



Flash is anathema to the pragmatic Panozs who live in spartan simplicity, despite the accoutrements of a Bermuda tax haven, a chain of luxury hotels and one of the world's biggest names in motor sport racing.

When Don Panoz was a young man training at Greenbrier Military School in Lewisburg, West Virginia, he had two choices when it came to his romantic life: date a boarder at the local women's college, or date a town girl. He chose the latter, in the hope the liaison might encourage invitations to Sunday dinners off campus at his sweetheart's family home.

In life, as in business, Panoz was always a pragmatist. "I'm not being crass now, I'm just telling you how things developed," the 74-year-old says with a grin. "You have a design sometimes and then you have an accident. I dated a few girls and then I met Nancy. She was a town girl."

Nancy, the town girl, is now his wife of 55 years. She sits by his side as he speaks, in a meeting room on the grounds of the Vintage estate in the Hunter Valley, where the couple will soon open Château Élan – a hotel, conference centre and spa replicating the extremely successful luxury complex they have in North Atlanta, Georgia.

The resort is the newest venture in the multimillion-dollar Panoz empire, which was founded on pharmaceuticals, grew to include sports car construction and racing, and then took a sidestep into luxury hotel management (Panoz refers to his business interests as "drugs, driving and drinking").

He made his fortune when he took his second venture, the pharmaceutical company Élan Corporation, to Ireland in the late 1960s, where the regulatory regime allowed him to develop his products more easily.

One, the transdermal patch, was licensed and eventually formed the basis of the nicotine patch. Panoz later floated Élan in both Ireland and the United States. Despite having helped countless smokers quit, however, he is an unapologetic puffer himself. "Do you think the guy who invented condoms always used them?" he demands.

From pharmaceuticals, his next move was into motor sport. He first ventured into racing through his son Dan, who established a sports car manufacturing company in 1989. From the start something of an automobile prodigy, Panoz junior's cars have included the Panoz Roadster, AIV Roadster and the Panoz Esperante.

But it was his dad who decided he needed a motor racing legacy. Panoz negotiated for the touring rights to Le Mans, a motor sport endurance race, and toured it to the United States, in the process turning the Panoz name into one of the biggest in motor sport racing.

From there, the family moved into golfing and winery resorts – the first was built in Georgia in the US, followed by two more, in Patterson, California and St Andrews in Scotland. The Hunter Valley project is a joint venture with NSW development firm the Stevens Group, run by John

Stevens, with an estimated end value of \$450 million.

The couple has firm ideas about the primacy of service. They believe it should be welcoming but not aggressive.

"We like a gentle, warm, inviting atmosphere," Nancy says.

"Nothing too 'done' or polished or marble," Don chimes in.

Just like the Panozs themselves in other words. Nancy admits to a penchant for spa treatments but other than that, they'd have to be the least flashy multimillionaires ever to float a pharmaceutical company or have a tax haven in Bermuda.

Panoz is often referred to as a billionaire, but he scoffs at the tag. "The Aussies, English and Irish, if you're American, they always want to add six zeros to your money," he says. They are very much of the Warren Buffett school of American wealth – they live simply in a two-bedroom townhouse in Georgia and their second home, on the Gold Coast, has a nice hillside position with coastal views, but other than that, it's nothing too fancy.

They have no personal staff, fly commercial and their conversation is scattered with chat about grandchildren and where to get the best kind of corned beef. "We've always lived a relatively simple lifestyle," Nancy says.

Don agrees. "Things are always basically just you," he says. "Success shouldn't change you. Not many people know us because I never had a PR person. I never did that stuff."

The Vintage already has a golf course and Grand Mercure apartment complex. But the Panoz vision is to turn it into one of NSW's premier resorts – with a luxury spa, golf course and 120-room hotel, complemented by residential accommodation for weekenders and a conference venue.

The resort will feature 18 treatment rooms, 20 spa accommodation suites and 40 self-contained, two-

bedroom spa villas with views of the Greg Norman-designed golf course.

"The Hunter Valley is really like the playground of Sydney," Don says. "It has a wine area. It has reasonably good roads up to it and I understand they're going to get better."

Part of the reason for the move is what Panoz sees as a yawning gap in the market. Australia doesn't have world-class conference venues, he says.

"Outside the big hotels in Melbourne and Sydney, where can you go to have a conference of 400 people?" he asks. "There just aren't any facilities."

The Château Élan project has been in the works since 2006, but the onset of the global financial crisis meant the building schedule has been staggered. Bookings have begun for the conference business and the spa business, and once that has solidified, construction will begin on the hotel.

Meanwhile, the Panozs are supposed to be semi-retired. They spend half the year at their Gold Coast home, but it hasn't quite worked out that way. As Don says, "You have a habit of creating things, it's kinda hard to give it up."

Their business holdings are still diverse – they own various car development companies and raceways, the Georgia-based Château Élan, and Don still does some consultancy work for a pharmaceutical start-up.

Australia is a good semi-retirement bolt-hole for them – it is isolated enough so that, for at least five months of the year, Don can't be called upon to attend meetings.

"The problem is that between the businesses we work in, you always get the call that says, 'We only need you for one day in Minneapolis,'" he says.

"So in Australia, I can just say, 'Sorry, I can't make it.'"

Nancy has been beside and behind Don for every venture. As she describes it, he is generally the finder of businesses, and she is the keeper. He goes out and hunts down the next venture and she looks after it.

When it came to the spa business, however, it was different. Nancy was very much the driving force, for reasons that were entirely personal.

During the early days of Don's drug company Élan Pharmaceuticals, the couple were residents of Bermuda for tax purposes, as the death duties were so heavy in Ireland at the time that Don's demise would have sunk the company.

Don spent much of his time travelling, so Nancy was left holding the babies – they have five children, all now adults.

During one particularly brutal hurricane season, when it was difficult even to leave the house, Nancy was at her wit's end.

"I was in that house, and I was feeling like, 'Just give me a gun, I'm ready,'" she says.

She saw an advertisement for a day of beauty at the Sonesta Hotel spa, so she dropped everything to go and it saved her sanity, she says.

"I went in there feeling like a dog's dinner and I came out feeling like a million bucks and I said 'If it can do that much for me in one day, I have to build a spa.'"

For his part, Don says that you can get as much physical pleasure from drinking and smoking, "and some of those things have after-effects that a massage doesn't".

He's also been known to play the odd round. **LUXURY**