

CENTURION

M A G A Z I N E

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Twin Peaks and the Verandas, two of four restored guesthouses at Valley Rock Inn & Mountain Club, in Sloatsburg, New York.

Talk of the Town

After Michael Bruno sold 1stdibs, he went in search of his next act. He never imagined it would take a village.

by Jackie Caradonio. Photographs by Paola + Murray

THERE ARE NO small projects in Michael Bruno's world. That was true of 1stdibs, the online marketplace he founded in 2001 and eventually turned into a \$300 million business. And that is also true of Valley Rock Inn & Mountain Club, the resort he built in New York State that eventually revitalized an entire town.

But first, the backstory. It was 2012 when Bruno, at the insistence of a friend, made his first pilgrimage

to Tuxedo Park. Less than an hour from Manhattan, the lakefront neighborhood is one of the oldest gated communities in America (the word *tuxedo* actually derives from the name of the village, where the garment was popularized during the Gilded Age after a local resident discovered it in England). For Bruno, it was a secret Xanadu. "I had never even been across the George Washington Bridge," he says, "but the way

my friend kept talking about it, with these houses and hills overlooking this lake—it didn't even sound real."

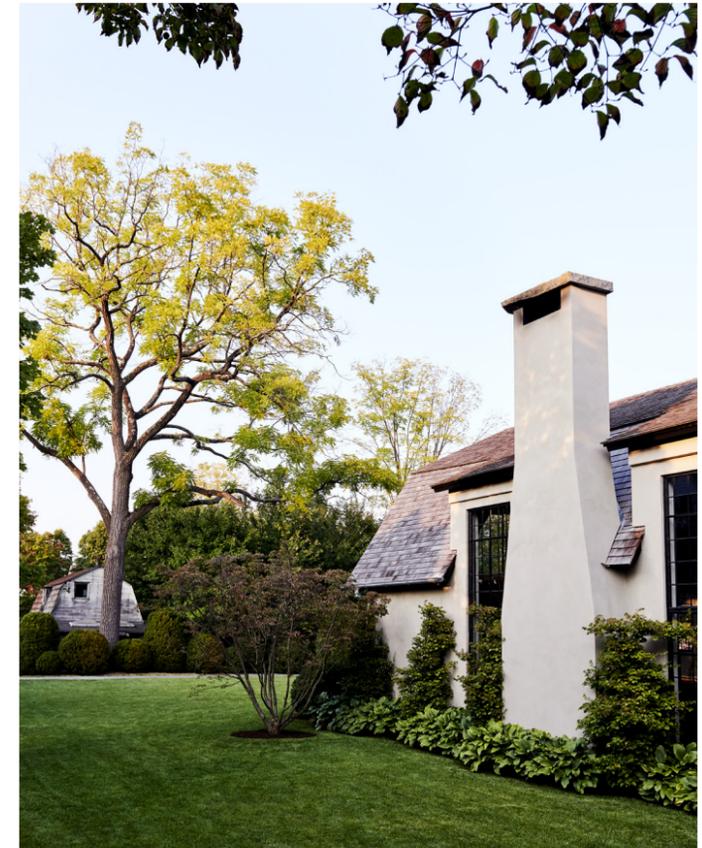
It *was* real, and for Bruno, it was love at first sight. Within months, he and partner Alexander Jakowec were the village's newest residents, having purchased what Bruno says is the dream house of his childhood: a Georgian-style estate designed in 1900 by architect John Russell Pope. He called it his "city residence"—he



Clockwise from left: Valley Rock Inn's swimming pool; Michael Bruno; the resort's restaurant, decorated with furniture from Bruno's own collection.



Clockwise from right: The Valley Rock market; one of several restored 19th-century structures at the inn; Eero Saarinen chairs and a Verner Panton chandelier in the Verandas guesthouse.



even gave up his apartment in the West Village—and filled it with designer pieces and finds from Paris flea markets. But there was one problem. “Outside the gates of Tuxedo Park just wasn’t as interesting,” he says.

Beyond those gates lies Sloatsburg, a village of 3,000 that served as a strategic military site during the Revolutionary War but by the 2000s had become a sleepy commuter town. Bruno devised a plan that would establish the kinds of shops and services he felt were missing in the area as well as draw other new businesses. “I thought if we could create a market, maybe a nice restaurant and an art gallery, we could improve the lifestyle and make it a more interesting place to be.” So in 2015, after stepping away from Istdibs, he started buying abandoned buildings and lots. Eventually, he had amassed roughly one-third of the town, including historic barns, farmland, and a Dutch homestead and firehouse dating to the mid-1800s. “It started out small and just kept growing and eventually I realized this spot, with the river and the light and Harriman

State Park right there—this place could really be something.”

Before it could be something, though, those old buildings needed work. Bruno turned to another friend, interior designer and antiques dealer Lisa Bowles, to help take the houses down to the studs, then reconstruct them in their original style, shingles and all. “I didn’t want to butcher the

way they looked on the outside,” he says. “I wanted to keep some integrity to the houses.” In doing so, the duo avoided the pitfalls of countless hotel conversion projects: Rather than slice and dice the historic homes to cram in more guest rooms, they have kept them intact as four three-to-five-bedroom houses, each of which can be booked only in its entirety.

In those spacious quarters, Bruno’s impeccable taste is everywhere. “At first I picked through my own warehouses,” he says, “and then I went antiques in Hudson, and of course, I used Istdibs.” Pieces from his personal collection—Anthony Redmile



antler chandeliers, Jacques Adnet leather chairs—blend with Bowles’s handmade lamps and custom furnishings like a restored 19th-century horn chair covered in leather and angora fabric. In the three-bedroom Farm House, J. L. Møller rosewood chairs surround a Florence Knoll marble conference table. The old firehouse—now a restaurant that hosts popular weekend farm dinners—has a pair of de Sede leather sofas and a totem pole, all of which also came out of storage. “They are going to get more wear and tear but I would prefer that to them being stowed away,” he adds.

He didn’t stop there. He created gardens and a pool (hauling in hundreds of hydrangeas and boxwoods from Marders in the Hamptons), a 7,000-square-foot gym (for guests as well as locals, who can join as members), an organic market, and an art gallery (which regularly showcases the work of his sister, painter Sally Bruno). In the town of Tuxedo, he has converted an abandoned grocery store into Tuxedo Hudson Realty and Antique Center, and 26 miles away, in Chester, he leases 300 acres of land to farmers, who sell their organic produce at an on-site market and through Valley Rock Inn.

Bruno’s build-it-and-they-will-come strategy appears to have worked. Local businesses are flourishing—a coffee shop and craft-beer garden have opened, and a farm stand now pops up on weekends—and the designer has ambitions for a second hotel nearby, as well as a restaurant inspired by Manhattan’s Waverly Inn. He has also launched a website, Tastemakers Guide, devoted to showcasing arts,

culture, and dining throughout the region. Still, he credits much of the newfound interest in the area to the same thing that lured him on that fateful first visit in 2012: the 70,000 acres of untouched nature surrounding Sloatsburg and Tuxedo. “To have all this wild nature this close to the city is just truly incredible,” he says. “Sometimes I’m still in disbelief that it’s real.” valleyrockinn.com