



# BROTHERS IN ARMS

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WORDS *by* COLIN CAMERON  
IMAGES *by* MICHELE GASTL

# IN AN IDYLLIC PART OF

rural Tuscany, the sounds of nature mix together with more man-made audio murmurings. At Fattoria La Vialla, a few miles north east of Arezzo, the latter noises reflect that even the purest artisans of agriculture have adopted tools of the modern age. Without compromising organic principles and regional custom, added to Tuscany's natural blessings — the region is actually self-sufficient, if you are prudent, which the rest of Italy jokes all Tuscans are — there have been mechanical and scientific technology processes for the production of, in this instance, biodynamic wines.

Yet here there is an additional element to the local soundtrack that accompanies, in the case of La Vialla, the production of Chianti, olive oil, cheeses, pasta and rich regional sauces. Gianni, Bandino and Antonio Lo Franco, the men behind all this local industry, are brothers. Thoughts and views, contradictory or otherwise, are expressed with vigour and at great volume. Through the day — and, at harvest time, during the night — fraternal dialogue fills the air. "The decision making is democratic," Bandino laughs. "The farm works and grows thanks to our affinity; it is almost a fellowship." He shrugs: "Sure there is a slowness in making our minds up. Because all important decisions must be made together and this takes time and effort." Gianni is the oldest, Bandino adds, and perhaps, with procrastination or even stalemate in mind, also being the biggest helps him ultimately in breaking any deadlock.

Sergio Loro Piana smiles at the thought. Along with his brother Pier Luigi, he runs the international fashion house Loro Piana, which, as a byword for excellence in both materials and production, proudly bears their family name. This is an altogether different scale of brothers in arms. The company has a worldwide presence with over 100 stores across four continents, stocking a range of garments that equip patrons for the ultimate Amalfi coast lifestyle and the seasonal variations of the super-rich social circuit.





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Sergio Loro Piana reflects. For a moment he breaks from his lunch and conversations with waiting staff that can switch comfortably from English to either French or Italian and ponders the business of families. He reflects that a size of operation such as Loro Piana is blessed by having more than a single figurehead, which can sometimes mean a one-dimensional rather than multi-dimensional approach to the daily challenges of a global brand. "Say my brother and I agree that we must go to Roma," Sergio suggests. "We both chose how to travel. Then maybe we also take different routes. But we end up together at our destination."

If only Cain and Abel could have agreed to differ. For the obvious reason of averting a murder but also because a difference of opinion is no obstacle to success. For example, the Dassler brothers, Adi and Rudolf, went their separate ways to pursue alternative approaches after a youth shared in making boots for football. The former subsequently established Adidas, the latter Puma, with the two operations co-existing on either side of the Aurach River that runs through the German town of Herzogenaurach.

Behind this particular separation there was a long sustained feud. The Dassler brothers reputedly never reconciled after an argument between — some suggest — their wives (which, more divisive rumours claim, involved a fraternal infidelity and even a love child).

Loro Piana is illustrative that fashion is perhaps better at harnessing creative tension for the good under the same of-the-moment umbrella. The industry also boasts Carlo, Claudio and Roberto Zaccardi, the brothers behind, Boggi, the stylish Milanese menswear label that recently added an outlet on Jermyn Street at the heart of London's male sartorial district. Likewise Max and Roberto Girombelli, who combined to establish the bespoke Duca Sartoria, with ateliers in Moscow, New York and Milan, and regular trips to London to service clients. "Max? Più pragmatico, come il Anglo-Saxon," laughs Roberto, the younger brother. "Me? Più sentimentale, come il Latino." Roberto continues, with a trademark smile: "Max più trdizionale-conservativo. Roby più creativo-trasgressivo."

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Whether or not you speak Italian, the sentiments are easily understood. Like the Loro Piana brothers, the Girombelli boys behind Duca Sartoria, which has clothed US presidents, might well take different paths to Rome. Speak to Sergio Loro Piana and the bond with his brother is never far from the conversation. Likewise, a recognition of their different approaches to life. "As children we would fight with pillows," he jokes.

Despite their differences, the pair share responsibilities. The company, which they currently co-chair, first traded wool fabrics at the beginning of the nineteenth century out of Trivero before relocating to Valsesia. Then, in 1924, Pietro Loro Piana established the shell that ultimately grew into Loro Piana of today, still in the heart of Piedmont. Pietro Loro Piana's nephew Franco took over as managing director in 1941. Around 30 years later, his sons Sergio and Pier Luigi took on a growing number of their father's chief executive duties. Today they rotate the chairmanship of Loro Piana, each occupying the hot seat for three-year stints. "We have always shared the vision of what you see today," confides Sergio Loro Piana. "This was important. There has not always been around much that we could copy or on which our plans could be based. Together we have had to invent our own wheel." Sergio can distill the differences in approach into the most basic division of duties. He jokes that his brother buys the wool and cloth. "Then I decide what we do with it," he chuckles.

Helpfully, the company, with an overall payroll of 2,200, has two arms: textiles and luxury goods. With this scale of operation and the split there is room to breathe. The Loro Piana brothers can spread their talents across their fabrics, yarn, and interiors endeavours, the last of these providing materials to architects and decorators, as well as the production, design and distribution of the brand's luxury lifestyle collection.

At 62, Sergio has both a statesman's grace and a vigour that is in contrast with his vintage. Like at La Violla, sometimes the older Sergio — three years senior to Pier Luigi — does take the lead. "Pier Luigi only started using email a few years ago," his brother laughs. "People would ask him, heh, did you receive my message? No? Actually, any email would just remain unopened. Then, my brother realised that decisions were being made and he was learning about them only after all had been agreed. He thought, hang on, I must have this tool."

The dynamic of the brothers can be further illustrated by the culmination last year of a collaboration that has yielded a new luxury fabric with a written testimony to the painstaking process behind that fabric's emergence. In 2007, a ten-year process of persuading Mongolian and Chinese breeders to set aside a first and only combing of kids' underfleeces before the goats reach the age of one resulted in Loro Piana registering baby cashmere as a trademark in Italy and internationally.

Then, last year, "Baby Cashmere: The Long Journey of Excellence", a book featuring photographs of the acclaimed Bruna Rotunno, was published by Skira, and limited editions were made available throughout Europe and Asia. This September, the 184-page tome will be available in America. The book chronicles the painstaking harvesting of 13–13.5 micron cashmere from the Hyrcus breed which ultimately makes up into garments that are both uniquely lightweight and warm. "PJ had the idea for baby cashmere," maintains Sergio. "The book? That was me."

Baby cashmere is a reflection of the company's pursuit of the very best materials for customers and also clients, which are provided fabrics by Loro Piana's textile divisions. China and Mongolia are the source of cashmere, and vicuna, the world's most precious fibre, is sourced from Peru. For merino wool, Loro Piana looks to Australia and New Zealand.

Evidence of Loro Piana's commitment to developing the very best of materials is the Chinese dehairing plant bought in 1999 so that the company could control the all-important early stages of the cashmere spinning process. The plant is based in Outer Mongolia, a place few companies can claim to have trawled while looking for the right offices.

The purchase of 2,000 hectares of land near Peru's Pampa Galeras reserve is intended to help preserve the threatened vicuna species on whose qualities upon which Loro Piana carefully draws. In 1994, Loro Piana established a relationship with Peruvian conservationists, which kickstarted efforts to save the vicuna from extinction.

The ephemeral elements of fashion are greatly at odds with commitments that strive to sustain the past long into the future. Being at the head of a company of Loro Piana's size requires Sergio to look beyond fashion's spring/summer, autumn/winter seasons. He creates the space in his schedule to nurture the company's long-term vision by

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mastering the art of delegation, a gift which his brother is less inclined to embrace so wholeheartedly. "I am the ordered one, and structured," Sergio maintains. He jokes: "I don't like to work, so I try and teach others around me what needs to be done so that when I have finished teaching I can attend to other matters."

With any free time, Sergio likes to fly. The analogies with running a multi-national business are obvious. At the controls, you must decide what route you take, and alter course and altitude while at the same time progressing towards your ultimate destination. As a qualified pilot, Sergio counters the notion that being in the cockpit is an opportunity to savour vistas and panoramas. That is true only of the big commercial planes, when the deck is on automatic pilot, he explains. The smaller the plane, he suggests, the more flying is like driving, constantly changing altitude and direction.

Having more than one navigator could potentially bring problems. A deal breaker is to hand in the presence of Elena Loro Piana, a shareholder in the company in her own right. She is the mother of Sergio and Pier Luigi.

In the case of Cain and Abel, their mother, Eve, wasn't ideally suited to preventing the latter meeting a bloody end at the hands of his brother. A football match last year between Adidas and Puma — the first shared activity between the companies since the founding brothers went their separate ways in 1948 — at least shows that even the most long running of fraternal feuds can be healed.

Roberto Girombelli believes that he and his brother Max avoid descending into bitter disputes by being joined together by values transmitted from their family, which has educated them to share an appreciation of what is right and to sustain a tradition of thoughtfulness to kin. Or in a tongue that the multi-lingual Sergio Loro Piana would favour "una famiglia con grande tradizione di serietà". Back at Fattoria La Violla, Bandino Lo Franco adds: "When I was small, me and my brothers would always have lunch and dinner at home with our parents, taking in an air di famiglia particular to our own family, which truly thrived on us all being together." He adds: "As children we spent our spare time playing, going to the countryside at Ca' Dell'Oro, collecting crops, cooking, looking after olives, making oil, pressing grapes."

It is only natural.

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