



High-profile Wall Streeters hit by ‘Ponzi-like’ wine scam: lawsuit

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A New York business consultant known for throwing lavish wine parties at five-star eateries like Daniel has bilked a cadre of Wall Street bigwigs out of millions, according to a shocking new lawsuit.

Omar Khan, who runs the Sensei International consulting firm on Park Avenue, used his fancy Rolodex to stage wine-fueled shindigs that lured more than a dozen captains of industry into a “Ponzi-like scheme,” according to the lawsuit filed in New York State Supreme Court on Wednesday.

The suit claims Khan met many of his alleged victims at his own parties, which “centered around vintage wines and expensive cuisine.” Khan then used his well-heeled connections — as well as claimed ties to famous names like Philippe Rothschild of the Mouton winery — to convince his alleged victims to invest in his growing events business, the suit said.

In addition to Robert Van Brugge, CEO and chairman of Sanford C. Bernstein, victims include Kresimir Penavic, a former senior research scientist at Renaissance Capital, the \$110 billion hedge fund founded by James Simons; Robert Gelfond, director at the Cato Institute; Peter Slagowitz, CEO of Spurs Capital; and Lorine Schaefer, a vice president at Morgan Stanley, court documents say.

They are suing for \$8.3 million, plus interest, although the bulk of the losses allegedly belong to Penavic, who invested close to \$5 million with Khan through 27 events from 2015 to 2018.

“He was larger than life,” Penavic said of Khan, who scored glowing write-ups about his “elite supper club” in Forbes and Bloomberg.

“Not only by his volume, by his voice, the way he talked,” Penavic said in an interview with The Post. “He liked to position himself as in the know and bask in the limelight.”

Penavic’s suit is the latest in a string of civil suits making similar claims filed against Khan since 2015.

According to a lawsuit filed in December by Jean-Claude Bernard, the owner of a hotel in Beaune, France, Khan allegedly failed to pay out the profits at an exclusive dinner where sommeliers uncorked 36 different bottles of wine during an evening for a group of guests at the Four Seasons Hotel George V in Paris.

Those included rarities like a Mandive Vigo from 1814 and a \$5,000 Domaine de la Romanee Conti Montrachet from 1973.

“Those are exactly the same wines that were supposed to be served at a dinner in Paris that I was supposed to attend — that he canceled!” Penavic fumed.

Khan has denied Bernard’s allegations and is seeking to dismiss the case. Bernard didn’t return a request for comment.

In January, Napa Valley winery owner David Sinegal sued Khan over a \$75,000 investment for 23 bottles of Chateau Petrus bottled from 1923 to 2005 — a series of extremely rare and expensive vintages, according to San Francisco federal court papers.

Sinegal realized something was amiss when Khan wouldn’t allow him to inspect the bottles’ authenticity — and the dinner ultimately never happened. The suit was settled in June with Khan paying \$125,000 to Sinegal, who declined to comment.

Khan, who lives in a Midtown Manhattan high-rise, denied the allegations to The Post and blamed “cash-flow issues” from clients that hadn’t paid him.

“This is because of a cash issue, which then led to people not being able to have the dinners done and their wines received. That’s terrible. We’ve addressed it, we will address it,” he said.

“To call that a Ponzi scheme, that would suggest that no dinners were done, that’s absurd,” Khan added.

Khan’s wife, Leslie Khan, who is named as a defendant in the most recent suit, didn’t return a request for comment.

Not much is known about Khan before he started his vintner venture, the International Business and Wine Society, in 2013. He claims to have been born in Egypt — the son of a diplomat to Pakistan — and to have attended Oxford University and Stanford Law School before becoming a business consultant.

Khan says he’s “one of the pioneers of neuro-linguistic programming,” which can allegedly train people to influence others using language, according to his Sensei bio. He also has written several books, including the self-published “Synergy: Channeling the Energies of Transformation,” which he weirdly brags was “acknowledged by one eminent reviewer as ‘a blow for civilization.’”

It’s unclear where the investors’ money went. Khan claims it all went to wine and dinners, while the latest lawsuit claims he spent it on himself.

“This guy needs to be stopped, Penavic said. “Right now as we speak, he is probably scheming and organizing a dinner.”

The hedge funder says Khan first dazzled him in February 2015 at a private dinner at Daniel, the Michelin-starred eatery owned by Daniel Boulud that offers a seven-course tasting menu for \$250.

One of the main draws of the dinner was Anne-Claude Leflaive, who then presided over one of the most exclusive wine estates in Burgundy — about two months before she died from cancer, Penavic said.

“It was very, very kind of her to come all the way from France,” Penavic said.

The dinners were usually attended by about 10 other wine enthusiasts, and talk usually stuck to the spirits, Penavic said. Among the bottles opened were a 1945 Mouton Rothschild, a vintage that can sell for as much as \$33,000 a bottle.

At a May 2017 dinner at The NoMad, a swanky Manhattan restaurant, Khan dazzled Pierre Lurton, the director of Chateau Cheval Blanc, a high-end wine estate owned by luxury brand LVMH, said Penavic, who was in attendance.

The dinner was such a success, Lurton invited Khan and his guests to his Bordeaux chateau soon after for wine and dinner — an invitation they accepted, Penavic added. Lurton didn’t return a request for comment.

“A person so well-connected and capable of doing things like that, you don’t think twice,” Penavic said.

Sir Ivor Martin Crewe, the master of University College at Oxford, lectured at one of Khan’s events in 2018, according to the International Business and Wine Society’s Instagram page. Oxford did not return a request for comment.

Khan partly relied on his ties to retired real estate developer Daniel Rose, known for building Pentagon City in Arlington, Va., to build credibility, Penavic’s lawsuit said.

Rose declined to comment, but the lawsuit says the retired real estate developer “confirmed that he is a close family friend of Khan but denies having ever invested with Khan or having ever made any financial dealings with Khan.”

Khan appears to have fabricated other connections, the lawsuit says, including to Rothschild, whose Bordeaux winery was started in 1853 by Baron Nathaniel de Rothschild. In one alleged scheme, Khan claimed Rothschild’s winery wanted Khan’s help opening a New York wine club. But his only evidence — an email coming from Rothschild’s office — appears to have been “manufactured,” the lawsuit said.

Rothschild did not return a request for comment.

Penavic ultimately paid Khan \$4.9 million in principal investments, and is owed another \$1.9 million in interest and unpaid profits, according to the suit.

Van Brugge claims that Khan owes him \$235,750 of principal and profit he was owed, according to the suit. Miriam Tai, a VP at Franklin Templeton, claims Khan never returned \$312,625 in principal and profit.

The other defendants who joined Penavic declined to comment through their lawyer, Rob Seiden.

“There’s no question this guy was a con man,” said Seiden of the Seiden Law Group. “He may have started out legitimately as a business, but eventually he got to a point where I guess he got greedy. From my standpoint, this guy needs to get brought to justice.”