

*THE*

An icon of quiet luxury, Brunello Cucinelli keeps his empire focused on quality, family and the joy of everyday life.



*EXPERIENCE*



# HUMAN



Brunello Cucinelli and family.  
All photos courtesy of Brunello Cucinelli.

BY JACKIE COOPERMAN



Luxury-cashmere pioneer Brunello Cucinelli grew up in rural central Italy without electricity but with a profound love of family and community, and a deep intellectual curiosity.

An autodidact and voracious reader of philosophy, Cucinelli, now 70, presides over a public company valued at over \$8 billion and with 125 stores worldwide.

In the Miami Design District, Cucinelli recently opened a brand-







new flagship, a space he says is built for experience over shopping. “In our boutique, you can live the product and experience luxury that is humane, simple and friendly,” he says. “There is a little bar where you can have a cappuccino and a pastry. You can do business, breathe our culture, have a glass of wine, find a book and understand our lifestyle.” Ahead of the opening, Cucinelli spoke to us about the importance of joy, the twin imperatives of profit and philanthropy, and why he urges his granddaughter not to do her homework.

**Design District magazine (DD):** You've said that your rural upbringing was central to your success today. Why?

**Brunello Cucinelli (BC):** I grew up in the Umbrian village of Castel Rigone. My life in the countryside was fundamental to my understanding life as an adult, and to my approach to work. I grew up without electricity and with a profound relationship to nature.

The countryside wasn't like it was in the 1930s, where there was hunger and poverty. Our life was at the beginning of a new cycle, after the war. I lived well, with my grandparents, aunts and uncles. We were 13 people living together; a happy life, in a countryside of silence and sometimes prayer. Our house was built in the 1800s and faced the sunset. If you have a house where the balcony faces the sunrise, it's never as beautiful, because when the sun rises it's assumed that you start the day, but when it sets, you can stay and admire it.

Everything changed when I was a teenager. The dream then was to leave the land and go live in the city. We moved to the outskirts of Perugia. Going to work in a factory was a dream for all of us.

**DD: How did that experience shape your work as an entrepreneur?**

**BC:** My dad went to work in the factory. He didn't complain about the hardship of the work, because he was 40 years old and strong. He complained about the relationship with the managers. When you work in the countryside, who do you have relationships with? The animals, the sky, and every now and then, the landowner. But in the factory, there were these tough relationships with the bosses, and it felt humiliating. If the manager said a swear word, you had to just accept it. He could fire you whenever he wanted. I immediately saw the factory as a difficult place. I saw my father's hands cracked from the work. My mom used to knit me thick socks because I was always in the water and the mud. It was tough in the winter.

**DD: You've written about the importance of the Italian bar or café as a form of education. What do you mean by that?**

**BC:** When I was between 15 and 25 years old, I spent a lot of time at my local café. I call it "the university of life." In Italy, the bar is a meeting place, a small theater, a mix of all different people discussing ideas. There is always someone who listens to your pains. Where else do you find that?

**DD: A sort of communal therapy?**

**BC:** Yes, it's a sort of communal therapy. You watch soccer, you joke. These are the little things that are fundamental to Italian culture. And it dates back to the Renaissance and Lorenzo the Magnificent. In the Middle Ages, there was this sense that life is difficult and then we die, but Lorenzo the Magnificent said we should be happy. This is a moment like the Renaissance, especially for medicine. In the last 20 years, medicine has done unthinkable things. Now, we need to cure our souls and to find a balance in family, at the bar, at the theater, at work, everywhere. I think we focus too much on scholastic achievement. If you also dedicate time to study the intelligence of the soul, you might become a more humane human.

**DD: How has that "soul intelligence" influenced your approach to running your company and managing your 3,000 employees?**

**BC:** First, you have to have a good relationship with the people who work with you, which means you have to be kind and polite. If you offend someone, automatically you're fired. You can be a manager, nonmanager, beautiful, ugly, woman, man, there's no difference. Nobody has the right to offend.

Second, our factory has windows. Most factories don't, because if I'm on the assembly line and I look at the sky 100 times a day for four seconds, I've lost 400 seconds. But it is terrible to work in a place without windows. Third, my employees are all paid salaries, not wages. There's a monthly compensation that is fair and equal,

The Brunello Cucinelli factory in Solomeo, Italy.





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and this has to be the great theme of the future. I've always wanted equality, from when I started the company 46 years ago. There's no difference between men and women; everyone earns the same thing according to the work they do.

Our clothes are exclusively made in Italy. It's expensive, but not overpriced. It costs, but not because we're taking advantage of people. It costs because we make sure the person who provides the materials is well-paid, the tailors are well-paid, the investors in our company are well-paid.

We aim to be a slightly better workplace, a slightly better factory, one that causes the least possible damage to the environment, so when someone buys our clothes, they'll say, "This was made by people who earned the right amount, in a place where they see the sky." You wear our clothes knowing that the people who made it were treated well. I call it "humanistic capitalism"—there must be profit and there must be giving back. This is fundamental.

**DD: How do you do put those ideals into practice?**

**BC:** One way is that when we restored our factory in Solomeo in 2009, we added the School of Contemporary High Craftsmanship and Arts. We give students a stipend while they learn skills that will allow them to work for us. My wife and I also started the Brunello and Federica Cucinelli Foundation in 2010, to do things that enhance humanity. We want to help people who need assistance, and also to restore parts of our cultural patrimony. Our foundation restored the cathedral in Perugia, the city's Etruscan arch and the Civic Tower in nearby Norcia, which was badly damaged in the 2016 earthquake. We are merely temporary custodians of this earth.



Looks from Cucinelli's spring/summer 2024 collection.



You wear our clothes  
knowing that the people  
who made it were treated  
well. I call it "*humanistic  
capitalism.*"





The Cucinelli family.







**DD: Tell me about working with your family.**

**BC:** We all live together in Solomeo, the hamlet we spent decades restoring. Our factory is there, and my family's houses are right next to each other. I want the factory to be there another 300 years. My wife, Federica, is involved in the cultural life of our village and in our foundation. My daughter Camilla is the co-head of the women's style team. Her husband, Riccardo Stefanelli, is our CEO. My other daughter, Carolina, is co-creative director and co-president, and her husband, Alessio Piastrelli, is our men's creative director. Now, we have three grandchildren. In the evening, we're all together. There's a lovely family atmosphere. Sunday lunch, we're all together, sometimes the priest comes, sometimes friends come, people who might have problems, they come and get together with us. Life like this is beautiful.

My oldest granddaughter is 13. It's my job to transfer the joy of life to her. She'll say, "I have to do homework, grandfather." I'll reply, "Don't do it. Rest. Look at the sky, because there is an intelligence of the soul. You have to cultivate the intelligence of the soul. That is the true intelligence."

**DD: Where do you find inspiration?**

**BC:** I find inspiration in the sky and the stars. I have a big fireplace in my house, and I look at the fire for hours. My wife may be in the kitchen, watching television or some movie. She'll say, "What are you looking at?" And I'll say, "The fire. Look how it moves." I get drunk from the fire; not from wine, but from fire. I say let yourself get drunk on the stars, let yourself get drunk on the sky, on the sun. When you are sitting and think to yourself, "I've lost time," I'd say, "To the contrary." It's important to embrace what the Romans called *otium*, contemplation.

**DD: Tell me about your greatest challenges.**

**BC:** Well, I haven't encountered them, because it depends on how you take life, right? I don't want to seem superficial, but I focus on the joy of life, and that's what I want my children and grandchildren to learn.

What was humanity like 50 years ago? How were women treated 50 years ago? How were gay people treated 50 years ago? Humanity is much better now. We are 8 billion human beings. Of course there are wars, but they are less compared to the past. Think about ancient Greece and their 50-years war.

I do think, though, that social media the last 20 years has created damage to our soul. We don't talk to our partners anymore at home. So often, we need someone to talk to. But we're busy, our partner is busy. Your kids want to talk to you, but you tell them, "Wait until I send this email." We can't get worse than this, I think.

**DD: You've accomplished a great deal. What are you most proud of?**

**BC:** In terms of my work, I'm proudest that [then Italian Prime Minister] Mario Draghi invited me to speak during the G20 summit in October 2021 on the topic of capitalism and human innovation. It's not that today I am happier than I was 30 years ago. Thirty years ago, everything was smaller, but the philosophy was the same, human relationships were the same. Now, we're listed in the stock exchange, but you know we try to live a normal life. We work eight hours a day, and we are not connected to our work after 5:30 pm. We all need to go back to living normally.