



Brunello Cucinelli, the archetype of Italian fashion

More Than Mere Cash

Brunello Cucinelli's Batista Wasescha Spins Cashmere Into Gold As A Holistic Company With Family Values Grows In The Swiss Market

TEXT: LAURIANE ZONCO

Love of knowledge echoes in our hearts and nourishes great thought". The words of Socrates? Good guess. More surprisingly, though, it is also the introductory catchphrase of the website of super-luxurious cashmere brand Brunello Cucinelli. When was the last time a fashion brand gave us food for thought via the voice of an ancient Greece philosopher?

The uniqueness of the company does not stop there. Brunello Cucinelli, who founded his eponymous brand in 1985 in the mediaeval Italian town

of Solomeo, sets himself apart in the worlds of fashion and commerce by reiterating his sentiment that profit for profit's sake does not motivate him in the least and that he'd rather give "business a meaning that goes beyond profit and reinvest capital to improve the lives of workers, to enhance and restore the beauty of the world". In times when the lust for profit has usurped all other values, many of us would happily send our résumés to what must be one of the few unorthodox capitalists left in the whole world. Oh, the joy of working with someone who has a soul!

There is such a lucky man, actually. Swiss-born Batista Wasescha has been working with Brunello Cucinelli for the past 20 years, making him one of the earliest partners of the Italian fashion house. Wasescha acts as the managerial agent for the brand in Switzerland; it was he whom Brunello Cucinelli selected in 1992 to develop the Swiss market and expand recognition of the company's colourful, high-quality cashmeres beyond the fashion world and affluent social circles already familiar with them. Wasescha recalls that he and Cucinelli were introduced by a mutual »»»



Batista Wasescha of Brunello Cucinelli

friend, giving Cucinelli the opportunity to appreciate how Wasescha would fit into the company's culture. Recognising the compatibility of their common goals and corporate values, Cucinelli promptly appointed Wasescha to represent and develop the brand in Switzerland. Surprising to many industry experts today is the fact that Wasescha is still occupying the very same position 20 years later, nicely demonstrating a longevity that echoes Brunello Cucinelli's philosophy and ethics, especially with regard to staff satisfaction. As is so typical of companies founded by families, the happiness and wellbeing of the employees are viewed as fundamental keys to success; the Cucinelli factory is famous in Italy for letting workers enjoy long lunch breaks and exempting them from punching a timeclock.

Brunello Cucinelli's intuition in hiring Wasescha has been shown to be astutely accurate. Batista Wasescha talks about the Cucinelli brand with a blend of passion and admiration in expressing how much he cares for it, characteristics which serve him well in overseeing development of the brand in Switzerland; when their collaboration started

out, there were only ten outlets selling Brunello Cucinelli products in the entire country. "Now, we are present in 35 multibrand outlets and have five mono-brand shops, with a sixth one opening in Zurich this autumn," he points out, adding that Cucinelli products "are sold through the best and most refined multibrands in Switzerland". He says so in a matter of fact manner, without any hint of smugness, because he understands and loves the brand enough to know how and where it should be distributed.

It seems Batista Wasescha has always been in the fashion business, even before he was born. Few people were

more equipped than Wasescha to comprehend the needs of Brunello Cucinelli both the man and the brand. Wasescha's parents ran a sports shop, and he started working in the fashion and retail business in Zurich at a young age. His encounter with Cucinelli came early in his career. Subsequent to this professional epiphany, Wasescha started his own fashion agency, soon giving up representation of other brands in order to devote himself completely to Cucinelli. The speed at which the brand developed, in Switzerland and elsewhere in the world, was quite impressive and was recently substantiated by a highly suc-



Taking the brand beyond its base into new areas of merchandise

cessful IPO on the Milan stock exchange earlier this year.

Wasescha is not surprised by the success of Cucinelli in Switzerland, a market that understands and nurtures luxury. Sweaters knitted in the most precious cashmere were bound to find a devoted following here despite the hefty pricetags that dangle from Cucinelli products—Cucinelli is indeed among the most expensive ready-to-wear brands available. Wasescha knew right away that he had the perfect product on his hands. "The Swiss are naturally drawn to those luxurious, warm sweaters and cardigans," he states with a smile, explaining that Swiss consumers "understand what quality is about. Cucinelli takes great pride in having its entire clothing line produced in Europe. It is true craftsmanship, and it has a price, but the end product speaks for itself".

Thanks to the Swiss appreciation for quality, the domestic market was ready to accommodate the expansion of Cucinelli from a brand of luxurious sweaters to a full-range clothing line. "We started with about 150 different Cucinelli products in 1992, and today

the brand produces 1300 pieces per collection each year. We are now able to design about 100 prototypes per day, which is absolutely enormous," enthuses Wasescha. The adaptability and flexibility of the company enabled it to make a swift transition from a respected but restricted product brand to a full-fledged fashion house which now carries a complete range for both men and women. When taking the brand to a global level in expanding both its line and its distribution, the House of Cucinelli decided to create a complete wardrobe "from head to toe". Explains Wasescha, "Something that would mirror the brand's philosophy—our star products are still our statement pieces such as knitwear and coats, but you can basically find anything in our shops now, from hardware to shoes to accessories". More than just clothing boutiques, Cucinelli showrooms strive to offer a comprehensive lifestyle concept, one of understated luxury that evolves from using the best materials, best techniques, and careful handiwork. "The brand is luxury-sport chic," confirms Wasescha, "but never overdone". This characteristic he attributes as a

key reason for the success of the brand in Switzerland. "Buyers constantly marvel about the creativity of the collections, while the attention to details remain consistent," he points out.

His enthusiasm is obvious, yet his choice of words and the tone in which they are delivered display a delicate restraint that belies the Cucinelli ethos; indeed, after meeting Batista Wasescha, it is very clear that the company could not have selected a better person to serve as the catalyst for its expansion in Switzerland, for he completely understands both his market and the modus operandi of his employer. Wasescha is, of course, not a mere agent, but rather a true partner whose inclinations match those of the Cucinelli family and continue to foster growth in a logical and organic manner. So what does this expert have to say about the future of Cucinelli in Switzerland? "Oh, I guess we cannot go on opening more mono-brand shops since we are already established in the finest multibrands, but for that you really ought to ask Brunello directly," he adds coyly. "«««