

THE EMPIRE'S NEW CLOTHES

ITALIANS' HIGH STANDARDS AND INSISTENCE ON BEAUTY DATE BACK TO THE ANCIENT ROMANS, SAYS UMBERTO ANGELONI. HIS TAILORING BUSINESS, CARUSO, IS SUITABLY UNCOMPROMISING WHEN IT COMES TO MADE-TO-MEASURE MENSWEAR.

STORY JOSEPHINE MCKENNA

In the tiny town of Soragna in northern Italy one of the last remaining princes of the Holy Roman Empire has opened the doors of his opulent palace to share 800 years of family history with a handful of visitors.

The ancestors of Prince Diofebo VI Meli Lupi battled against marauding invaders and shifting political alliances, but still managed to fill the 98 rooms of their palace with plenty of stunning frescoes, gilded furnishings and French tapestries. These days the 72-year-old prince is celebrating culture of a different kind: he has been mythologised in two short films produced by the Italian menswear company Caruso.

"They were made with great taste and were very subtle," the prince says, before departing with his favourite labrador.

The two six-minute films feature veteran actor Giancarlo Giannini as the fictional prince of Soragna. The epitome of elegance, the prince drives a classic Lancia Aurelia sports car, wears the finest clothes and samples Italy's best food and wine.

The short films are the brainchild of Umberto Angeloni, who has turned a nondescript garment factory in Emilia-Romagna into an international powerhouse producing custom-made menswear. The president and CEO of Caruso was inspired to make the films after he met the real prince in Soragna in the countryside of Emilia Romagna. Entitled *The Good Italian*, they have become a social media sensation, attracting more than 400,000 views on YouTube.

"In *The Good Italian*, the prince thinks the best way to impress his niece is to produce the ultimate pesto," Angeloni says. "That's what Italians are about and that is why it has been a great success. We wanted to convey things like hospitality and optimism, the substance of how we live. This is the Caruso business plan."

Caruso represents a personal and professional resurrection for Angeloni. He spent 25 years working at Brioni, the exclusive menswear brand, 17 of them as CEO, and created an iconic brand that dressed two James Bonds – Pierce Brosnan and Daniel Craig – and plenty of other big Hollywood names.

But Angeloni fled the company in 2007 after a bitter family leadership dispute, which he prefers not to discuss today. Brioni has recently undergone fresh upheaval and is looking at staff layoffs.

"Parting from Brioni was sad for me. Brioni was my masterpiece, a very fine product, the most prestigious menswear brand in the world," says Angeloni, who increased revenues tenfold during his tenure as CEO.

"It was a new way to promote fashion and culture through lifestyle. It's similar to what I am doing with Caruso through the movies and the promotion of the land, as well as food, art, culture and opera."

When Angeloni left Brioni he was tempted to retire or try something different. Instead he returned to the sector he loves. He heard about Raffaele Caruso, a master tailor who had opened a small shop in Soragna in 1958 and steadily expanded his business. Caruso's factory, Fabbrica Sartoriale Italiana, had grown to 600 employees when Angeloni bought it in 2012.

Angeloni renamed it Caruso in honour of the tailor's legacy. It doesn't hurt that it is also the name of the great Neapolitan tenor Enrico Caruso, since both seem synonymous with Italian quality.

"I invested in Caruso because I thought it was much more advanced from a technical standpoint," says Angeloni, now 63. "Caruso is about evolution – the use of materials, the silhouette, the combination of technology and craftsmanship – this is what men want."

Using the Italian eyewear manufacturer, Luxottica, as its model, Caruso not only produces its own made-to-measure label but also designs and manufactures men's clothing of the highest quality for 15 of the world's top designer brands. "Our mission is to be the most prolific of tailored menswear in Italy, so we take this project as far as possible," he says.

The Chinese investment conglomerate, Fusion, now has a 35 per cent stake in the company and there are plans to expand in China when the faltering economy improves. For now there is strong demand for Caruso's fine tailoring in Italy, the US, Germany and Japan and sales topped €50 million (\$70m) in 2015.

With a price tag of between \$4300 and \$18,500, not everyone can afford a custom-made Caruso suit; but clients can pick up a ready-to-wear one in Milan for as little as \$2300.

"Most men don't want to change their wardrobe every six months," Angeloni says. "They want to evolve, they want to experiment. They want to enrich their style."

Angeloni, a father of five, is originally from Rome. But no discussion about Italian taste takes place far from the dinner table in Emilia-Romagna, which is famous

Umberto Angeloni, president and CEO of Caruso, believes in promoting fashion and culture through lifestyle.



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for its succulent prosciutto, balsamic and Parmesan cheese – so before we make it to the Caruso factory there is a critical pitstop.

"We are close to Parma so we have to start with prosciutto," is Angeloni's opening line as he skims the wine list. "I didn't know this area before I invested in Caruso. Nearly every time I go to a restaurant I learn something, I find a different herb, a new wine."

"When you see so much sophistication, how the food is assembled and presented you can understand the same applies to clothing. That's why it's important to have a meal together to understand how far we have come and how much we have accumulated in our DNA."

Angeloni's conversation whips from the evolution of the senses to the demise of ancient Greece and Egypt before noting the enduring impact of the Roman Empire and how it still influences what it means to be Italian today: "The Roman lifestyle is unparalleled. Never before or after has there been such exquisite taste about how to live."

Caruso's discreet flagship store is located beside the five-star Four Seasons Hotel in the heart of Milan's fashion district with big-name designers like Salvatore Ferragamo, Dolce & Gabbana and Giorgio Armani a short stroll away. Caruso opened a second store in New York in 2014 and is planning more openings elsewhere in the world. In Australia, Caruso is sold at Harrolds.

Inside the stores tailors are ready to take clients' personal measurements and help them choose from hundreds of fabrics such as cashmere, wool blends and even specially crafted camel's hair from the Gobi desert, to create the suit of their choice.

Tailors are also readily dispatched to other Italian cities and even abroad when clients cannot make it to the stores. "The tailor goes to their office or home and men enjoy the experience. They feel good about it, they feel confident, they feel taken care of," says Angeloni.

Tailor Angelo Di Febo spent 13 years learning his trade at Brioni. The enthusiastic 33-year-old now runs Caruso's made-to-measure department and often travels to Russia, the US or the Middle East to personally measure clients.

"There are loyal clients who buy every season," Di Febo says. "Several clients even buy up to 20 items a season. Some focus on a type of fabric while others want to freshen up their wardrobe and change their style. Once we have their profile, it remains on file."

Caruso produces an incredible 9000 made-to-measure suits and jackets a year and has 15,000 customers on file. Roberto Cibin heads the 14-member design team that liaises with designers and produces prototypes for big-name fashion brands as well as Caruso.

"Men's fashion is easier than women's fashion since it changes less," says Cibin. "But it's important to have the right eye and it is fundamental to understand the line and the evolution of men's tastes. There is a new challenge every day."

The brand not only prides itself on its fine tailoring tradition, but invests heavily in research and development, working with renowned textile producer Loro Piana to develop new fabrics from natural fibres.

"You can add features, like wrinkle-resistance and

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changed or improved,” says Angeloni. “Anyone who wants high class wants handmade buttonholes. That’s part of the brand.”

Across the factory floor thousands of suits and jackets in many different sizes and fabrics are being pieced together for a number of instantly recognisable international brands as well as the Caruso line.

“Our advantage is that we have the flexibility to produce a variety of different models,” says Nicola Santini, a former accountant, now in charge of quality control. “It is really a tailor’s workshop. We have put a tailor’s shop and a factory together and when it’s done well it gives you great satisfaction. Sometimes we have to produce a jacket prototype in 24 hours.”

Technical perfection and fine tailoring can never be sacrificed for the sake of speed and at every stage of production there is rigorous scrutiny. Letizia Mutti, 28, gave up a blossoming career as a biologist to check garments for faults and defects. “This is so much better. It gives me a lot of satisfaction,” she says.

Claudia Mambriani was a teenager when she began working as a seamstress with Raffaele Caruso. Now 63, she was lured out of retirement to share her wealth of experience with Angeloni’s team and works with the R&D team on new clothing designs. Together they produce a staggering 4000 prototypes a year.

“Almost everything that used to be done with a sewing machine is now industrialised, but it’s still done with the same spirit and the same expertise,” the 63-year-old Mambriani says. “It is important not to lose this mentality with all the new techniques we have.”

Of course it is not just about manufacturing techniques – it is about providing a tailored fashion item that men want to buy and even educating a new generation of young men about style, regardless of where they live.

In the 21st century there is far less demand for tuxedos, morning suits and waistcoats than there once was, but Angeloni says younger clients are happy to experiment and fine tailoring is always appreciated by those who recognise it. “The fact that young men are experimenting with their informal wardrobe is fine,” says Angeloni. “They are learning to dress up, to dress elegantly, more formally.”

If Angeloni needs any more insight into what the next generation of men may want in a luxury garment, he doesn’t have to go far. His 35-year-old son Marco is in charge of Caruso’s operations, while another son, actor Emanuele, plays the prince’s personal butler in *The Good Italian* films.

But after years of experience in quality menswear, Angeloni is convinced that simply reinforcing what it means to be Italian allows his line of exclusive apparel to sell itself. “It’s not a myth that Italians know how to live well; Italians are only happy with what they think is the best,” he says.

“You can trace *la dolce vita* back 2500 years. The ancient Romans lived at such a level of sophistication that it has not been matched. That is who we are and we do it effortlessly. We know how to create pleasure, whether it’s a dish of pasta or a landscape. It is part of our identity and it is something we have to share.” **W**



From Caruso's autumn-winter 2016 collection

stain-resistance,” says Angeloni. “They are super-fine. Caruso is superior to any other in its search for materials. There is no need to reinvent the wheel but there is a need to go for it.”

Once the designs and the fabrics are selected the orders make their way along a vast production line where an army of seamstresses work with remarkable visual illustrations and precise measurements for every item at their fingertips. Teams are tasked with producing collars, lapels, pockets, sleeves and jacket linings that are finally pieced together in a careful process where there is no margin for error. Every

piece of clothing is traced by computer as it progresses.

Anyone expecting to see a classic Neopolitan tailor with a tape measure around his neck and a dummy beside him may be disappointed. On the factory floor highly skilled human handiwork seems to merge with the latest hi-tech equipment, and yet a top-of-the-range suit is still 80 per cent handmade.

One phase of the operation that remains unchanged and unautomated is the buttonhole. Using the finest silk thread, 20 seamstresses sew each one by hand, miraculously completing one buttonhole every 15 minutes. “That’s one of the things that cannot be