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A MAN OF GREAT VISION

ENTREPRENEUR
MICHAEL BRUNO IS FORGING
THE REBIRTH OF TWO TOWNS
THAT TIME FORGOT.

BY BRYAN MILLER

FEATURING PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENNETH GABRIELSEN

Driving north on New York State Route 17, at the western tip of Rockland County, the village of Sloatsburg announces itself with a row of sad, flaking farmhouses, some vacant, some with front porches serving double duty as storage units. The busy two-lane highway bullies its way through the center of the community, depriving it of a quaint Hudson Valley center or any center at all. I visited twice on beautiful late spring days and saw little pedestrian traffic, but much truck traffic.

In a previous century, Sloatsburg was known for its lumber business and the Ramapo Piece and Dye Works, which manufactured textiles for the ladies' garment trade. In the spring of 1955, a wind-whipped blaze consumed the sprawling complex, requiring more than 400 area firefighters to put it down. At the same time, commercial timber was thinning out. Things in Sloatsburg started to go south.

For decades, the Orange Turnpike (also called Route 17) was one of the only major roads leading to upstate New York, and it brought thousands of motorists a month to its flourishing center, which was bustling with inns, restaurants, bars, general stores, service stations, and more. That spigot began to taper with the roll-out, later in the decade of the New York State Thruway and the Palisades Interstate Parkway.



Michael Bruno in front of a sloping 19th-century barn with a stamped metal roof. Its sole function is charm.

Photograph by Jill Swirbul

Since then, to go to Sloatsburg you have to *want* to go to Sloatsburg.

Even so, the region holds numerous non-commercial attractions, particularly for those who revel in the outdoors. The village of a little more than 3,000 residents is ringed by thousands of acres of parks, including Sterling Forest and Harriman State Park, each with campgrounds, swimming, boating, and 200 miles

Four renovated Victorian guest houses accommodate six to eight guests each. The houses have two entrances: the shingled side faces Route 17 (Orange Turnpike) and is buffered by greenery; the other fronts the village courtyard.

of hiking trails. To the west, the Appalachian Trail treks south along the shores of Greenwood Lake.

Following 9/11, dozens of police and firefighters made Sloatsburg their psychological and residential refuge. Real estate was cheap, and the near 38-mile commute to the city was manageable, particularly if you worked off-hours. Many of them remain, and have raised families here. Every Fri-



day, a dozen or more get together at the popular, TV-festooned Rhodes North Tavern on the south end of town. Adorning the walls are framed photographs of their lost comrades.

Sloatsburg took it on the chin with the real estate bust of 2008. There were foreclosures, bankruptcies, and lost jobs, but surprisingly, the population held steady. This is attributed to the influx of commuters who continue to supplant many local youth who, after high school, can't hit the Thruway fast enough.

A two-minute drive north, past more farmhouses for which the term ramshackle would be a compliment, took me to the town of Tuxedo. It is comparable to Sloatsburg in size and decrepitude, or so it seems to a drive-by visitor. What makes Tuxedo unusual is that it contains a town within the town, although the two could well be on different continents.

Carved out of spiking, rocky terrain in the late 1800s as a bosky redoubt for wealthy New Yorkers, Tuxedo Park is said to be one of the oldest gated communities in the

country. (The men's garment that borrows its name is said to have been popularized at the exclusive Tuxedo Club in the 1880s.) Though its three square miles are home to fewer than 700 residents, the village supports a mayor, a police department, a town hall, and attendant government agencies. A brief tour reveals a phantasmagoria of architecturally distinctive manses, many overlooking a large reservoir and valued in the eight figures. One could say that Tuxedo Park stands sentry — Oz-like — over the dramatic Ramapo Valley.

"That's the fancy place up there," is how it is defined by Anne Skinner, an affable, matronly waitress at the Orange Top Diner, a high-ceilinged, featureless structure that appears to serve as the de facto town square. She adds, with mock indignation, "You have to know somebody to get in; I know lots of people."

To get a sense of the town/gown character of Tuxedo, just drive up and down the main drag. You'll see a wine shop ("Veuve Clicquot, \$43.99!") but no supermarket; a yoga studio but no clothing store; a sushi place but no service station; a financial planner but no drugstore.

Meet Michael Bruno, founder and owner of Tuxedo Hudson Company, who wants to change all of this. A well-off entrepreneur, his mission is to buy up blighted property in both

municipalities and create an artsy pastoral village that celebrates the agrarian heritage of the Lower Hudson Valley. The project is called the Valley Rock Inn, and he plans to accomplish all of this pretty much by himself.

Raised in Larchmont, he studied business at San Diego State University. He fell in love with the real estate business when, at age 19, he watched in awe as a real estate agent pocketed a \$20,000 commission on a single sale. He earned a license to practice a year later, and purchased his first house, with no money down, at 21.

"Now that's what I want to do!" he recalls thinking at that time, during a driving tour of the area. It was the zenith of the dot-com era. His easy affability and infectious optimism proved ideal for selling very big homes to very young clients. Eventually he relocated to San Francisco — where the big tuna were biting — and sold to the first wave of tech entrepreneurs. In short, he made a killing.

Rich, young, and restless, Bruno, who is of medium build and easily likable (he declines to disclose his age), scanned the landscape for a new challenge. While he had virtually no experience with the Internet, it was exploding all around him and seemed like a promising second career.

"I didn't even have an email address," he laughs. "But I was determined to do it."

In 1999 he purchased a domain name and a one-way plane ticket to Paris. Why Paris? Bruno's response says as much about that heady epoch as it does about his youthful audacity.

"I knew that if I stayed in California," he reasoned, "I would be making so much money I'd never try the dot-com thing."

While meandering through the city's vast Clingnancourt flea market, where scores of vendors, both large- and small-scale, competed for attention, he had a flash of inspiration. What if these merchants could display their wares to a worldwide market on the web? Thus was hatched 1stdibs.com. It was a brilliant and timely concept, and investors came onboard after he was able to self-fund the company for more than a decade. A quick perusal of its expansive website confirms its astounding success.

Having amassed, for the second time, too much money — he has sold his interest in 1stdibs.com — Bruno decided to return to his first passion, real estate, but in a very different way. At the time, he was residing in Manhattan with his partner, Alexander Jakowec, in an apartment on the Upper East Side, near Central Park. They were in the



(Left) The rose-framed courtyard is used for special events; (right) A Dutch-style barn will house the yet-to-be-named restaurant and bar.



market for real estate when a friend suggested they check out the Tuxedo area. “I looked around and saw how rundown it appeared,” he recalls. “But at the same time, I came to believe that the potential was tremendous: surrounded by state parks, close to the city, train access, and major highways, and with some buildings that could be beautifully restored. That’s how I got this crazy idea.”

The crazy idea was to create the rustic — well, rustic for city folk — Valley Rock Inn, a sophisticated village that will include restaurants, guest houses, a hotel and pool, a farm stand, a coffee house, an art gallery, an antiques store, an events space, a bike shop, and more.

As of early July he had spent nearly \$12 million in both towns to snap up two dozen astoundingly cheap buildings and get a building team up and running. The development is designed to evoke a folksy village square anchored by the four handsomely renovated, two-story Victorian guest houses with 32 rooms — each room renting for anywhere between \$100 to \$150 a day.

“This cannot be just for rich people,” Bruno says.

At press time, the Blue Barn Farm Stand and the bike shop were scheduled to be the first to open in early September, while the restaurant could take until year’s end. The 40-50 room hotel and pool are scheduled to open in 2018, as well as the Hudson Valley Market, carrying produce and prepared to-go items, among other things.

To assure an ample supply of wholesome victuals, the company purchased the Chester Agricultural Center, a farm preservation consortium backed by private investors. Bruno plans to tap into young culinarians in the region, as well as talent from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. “If you do good food on a high end, people will come from all over,” he predicts.

A steady stream of customers is expected from Woodbury Common Premium Outlets, 14 miles to the north. Skiing is a short drive west at Tuxedo Ridge; to the north are the art installations at Storm King. The biggest boon of all is expected to be a mind-boggling residential development nearby called Tuxedo Farms, projected to hold nearly 2,000 townhouses, cottages, apartments, and big-ticket estates. The first phase of 687 units is in progress.

Also to be taken into account is a new 1.6 million sq ft headquarters of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, just 20 miles down the road in Warwick. The giant visitors’ center is said to attract hundreds of pilgrims a day.

“Nobody is taking advantage of all these things, so I guess it’s gotta be me,” Bruno says as we drive up to the intimidating, guard-patrolled gates of Tuxedo Park.

As we wind around the leafy compound, Bruno points out one massive residence after another, citing the names and occupations of many residents, as well as the market prices of their homes.

“I love real estate,” he rejoices.

Bruno owns three estates inside the gates, among them a 12,000 sq ft, turn-of-the-century manse (with an adjacent 55-acre park), and the historic “Loomis Lab.” This 20,000 sq ft stucco and beam lodge was built by Alfred Lee Loomis, a banker/philanthropist. In the early years of WWII, Loomis turned it into a covert scientific think tank that hosted the likes of Enrico Fermi, creator of the world’s first nuclear reactor, and Albert Einstein. Within these walls transpired experiments that led to the invention of radar as well as the atomic bomb. Today it houses Bruno’s personal think tank, where young, live-in operatives strategize over ways to revitalize a tiny corner of the valley — for a profit.

Bruno’s love of real estate includes other homes, one in Southhampton, Long Island, another in Greenwich Village. Last fall he purchased a house, after one visit, on the remote island of North Haven, Maine — a deal that was sweetened by the inclusion of a private landing strip.

As we descend from the gilded precincts of Tuxedo Park toward the highway, we pause at what may be the most dispiriting structure in town. It’s a long, rectangular, one-story cement building with an excoriated façade that faintly divulges its history: an IGA, once the town’s only supermarket, which closed last year. Gazing through the car window, I could imagine it as the social artery of the town, where shoppers met and exchanged news with friends and neighbors while picking over Bibb lettuce and strawberries. As a consequence of its demise, residents of Tuxedo and Sloatsburg drive 10 miles for groceries.

We pull around to the back, and the poignancy of the scene smacks me in the forehead: Christmas lights dangle above decaying loading docks. I turn to Bruno, knowing what was coming.

“I bought it,” he declares. “It has great potential.” Plans are in process for a market and restaurant, he says. To many residents of Tuxedo and Sloatsburg, Bruno has assumed near-mythological status. Few have

met him, even fewer have taken the time to check out the Sloatsburg site, but most expressed guarded optimism concerning his observations in the media.

“He talks so fast about so many things that sometimes I can’t keep up with him,” Tyler Rhodes, the good-humored septuagenarian owner of Rhodes North Tavern, told me. “But he is a really smart guy and knows what he’s doing.”

Anne Skinner, back at the Orange Top, has been around long enough to see other ballyhooed ventures come to little, but she is hopeful. Her one grievance regards Bruno’s acquisition of the rambling old Tuxedo Inn and restaurant. It turned out to be structurally ill-suited to renovation, so it was leveled.

“I went on my first date there with my husband; he died four years ago,” Skinner recalled. “Everybody went there. Now there’s no place to go.”

Not surprisingly, civic dignitaries are steadfastly behind the project, not least for the tax revenue it could reap.

I dropped in on Carl Wright who, like Skinner, has seen it all. A genial, loquacious man wearing a blue checked shirt with an American flag pin attached to the collar, he has been the mayor of Sloatsburg, “on and off,” since 1990.

He describes Bruno as a man of “great vision” and, hopefully, the right person to jump-start the local economy after years of stagnation.

He adds: “I think the whole community is enthusiastic about this because it could promote commerce and improve the quality of our village.”

Some up in Tuxedo feel like a bride abandoned at the altar. This is where the project was to begin. For more than two years the media enthused over the second coming of the town, only to see the shrine levitate to Sloatsburg. Early in the planning stage, Bruno and his team, called the Tuxedo Hudson Company, concluded that Sloatsburg was in more need of constructive surgery than its neighbor to the north. So the focus changed, just a baguette’s toss from the railroad station.

Bill Sweet, a financial adviser, part-time commuter, and former president of the Tuxedo Chamber of Commerce, does not need to be sold on the venture wherever it starts.

“They’re really awesome people,” he says. “And as far as I can tell, there is no negative to this.”

Bruno, a man who appears unburdened by self-doubt, is escorting me around his busy work in progress, excitedly pointing out a new reflecting pool and mini-grove of just-planted hornbeam trees. We slog through a muddy construction area where he points to a barnlike structure that will house the art gallery.

“Who knows, maybe no one will go there except me,” he surmised. “But an art gallery is part of my dream, and I want it there, so there it is.”

“THE POTENTIAL WAS TREMENDOUS. SURROUNDED BY STATE PARKS, CLOSE TO THE CITY, TRAIN ACCESS, AND MAJOR HIGHWAYS, AND WITH BUILDINGS THAT COULD BE BEAUTIFULLY RESTORED. THAT’S HOW I GOT THIS CRAZY IDEA.”
— MICHAEL BRUNO