Joseph Leone had a vision for a chef d’oeuvre that would rival Versailles. Meet the developer behind Le Palais Royal.

By Michelle F. Solomon

To call Joseph Leone a visionary is an understatement. The jewelry-designer-turned-developer doesn’t just have big ideas. His larger-than-life imagination and creativity encompasses, as its most notable distinction, perfection.

During a walk through of the French-inspired, Beaux Arts masterpiece, Le Palais Royal in Hillsboro Beach, Leone points out every detail — from the $6 million in gold leafing that adorns everything from ceilings to the front entrance’s wrought iron gate to the first IMAX screening room to be installed in a private residence in the world. There are other one-of-a-kind amenities that make this palace not just a piece of property, but a true work of art. The chef d’oeuvre has received lots of worldwide media attention for its multi-million dollar price tag, making it one of the most expensive listings in America.

Born in Bologna, Italy, Leone grew up in France the son of a tailor. Young Joseph would go to his father’s shop—first in Italy, then in southern France — where he was creating men’s suits. He says his eye for detail and creative fashion sense is inherited from his father, while his business savvy comes from his mother’s side. “My (maternal) grandfather was a big businessman and on my father’s side, they were in the fashion business. I think this is what I believe is what makes me very different from most people — I have two parts of the brain that work together.” Leone says that he has realized through the years that “it is very difficult for businessmen to be creative, and it’s the same thing for designers — it is tough for them to be good in business.” But he has an equal gift for both.
When he was 23 years old, he started his own high-fashion jewelry design and manufacturing company in Marseille, working with the biggest names in French haute couture, such as Jean Patou, Rochas, Celine, and Annick Goutal. He decided to go into business designing for some of the biggest names in France.

“I was designing for all the large companies and the fashion industry in Paris. I was living in Marseilles, but I would spend the week in Paris because that’s where fashion was,” says Leone.

It was the mid to late 1980s and it was, as Leone says, the time to be involved in the fashion business in Europe. “This was the era. Fashion was high and creative. You had to be creative and be different. The more creative you were, the more successful you would become,” he says with an upbeat confidence. He found it to be an unforgettable time to be an entrepreneur, working with the best designers in France and the best designers in fashion. By the early 1990s, the entrepreneur was ready to make a move and broaden his horizons by introducing his creations to a wider audience. He arrived in New York, where he forged relationships with department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman.

One day, while at a jewelry show, he had a sense that another challenge was awaiting him. It was 2004, and he had decided that he had done everything he could do in the jewelry business. “I had sold to every big department store in the world; I had designed for the biggest brands; I had been everywhere in the world.”

He began talking to a businessman in attendance and the two hit it off and became friends. The initial project that Leone took on for the man — who would become not only a friend, but a client — was to find him a yacht. After searching, he purchased a 160-foot yacht for the businessman, a private person whose identity Leone keeps anonymous. “We tried to charter it for a little while when we bought it. It was a good boat for entertaining corporate clients.” But Leone, who was used to yachts that were made for cruising San Tropez, Cannes, and the French coast, thought the boat was too enclosed. “There was no open deck.” So rather than sell the yacht and purchase one with more outdoor space, Leone decided the yacht should be extended 25 feet. “When I told the people in the yacht industry my plans for the yacht, they started laughing and told me I was crazy. They said it was impossible.”

It took 18 months and $20 million to rebuild the boat. Leone redesigned the boat by cutting off the back of the vessel to add a larger deck space that is basically a beach club aboard the yacht. The sundeck also doubles as a helicopter pad, and Leone designed the yacht’s interiors, too, and added all new state-of-the-art technology, including audio and visual systems to accommodate an outdoor movie theater. “This way, you can watch movies under the stars.” My Seanna — named for the owner’s daughter — was a finalist at the coveted 2015 World Superyacht Awards in Amsterdam.

The yacht was the beginning and asserted what Leone already knew. He could take his creative skills, merge them with his business sense and eye for detail, and create “jewels” in different ways.

The yacht’s owner had wanted to do something with a 13,000-square-foot home he had on the ocean. “He said, ‘I want to build something there that is different,’ so I immediately began working on a design,” Leone recalls.

His European roots had Leone imagining something that would be built in the United States that hadn’t been seen before. “This would be like a castle you would find in Europe.” It would be an American version of Versailles “like nothing anywhere in the United States.” For two years, he worked on the design and engineering.

During that time, the house next door went up for sale. “The land was fantastic. I advised him to buy the house next door because the land would be a plus for the new masterpiece we were building.”

The original 2.8 acres on Hillsboro Mile became almost 5 acres of prime property. “We tore both houses down and began building Le Palais Royal.” He says that he worked on every step of the project as if he was creating a piece of jewelry. “Everything was thinking first, then analyzing second, then we would build.” The actual construction began in 2009, and Leone expects the palace on the sea to be finished by July 2016.
Coastal Construction Group worked with Leone on the project. Sean Murphy, co-president of Coastal, says Le Palais Royal has evolved into one of the most complex and extraordinary homes Coastal has ever built. “Joseph Leone’s vision to create such a unique property with fountains, pools, stone, mosaics, and ornate details throughout are so extraordinary and complicated that it really pushes the envelope for luxury residential construction. He has challenged everyone involved to create this masterpiece.”

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