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## RUNNING IN THE family

HOW LUXURY ITALIAN  
TAILOR CANALI HAS  
MADE A BIG IMPRESSION  
ON MENSWEAR WITH  
ITS PROUDLY SMALL  
SCALE MENTALITY

Words by  
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WHEN GIOVANNI AND GIACOMO CANALI set up a modest tailoring workshop in the tiny commune of Triuggio in 1934, little did they know that two rather grander, yet very different, events would catapult their business to becoming one of Italy's most revered labels. The first was the Second World War, where cloth rationing would cement the shorter lounge suit as the de facto outfit of choice for successful men. The second, after the pair had handed over the reigns to their sons 20 years later, was the re-emergence of Milan, 15 miles south, as the world's fashion capital; a city that mesmerised the stars of Hollywood's golden age such as Humphrey Bogart, Audrey Hepburn and Richard Burton.

The label naturally took advantage and expanded internationally, selling its wares across Europe, the Middle East and America. But, perhaps surprisingly, its growth was far slower than many of its rivals, with the brand stubbornly refusing to outsource production from Italy or hire outsiders in senior positions. "We are a family-led company," explains the softly spoken Paolo, a third generation Canali. "And that meant it took years to progress. We needed to have the resources to expand the production. We had to open new factories, and that's not something that can happen overnight." Family is a word you'll hear Paolo say again and again.

In 2017, he has the title of marketing director but, along with sister Elisabetta, is the public face of the company. He's taken time out of his manic schedule – he's meeting European buyers interested in spring 2018 today, such is the relentlessly forward nature of menswear – to talk to us at 8:30 am about the history of the business. He's doing this, no doubt, because he realises how important that story is. Just like his pre-teen self, he knows customers, who include Barack Obama, George Clooney and Michael Douglas, are buying into heritage as much as they are fabrics or designs.

"Canali was established more than 80 years ago by my grandfather," he continues, now talking to Mr Jones from the label's conversely futuristic headquarters in Porta Nuova, Milan. "It was then developed by my father and his brother. I have eight cousins all working for the brand. Between the late 80s and 90s, we all had a choice to join or not. Nobody was forced, but at the same time... we realised our parents fought all those years, working 24/7, to build it up and keep it going."

He had dreamed of a career in journalism or aviation but made the decision to sign up with the firm aged 10 after having an "epiphany" while walking through a pine forest near home. His first working experiences with the business came later in the 80s, when he was sent to cut his teeth in New York. He managed on the frontline, meeting clients and customers as the company plotted its expansion overseas. "Nearly all of us joined, and it was because we believed in it. I was fascinated by the story."

Canali now employs 1,500 tailors and 400 support staff in its seven factories across the country. It estimates that it crafts some 250,000 individual pieces of clothing annually, while you can find boutiques as far afield as Milan, Paris, Tokyo, Beijing and Singapore. And yet it's still proudly married to the same small-scale idealism it had when it opened. Fabric is only sourced from the best mills in Biella, Italy, and every individual piece is repeatedly tested before being certified to be cut. The same goes for its staff. New tailors, for instance, join an "academy" run by Paolo's cousin and are trained for up to six months before they are let loose on garments. Such is the reluctance to sacrifice quality, young recruits may wait weeks or months before they can undertake even the most simple tasks on real clothes.

"You need to train artisans to make the garments," he explains, "and the decision to manufacture in Italy is a business choice as much as a sentimental one. Because we own and oversee production in our factories, we can absolutely guarantee quality."

There's been a softening of the strict "family only" mantra recently, Paolo admits, but not on losing the company ethos. "We now hire skilled managers because we need to compete internationally. But it will always be family owned and have family values. We are determined to keep our friendly atmosphere." Indeed, exports now account for 75 per cent of Canali's production. Moreover, it is a sign of Australia's increased importance that today – "by coincidence I promise" he jokes – Paolo's set to meet up with a representative of David Jones in Milan.

But perhaps the most eye-raising aspect of the modern Canali is its bravery in branching into other areas of fashion, but all with a signature twist. Its slim-fit jeans, for instance, are blended with cashmere to make them softer, while its luxe headphones – yes, headphones – are wrapped in Italian leather to keep earbuds super snug.

I wonder, therefore, what's next for the label? What does the fourth generation make of what's come before, and will they all be as committed as the third? "There's eight younger Canalis between two and 23 years old," explains Paolo. "The idea is to hire the children one day, so they join the company. But this time they will have to undertake training and work at other businesses first." His eldest son is doing just that, and there are hopes he will continue the family legacy.

He will though, have a long way to go to match Paolo's father. "My dad is now 85," he says, as our conversation comes to an end, "and not only is he still involved – he insists on working six days a week."

**LEFT** Paolo is a third-generation Canali who is now the face of the label. **RIGHT** Canali's SS17 range includes a field jacket in soft rust-coloured leather and multi-blended, wool-cotton blazers.



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