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JUNE 2008

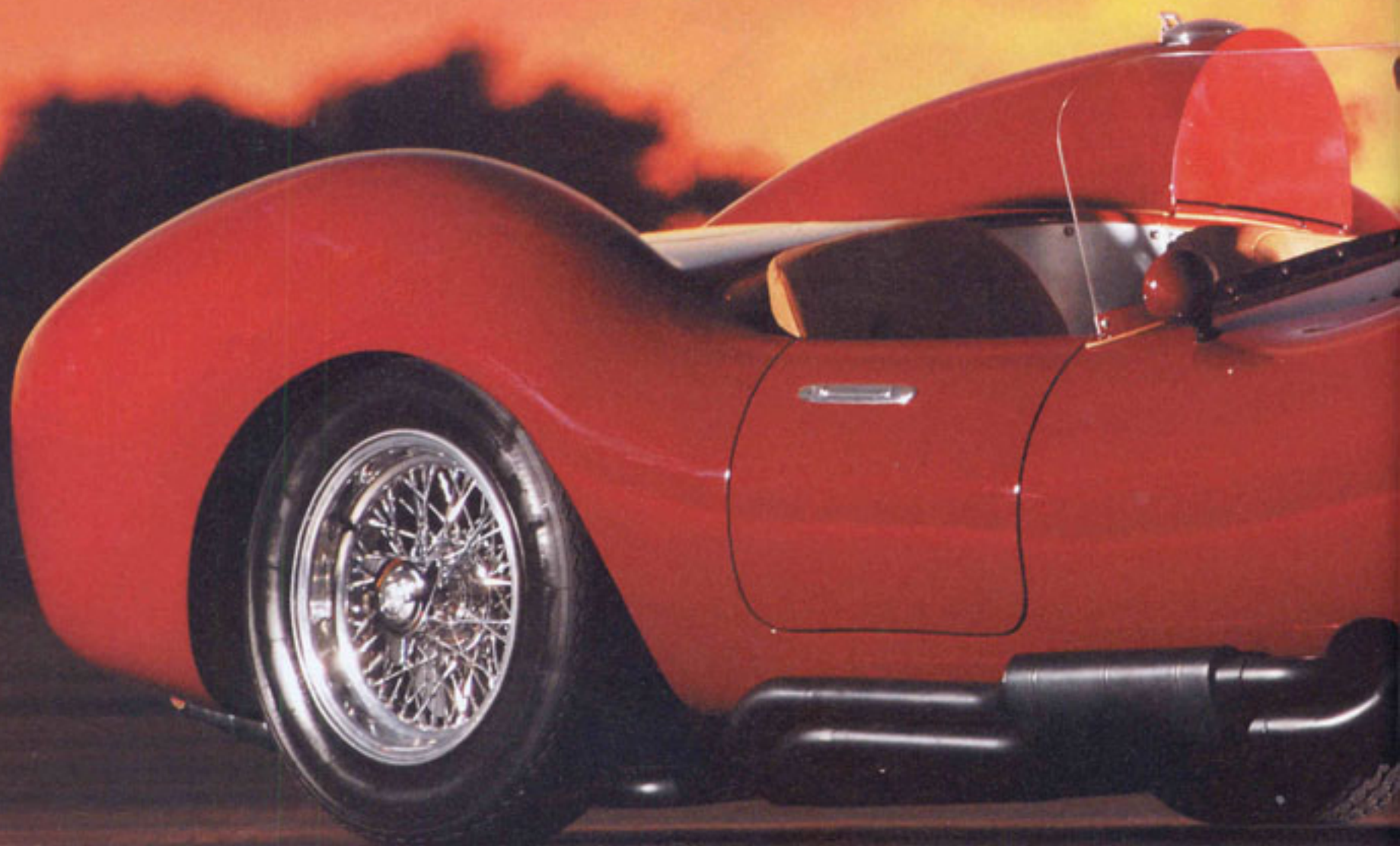
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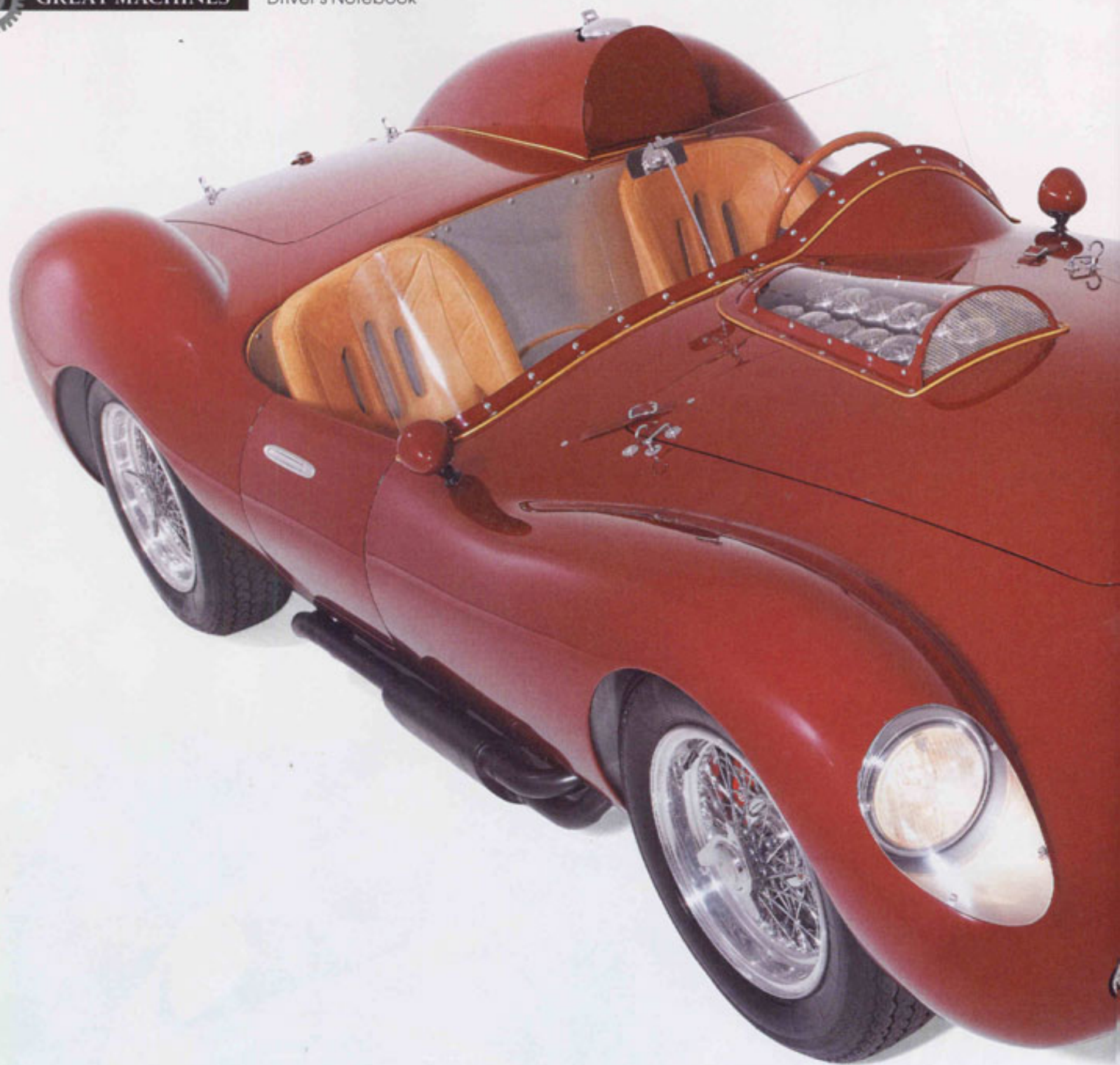
Speciale Order

There might be only a handful of Ferrari TR59s still in existence, but there is only one Sport Speciale.

BY EZRA DYER PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY WYSZATYCKI





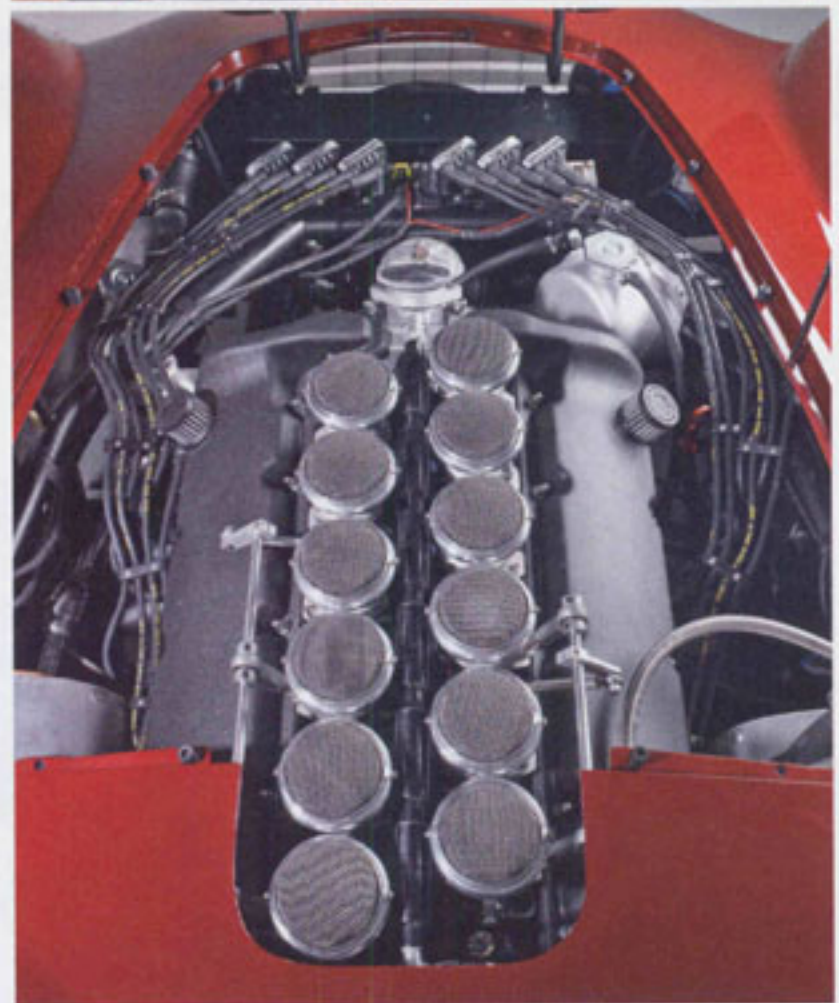


TO THE CASUAL OBSERVER, the Creative Workshop building doesn't look like it has anything to do with cars. Housed in a former grain barn in Dania Beach, Fla., this high-end customizer and restoration business looks like it might be the sort of place you go to make candles or build your own teddy bear. There are no oil spots on the pavement outside, no truncated '57 Chevy jutting out of the wall above the entryway like a trophy elk. Then you notice, parked unassumingly next to the gate, patiently awaiting its turn at the full, frame-off treatment ... is that a Vauxhall Victor station wagon?

Stepping through the door, you immediately realize that this is probably where Santa's elves conjure four-wheeled toys on a big-boy scale. You enter through a library filled not only with historic automotive tomes and Americana,

but also a 1924 Citroën 5CV. Dead ahead is a tiny, violently red two-seater awaiting a final touch—it's an early '50s Stanguellini. Turn left up a short flight of stairs and the view opens up into the main work area, where rows of rare cars sit in various stages of rejuvenation: a 1955 Eldorado is parked next to a 1967 Jaguar E-Type; a modified Corvair Corsa faces a mongrel rat rod used to test the imagination and skill of new hires. About 20 feet away from the rat rod, work is in progress on a unique Ghia-bodied Abarth original that's destined for Pebble Beach when it's finished. This is a place where you might find a Ferrari GTO or a Pontiac GTO, depending on the week.

The Creative Workshop has only been around for five and a half years. In that time, owner Jason Wenig has cemented his shop's reputation as a world-class restoration



A new BMW V-12 engine powers the Sport Speciale, but its cockpit reflects the 1960s with Veglia instruments and an original Nardi steering wheel.

business, an establishment that can handle esoteric, concours-level projects like the Abarth. Wenig, a former advertising executive, founded the Creative Workshop when he decided to try forging a new career that would draw on his encyclopedic old-car knowledge and hands-on fabrication skills. "My wife and I said, 'We have a choice: We go back to corporate or we do something nuts,'" Wenig says.

From the beginning, Wenig staked his claim at the high end of the restoration market, which is a perilous path for a start-up to take. "It's scary when you have 100 potential customers and 99 walk out the door because they can find someone else to do it cheaper," he admits. "But that one person understands craftsmanship and says yes. And then word spreads about the work you do."

Word about the Creative Workshop eventually spread to

a Texan named Barry Smith, who called Wenig two years ago with an interesting proposal: He wanted a replica Ferrari TR59, and had a \$200,000 budget to build one from scratch. "Unbeknownst to me, Barry called five other places, too," Wenig says. "They all told him they couldn't do it. I told him that I could do it, but I wouldn't. Because I don't build replicas."

But a project of this potential importance to his business caused Wenig to ponder how he could take the job, while remaining true to his aesthetic principles. His solution was to call Smith and accept the assignment, hoping that during the build process, Smith could be convinced of the merit of a one-of-a-kind automobile that evokes 1950s Italian racers without overtly replicating any specific model.

"I'd watched the *Victory By Design* show about the 1960



Ferrari TR probably 25 or 30 times," Smith says, "And I thought, 'I want that car.' But even if you had \$13 million to spend on one of the two still in existence, what are you going to do? You're not going to drive it. So I wanted a car that looked like that, but was state of the art underneath."

More than 6,500 man-hours later, that's essentially what Smith got, though the finished product ended up in a far different conceptual place than where it began. "Basically, on Jason's advice, we modified the original concept," Smith says. "This is the best of all worlds. By drawing on various influences, we came up with a hell of a lot better-looking car. I have a car that I can drive, and really enjoy. And it's not a replica."

The removal of the word "replica" from the mission brief explains why this sinuous, Italianate shape, rendered super-leggera-style in hand-pounded aluminum and looking as Mediterranean as a plate of *linguini fra diavolo*, is stuffed with a big Bavarian motor. "I asked myself, 'How do I build a car that's reliable, has performance, and is not a replica?'" Wenig recalls. "How do you immediately get as far as possible from that? By not using a Ferrari engine. And the sexiest, coolest powerplant that's not a Ferrari? The BMW V-12."

This particular BMW engine started life in an 850ci and has since been balanced and blueprinted, honed, and chamfered to a level never seen at the factory. The heads are a



The gaping front grille is inspired by classic racers like the Ferrari TR59.

special high-performance design provided by BMW, and the fuel injection system—with its dozen individual injectors crowned by velocity stacks—is gorgeous enough to warrant a window in the hood. Not just a looker, the motor produces 450 hp. "It's an 8,000 rpm, screaming V-12," Wenig says. "You get this thing past 5,000 rpm, your religion will change."

The Sport Speciale weighs only 2,230 pounds, giving it a better power-to-weight ratio than cars like the Ferrari 430 Scuderia and Lamborghini LP640. While the Sport Speciale is rife with genuine Italian racing components—Marchal headlamps, Carello turn-signal lights, Magneti Marelli switches and even original 1950s Ferrari diamond-pattern underhood insulation—the major drivetrain parts are modern. The tube-frame chassis includes four-wheel independent suspension with coil-over shock absorbers, front Brembo and rear Wilwood racing brakes, as well as an Auburn limited-slip differential (an important feature, since the skinny Vredestein tires are period-correct in their dimensions). "But where it didn't impact safety or performance, I erred on the side of using original parts," Wenig says. "Like the wheels. Wire wheels are fine, functionally, so these were made by Borrani from the tooling they used in the '50s."

Wenig produces the Sport Speciale's key (a slender, old-school "nail-type" key that's paired to a Sipea ignition switch—no generic golf cart ignition here) and the V-12

The Forgotten BMW V-12

Remember the BMW 760Li? If any company's flagship V-12-powered sedan is off the radar, it's this one. Even in Miami, where grocery store parking lots are filled with Bentleys, the 760Li qualifies as a rare sight. I hand the keys to a valet and, as he spies the subtle badge on the fender, turns to me with confusion writ across his face and asks, "V-12?" He's seen so many 745s and 750s that he probably thinks I glued the badge to the fender myself.

Why is this car such a secret, accounting for only 5 percent of 7-series sales? It may be a combination of the V-8 7-series' inherently high capabilities and BMW opting out of the horsepower war with the V-12.

A 750Li starts at \$78,900 and gives you 360 hp. A 760Li begins at \$122,600 and provides 438 hp. The V-12 version reaches 60 mph in 5.4 seconds, versus 5.8 for the long-wheelbase V-8. If that seems like a lot of money for not much more ability, that's because, for once, speed isn't the point.

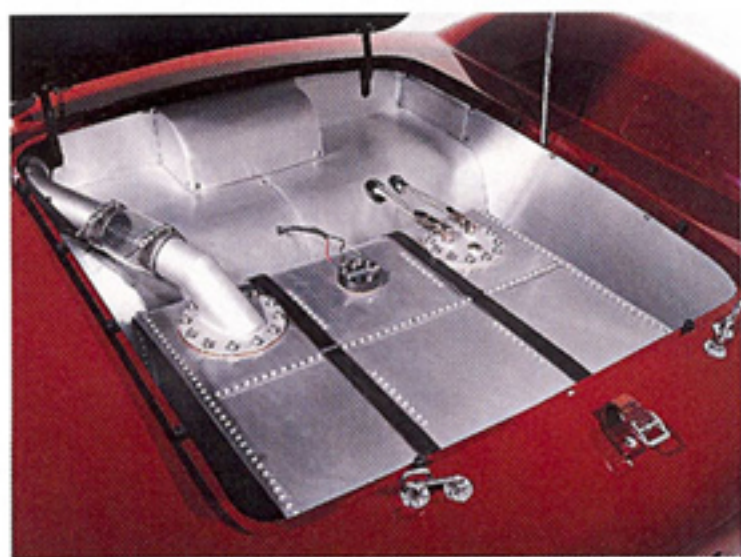


This car is all about coddling smoothness and utmost serenity. After all, this is the last stop on the BMW food chain before you get into something with a winged lady on the grille. With luxury as its priority, the 760Li feels less like a BMW than one of those stolid

Mercedes-Benz S-Classes from two generations back. Around town, it's absolutely silent. I'm not exaggerating when I say that, for all the sound and vibration produced by this power train, the 760 feels like it may actually be electric. Go ahead, roll down the windows—you'll still struggle to hear the engine. If I hadn't just stepped out of the Sport Speciale, it would be impossible to fathom that within this muted motor

lurks a bellowing beast waiting to be unchained.

Mercedes-Benz goes for twin-turbo torque with its V-12-powered 600 models, while Audi plays the novelty card with its A8 W-12. In the elite 12-cylinder corner of the sedan market, BMW finds itself playing an odd role: traditionalist. —E.D.



The Sport Speciale's rear decklid covers its fuel cell, which pumps high-octane gasoline to the front-mounted engine.

snarls to life. It's time for a ride.

Pulling into traffic, there are a few burps and hiccups from the monster motor as it warms to operating temperature. Wenig explains that there's still a bit of electronic fine-tuning to be done on the fuel injection system, but the V-12's minor petulance actually lends a proper air of nostalgia to the experience. After a couple miles, the big BMW is purring and a gap opens in traffic. Wenig nails the throttle and the row of traffic lights stretching into the distance immediately begin scrolling forward, accompanied by a wailing soundtrack not of this era—a high-strung V-12 singing through vintage Ferrari Ansa tips. One could be forgiven for thinking this motor was born in Italy.

Merging onto the highway, Wenig pitches the tail out with a stab of throttle and easily collects the ensuing slide. With the narrow, high-profile tires, slip angles can be explored without the neck-snapping suddenness of grippy modern rubber. As the speed climbs, there's an overwhelming sense of exposure—you're not ensconced in a polite, sanitized capsule, watching the world rush by through the high-def display of a triple-laminated flush-fit tinted windshield. You're out there, feeling the wind, hearing the intake howl, and exhaust crackle. Hang an arm over the low-slung door and you can literally touch the pavement.

Imagine this car tearing around the Nürburgring, and you will have newfound respect for the guys who raced cars like this back when engine technology was several decades ahead of brakes, suspension, or safety gear. These two seats are gateways to exhilaration and fun, but also inspire an undercurrent of genuine fear. (That nacelle behind the driver's seat houses the fuel filler neck, not a roll bar.) And that's the point—to replicate the experience of a 1950s Italian racer, not a particular car.

It's anyone's guess what kind of money this car might fetch on the open market, but suffice it to say that the finished product nearly tripled Smith's original budget. Still, he says, "I'd do it all over again tomorrow. Jason's a



good guy, and hell-bent on the integrity of what he does." Hence the \$600,000 price tag. "If Jason needs a screw for a headlight cover," Smith continues, "He doesn't go to the hardware store—he makes a screw."

For his part, Wenig harbors distaste for the idea of cars as commodities, saying, "It bothers me that our love affair with cars has become so intrinsically bound up in dollar value." But the fact is that the custom market has begun to respond to cars like the Sport Speciale, European-influenced one-offs with no provenance except their own style and craftsmanship. Witness the Blastolene B-702 roadster, another American custom that evokes 1930s French machinery. Despite its Oregon assembled-car title, the Blastolene sold at Barrett-Jackson for \$522,500.

"There are people out there who already have the cars they want, and say, 'What next?'" notes Wenig. "Custom cars are a hot trend, but what if you don't want a '32 Ford, if you want something European in flavor? [This is] an area of custom cars that's not yet fulfilled." Until now, that is, because although Smith started out seeking a replica, he ended up with an original. □

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