is one of the few brands that I could
imagine wearing as a complete look: from shoes, socks and
tapered trousers to his high-buttoned jacket and softly washed,
pale-blue denim shirt to even, say, a Cucinelli messenger bag
complete with his recently produced iPad cover.

Brunello’s closest business partners are wife, Federica, and
dughter Camilla, who works in-house as a designer. (An-
other daughter, 19-year-old Carolina, will likely join the
company next year.) In an age in which many consumers,
especially of luxury goods, are skeptical, if not distrustful, of
global marketing, Brunello satisfies the urge for local, artis-
nal, one-of-a-kind craftsmanship. These are not evening
clothes to be worn with Christian Louboutin stilettos, and
Cucinelli does not even dream in that ubiquitous kingdom of
urban chic known as “black. His colors are neutral tones
like grays and creams and browns, with an occasional touch
of “soft color,” as he puts it, “but never too bright.” Tellingly,
his signature tuxedo is in a soft pigeon-gray cashmere flan-
nel, trimmed in a fractionally different shade of gray satin. He
had no intention of actually producing the ensemble until he
wore it to opening night at Teatro Cucinelli and was floored
by the number of inquiries. In the kingdom of black tie, it
seems, The Cool King of Grey Cashmere did just fine.