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# alexa

JANUARY 27, 2016

*The Best of Everything*

## Lord of the Manor

**FROM HIS TIFFANY-WINDOWED  
OFFICE TO THE SHOPS ON THE  
SQUARE, MICHAEL BRUNO  
IS BUYING UP THE TOWN OF  
TUXEDO – AND CREATING HIS  
OWN HUDSON VALLEY KINGDOM**

PAGES 8 & 9 / STORY BY HEIDI MITCHELL



Bruno purchased his Tuxedo Park home for \$3 million in 2012, extensively renovating the interiors to create a chic, vintage-eclectic feel.



COVER STORY

# ON THE TOWN

## VISIONARY MICHAEL BRUNO REVEALS HIS CHIC HOME — AND PLANS FOR TUXEDO'S FUTURE

Story by HEIDI MITCHELL Photos by BRETT BEYER

**S**

EE that mountain? That was my Christmas present," says Michael Bruno, 52, visionary founder of one of the first online antiques dealers, Istdibs.com, and a self-described real estate junkie. We're about 35 miles from Midtown Manhattan in the gated town of Tuxedo Park, scaling a trail carved a century ago by famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, its borders

dotted with boulders draped elegantly in moss, like fuzzy green doilies. Bruno sweeps his arm in a near-full arc as we teeter along a half-frozen, waterfall-strewn stream. "We have a total of 120 acres up here. It's like Tuxedo was made for me: beautiful houses, low prices, access to the city, endless nature. We came up to buy a house, and I guess I just couldn't help myself."

Bruno — who spends most of his time up here with his long-time partner, former antiques dealer Alexander Jakowec, and their two dogs — isn't kidding. Along with all the alpine land that backs up to 22,000-acre Sterling Forest preserve and the twice-as-large Harriman State Park, he has purchased his own grand lakefront home (for \$3 million in 2012), followed by any nearby properties he could get his hands on: a guest house where he built an adjacent croquet lawn, a dilapidated boat house yet to be restored, even a castle used by Albert Einstein and other scientists as a secret lab during WWII.

Armed with grand ambitions (and the proceeds of a Southampton mansion sale), Bruno intends to remake the down-at-its-heels town of Tuxedo — just outside the wealthy enclave of Tuxedo

Park — into a one-stop Hudson Valley foodie and antiques destination. In the past two years, he's spent \$15 million gobbling up land and buildings (see sidebar below), with plans to break ground in February. "Once we get rid of the visual blight, and

Tuxedo begins to have this rural, foodie character, other neighbors will beautify as well," he says. "Beauty sparks beauty."

To get from here to there, his newly minted Tuxedo Hudson Company (THC) first bought the convenience store — "The ugliest building in town, and that's what I love about it" — which he'll convert into an upscale food purveyor, biergarten and antiques emporium. Next, THC snapped up the only restaurant in town, which will be transformed into an upstate version of the Waverly Inn, "my favorite restaurant in New York City." Then there are a few barns, a farmhouse, a half-burnt house (which he'll tear down) and 8 acres right on Route 17. Young chefs and local purveyors will be invited to open up specialty stalls and jewel-box restaurants. They can get their goods from THC, as well, since Bruno also literally bought the farm: He's invested in the Chester Agriculture Center, a for-profit collective that buys long-held farmland in the area and leases it to young, innovative, organic farmers.

"We want people to understand that this place has potential,"



**LEFT:** Plans are in the works to add direct service from Penn Station to Tuxedo's quaint train station.

**ABOVE:** Bruno's sylvan, lakefront, 120-acre estate in Tuxedo Park abuts the 22,000-acre Sterling Forest preserve and the roughly 50,000-acre Harriman State Park.

**RIGHT:** An airy upstairs room in Bruno's home displays some of his favorite nature- and animal-themed objets d'art.



### THE NEW TUXEDO

MICHAEL Bruno has spent \$15 million buying property and land in blighted Tuxedo, hoping to revamp it into the hottest town in the Hudson Valley. His plans include a farmers market, a destination restaurant, a charming inn and an antiques emporium. "I like to think of it as a village green with historic houses along it," he muses. "I love it here."



**THE RESTAURANT:** The developer snapped up the town's only diner and intends to reimagine it as a Waverly Inn-style restaurant.



**“I’M MAKING THINGS HAPPEN – THE REAL ESTATE HERE IS SO REASONABLE IT’S LIKE PLAYING MONOPOLY.”**

– MICHAEL BRUNO, ON REMAKING TUXEDO



**THIS AMERICANA LIFE**  
TOP: Bruno’s breakfast room at his Tuxedo Park home is decorated with vintage chalkboards and display cases — mixed-and-matched with sleek, mod seating.

ABOVE: A carved alabaster owl perched on a stack of books, along with other gilded woodland creatures, greets visitors.

LEFT: Bruno takes a brief break from his real estate and app-building enterprises to unwind in the living room with his English Cream golden retrievers.

BELOW: His Tuxedo Park empire includes Loomis Lab, where he now runs his own tech operations — it formerly served as a covert think tank for scientists (including Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg) during WWII.

PROP STYLIST: BRICE GAILLARD.



PHOTO BY BILYANA DIMITROVA.

Bruno adds with enthusiasm. “You have the Harriman trailhead right in town. Woodbury Commons a few minutes away. Skiing just 10 minutes’ drive at Tuxedo Ridge. We are the gateway to perhaps one of America’s most important food belts, and yet the only thing missing here is food.” By late summer, if the weather complies, all that will change.

We pull up to the Loomis Lab, physicist and entrepreneur Alfred Lee Loomis’ clandestine World War II think tank, where top minds from around the world (Einstein, Werner Heisenberg) met to discuss and develop radar, the Manhattan Project and other innovations. Bruno bought this 18,000-square-foot mock-Tudor/Bavarian castle to house his own covert tech operations (including his successful Housepad app). Now, half a dozen of his team live and work in the scattered light of Tuxedo Lake, refracted through Louis Comfort Tiffany windows, not far from his sprawling home and estate. “I’m making things happen here,” he says. “I love the momentum.”

To say Michael Bruno is enterprising is to seriously understate his position on the planet. Raised in Westchester, he first sold real estate in Southern California, then moved to San Francisco to romance home ownership to newly minted dot-com millionaires. Next was Paris, where he fell in love with the Clingencourt flea market — and had an idea. It was 1999, the dawn of e-commerce. Bruno went from stall to stall asking tiny merchants to show their antique wares online using this new thing called the Internet. And it worked. His company raised more than \$200 million in venture capital; Bruno mostly cashed out in 2015 for an undisclosed sum (presumably in the eight-figure range), though he remains the fifth-largest shareholder. He is re-energized to return to his “first love,” real estate; along with THC, Bruno is launching Tuxedo Hudson Realty in the first quarter of this year — local brokers be warned.

Bruno knows the provenance, owner, architect and purchase price of nearly all of the 350 residences within the Gilded Age gated community of Tuxedo Park, and he eyes them with a dealer’s twinkle. As we drive the single-lane roads that curve around three lakes and a clubhouse, he remarks on their history and prospective market value. “They are seriously undervalued,” he tells me, stopping by a 10,000-square-foot white house “by a prominent architect” on a lake that sold for just \$1.8 million. “The real estate here is so reasonable it’s like playing Monopoly,” he says.

Prices will likely go up, Bruno predicts, as the city outside the gates becomes more desirable. “Imagine you’re driving up Route 17 and all of a sudden you see sloping grass, horse-fencing, a few rustic barns with the

doors swung open and some tables, a farmers market and a restaurant? It will change the psychology of how people feel about Tuxedo. And hopefully that will spur a movement,” Bruno says, as we drive by all this potential in the downtown area.

It’s not a cutesy Hudson Valley town he’s re-creating, Bruno insists, but a day trip into rural Americana and all its bounty, only 30 minutes from the George Washington Bridge. Clearly he’s smitten, and on a mission. “You could come and hike and shop and buy all the amazing foods and go back to the city on the train,” he says. Or maybe you’ll buy a house and stay.

If all goes as planned, Michael Bruno’s New Urbanist vision for blighted Tuxedo will give overpriced Hudson and maybe even Sharon, Conn., and Long Island’s North Fork a run for their money. “I think this place is ripe,” he says. “It has been marketed as ‘secret’ for so long, but it’s not secret, it’s rare — and to me there is a real difference. I feel like I can turn Tuxedo into something that represents a complete culture, with antique shops, a real estate play, amazing food and interesting people. The only thing missing right now is someone to properly market the town.” Tuxedo may already have the best-suited man for the job.

**HOW THREE TOWN BUILDINGS WILL TRANSFORM UNDER BRUNO’S SCHEME**



**THE MARKET:** A run-down convenience store will become a high-end food market and antiques emporium.



PHOTOS BY BILYANA DIMITROVA. RENDERINGS COURTESY OF DEGRAW & DEHAAN ARCHITECTS.



**THE INN:** An unassuming house will get a new lease on life as a quaint inn, hosting weekenders from New York City.



LUKE PONTIFELL

**PAPER TRAIL**

By ANDREW SESSA

LUKE Pontifell, 46, is the artisanal stationer to the stars. The owner of Thornwillow Press, he has printed everything from calling cards to leather-bound books used by the likes of Michelle Obama, Carolina Herrera and the Vatican’s secret archives. Pontifell got his start selling his handmade books out of his Harvard dorm room. Now he oversees an 80,000-square-foot production facility in the Hudson Valley and a boutique at the St. Regis in Manhattan. Here, we press him for the numbers of note in his life and work.



**50**

Blue vellum envelopes stamped in gold with the Presidential Seal, each containing a Thornwillow-produced print of the White House, created in 2015 for Michelle Obama’s official use. (The First Lady ordered more for her private correspondence.)



**200:** “With Compliments” cards printed for designer Carolina Herrera last year, with her coat of arms blind-stamped at the top.

**4,000**

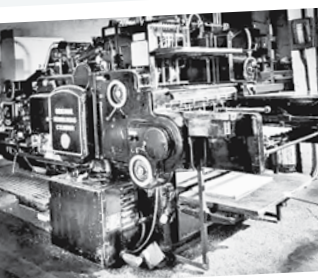
Volumes in Pontifell’s personal collection of books and papers, from 15th century tomes to Art Deco cocktail manuals.

**1985:** Year that Pontifell founded Thornwillow Press.



**\$500,000**

Most expensive item at Thornwillow’s St. Regis boutique — a bespoke, letterpress, leather-bound volume of the customer’s choosing.



**8,000**

The weight, in pounds, of the heaviest of 32 historic printing presses at the Thornwillow printery in Newburgh, NY.



**60**

Ink colors available, each with a matching tissue for envelope lining.

**twenty-one**

Sets of red-and-black engraved matchbox calling cards made for the Qatari royal family.



**58**

Limited-edition books Thornwillow has printed and published, including works from John Updike, Harry Belafonte and Walter Cronkite; next up is a story collection from playwright David Mamet.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE ASHBURN, VARIA, KATE WHITE, WOODY CAMPBELL, GETTY IMAGES.