

Restoring Tuxedo's historic charm

Multi-million dollar transformation coming to Tuxedo, Sloatsburg

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Visionary behind the Tuxedo Hudson Company, Michael Bruno, stands in front of the remains of a massive, burned-out barn, which will become a European-style outdoor cafe attached to the French Resistance Coffee House.

BY ERIKA NORTON

TUXEDO — Driving down Route 17 into downtown Tuxedo and Sloatsburg, a visitor from Manhattan would most likely see two towns in need of some TLC. There's ongoing construction from the installation of a sewer line, numerous closed businesses and shabby historical buildings, sitting, waiting for someone to breathe new life into them.

Driving down this same road, Michael Bruno sees the “new gateway to the Hudson Valley.”

“I don't even think I see the construction anymore,” Bruno said, cruising through Tuxedo toward Sloatsburg. “In my mind that's gone away because I know what it's going to look like when it's done.”

Bruno, 52, a Tuxedo Park resident from Manhattan, has made a living out of collecting, turning a trip to the luxury flea markets in Paris into 1stdibs, the leading online marketplace for luxury items. Recently, his love of collecting has a new focus - on real estate - particularly in the two little towns alongside Tuxedo Park.

Since moving to Tuxedo Park four years ago, Bruno has purchased 14 properties, investing roughly \$15 million into both Tuxedo and Sloatsburg, with the goal of revitalizing the area's commercial economy. The properties, many of them with historical buildings, will be transformed into places for antiquing, world-class cuisine and lodging.

His newly created Tuxedo Hudson Company will be undertaking this project, with a headquarters located at the famous Loomis Laboratory, the 18,000 square-foot building in Tuxedo Park where some of the top minds of the time met to develop radar and other innovations used during World War II.

With the two towns only about an hour from New York City, surrounded by scenic parkland, near the increasingly busy Woodbury Common Premium Outlets and relatively close to the Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, Bruno sees both Tuxedo and Sloatsburg becoming popular destinations for weekend trips filled with natural and cultural experiences.

“With all this commercial real estate connected to the park ... I just thought how do you go wrong?” Bruno said. “This park, this much natural beauty, the Hudson Valley with all the food and the city that close by. You'd have to be a bad storyteller for people to not want to at least come once and check it out.”

‘Discover our community through food’

Among the different properties purchased by Bruno is the old Tuxedo IGA Market, a building designed by Walker & Gillette in 1895, which will be completely renovated and turned into a market. The market will have what is being described as a “Hudson Valley first” focus, as will each Tuxedo Hudson food venue. He already has a relationship with the Chester Agricultural Center.

“We call it ‘Hudson Valley first,’” Bruno said, “meaning if we can get what we need from the Hudson Valley, we get it in the Hudson Valley. If we can't, then we turn to other sources. But it's going to be a focus on really healthy eating, beautifully prepared food that you could eat everyday.”

Within the Tuxedo Hudson Company Market will be a wide variety of these local morsels, from meats, vegetables, fruit and cheese, to honey, herbs, flowers, fish, eggs, wine and spirits. On the top floor of the market, there will be lodging,

about 15 rooms, with hiking and athletic gear rentals for weekend-trippers looking to explore the state parks - either on foot or two wheels. The building will be complete with fireplaces for the winter and a terrace for the summer, and a place for buses to park will be established.

The former Tuxedo Junction Inn next door to the market will become the Tuxedo Hudson Tavern & Grill, featuring superior cuisine using local Hudson Valley ingredients. The venue will consist of a large dining room with vaulted ceilings and a huge fireplace, a bar, and a terrace outside, all connected by two doors in a circular design, an aesthetic Bruno said he often strives for.

And down the road across from the Sloatsburg library, with a different vibe than the market or the Tavern & Grill, will be The French Resistance Coffee House & Cafe, serving specialty coffee and fresh juice, along with breakfast and lunch offerings like muffins, soup and foods-to-go. The large remains of a burned out barn on the property will become a beautiful European-style outdoor cafe.

As for the cooking at each venue, there will be chefs with different backgrounds at each location, bringing variety to the menu options. Bruno also said they plan to have an externship program, where chefs will come right out of cooking school, such as the Culinary Institute of America a few hours north in Hyde Park, to come and work at the restaurants.

Bruno believes that by giving city visitors access to organic, local, farm-to-table food, his “new urbanist vision” for the Tuxedo and Sloatsburg communities will become a reality.

“I think by making enough food places but not waiting for locals to show up and to eat there, and bringing in people from the city, I think that’s going to have the biggest impact on the area,” he said, “that people are going to discover our community through food.

“We’re adding food to all the great things that are already here - we have the park, we have culture and actually some of the most amazing shopping anywhere on Earth. So if you combine all those things and then offer amazing food, it’s a world-class experience, and right now, the missing ingredient literally is the food.”

Attracting the city crowd

And with a train station right into Tuxedo, it doesn’t get any more convenient. Bruno said he’s especially trying to target the city dweller looking for a weekend of hiking and cycling. He’s even thought of planning a cycling race in the future.

Right now, thousands of city cyclists flock to the 9W route every weekend, many of them biking up to Stony Point. Bruno hopes to attract this crowd to come just a little further north and stay either in one of the rooms above the market, or in one of the 30-plus rooms in one of the three Victorian-style houses he’s purchased, located near the planned coffeehouse/cafe in Sloatsburg.

“If you just cut through Harriman instead of going home, they just stay here,” he said. “And then they just get up the next morning and go home. It makes a whole weekend of it. Ride up Saturday, spend the night, hang out in the morning and then ride home.”

There are also a number of amazing hiking trails, both in the Harriman State Park and Sterling Forest State Park on the other side of the towns. Folks will be able to leave right from either the market or one of the Victorian houses and virtually hop right on a trail.

Bruno plans to create another outlet for his love and expertise in antiques by utilizing the 12-acre Stewart Farm property he purchased, which straddles both Tuxedo and Sloatsburg. By using the old 200-year-old barn and 19th century farmhouse, antiques from at least 20 dealers will be available to shoppers, bringing more antiques to both towns.

“I was at dinner not too long ago,” he said, “and I was talking with some friends, and I said ‘Sloatsburg’s going to be cool.’ They said, ‘Sloatsburg and cool have never been in the same sentence ever.’ I said, ‘You’ll see, it’s gonna be cool. This is where all the young people - it’s gonna be our Brooklyn - it’s where all the young kids are going to want to hang out cause it’s fun.’”

Jumping in

After spending only four days visiting Tuxedo Park, Bruno bought his Tuxedo Park home, a 14,000 square-foot Regency-style mansion on a lake, built by Bruce Price and designed by John Russell Pope, architect of the Jefferson Memorial.

“I love architecture,” he said, “so I saw a beautiful house on a lake, gorgeous architecture, beautiful setting and I thought why not, jump in as they say. And so I jumped in, and then I started coming out and I kept driving through Sloatsburg and Tuxedo and thinking god, this could actually be kind of cute if someone did something with these old buildings.”

After purchasing the building behind the market and the Tuxedo Junction Inn, he decided that if he really wanted to make an impact, to just do it.

While the target audience is admittedly city visitors, Bruno said that the Tuxedo community members he’s spoken to are ecstatic about the plans.

And with construction beginning for Tuxedo Farms, the long-anticipated 1,000 plus-home housing development, and another 1,000 Jehovah's Witnesses moving into the apartment complex as part of their new world headquarters in Warwick, there will be at least 2,000 more newcomers possibly interested in the new attractions in Tuxedo and Sloatsburg.

In addition, Bruno's started Tuxedo Hudson Realty, which he said he thinks now has the most listings in the area and is having a positive impact on the market.

As far as a time frame for the different projects being finished, Bruno said the first project he's aiming to finish will be the Tuxedo Hudson Tavern & Grill.

"I'd love to have it done by the end of summer, and we're going to push really hard for that. We would have had it done in three weeks if I had just stayed on plan," he chuckled, "but the end result is going to be so pretty."