

Marrying a Corvette and Ferrari

THE INTERMECCANICA ITALIA'S recipe for fun—big engine/small, sexy car—is straightforward and simple. But the car's story is full of twists and turns.

In the late 1950s Frank Reisner left his career in automotive chemicals to start his own car company. Carrozzeria Intermecanica was up and running in Turin by 1959, and shortly after the company made waves with the Apollo GT, which combined the Italian style of Franco Scaglione, former Bertone design director, with the American reliability of a Buick V8.

Despite great lines and a solid drivetrain, the Apollo was too complex to be profitable. Bodies were crafted in Italy then shipped to California to be completed. Apollo production ended in 1964 and Intermecanica was in danger of becoming a car company with no car to build.

Enter Long Island car dealer Jack Griffith. Griffith had spent the early '60s slotting Ford V8s into British-built TVR Granturas. But a crippling dock strike halted the flow of TVRs into the States in 1964 and Griffith, on the lookout for a low-volume car company to partner with, teamed with Reisner to construct a new car, the Griffith.

Designer Bob Cumberford sketched the car's dramatic lines. Intermecanica shaped the bodies then shipped them to New York where Griffith installed Ford drivetrains. The project collapsed when Griffith's financial obligations caused Ford to cut off the engines. Plymouth V8s were brought in, but even Griffith's gifted test driver, Mark Donohue, couldn't tame the torrid handling

of the heavier, Plymouth-engined cars.

Griffith PR wiz Steve Wilder teamed up with Cumberford to take on the project, renaming the car the Omega, which used Ford powertrains. North Carolina-based Holman Moody, with strong ties to Ford racing, was also involved in the project. Only a few dozen Omegas were built before strained business relations between the parties brought production to a halt.

An exasperated Reisner took the project in-house in 1966. Intermecanica was



NICK KURCZEWSKI

about to begin production of what was now being called the Torino when Ford, which owned the copyright to the name, issued an objection. Thus, the Griffith turned-Omega-turned-Torino became the Italia. More than 500 were built through 1972.

Our featured car is a 1970 Italia owned by Leroi Ambers of West New York, New Jersey. It was thoroughly restored 10 years ago. Ambers cannot hide his amusement when explaining how people routinely tell him the car is beautiful just before

asking if it is from a kit. "I want to tell them, 'Yeah, kit this,'" he laughs.

To our eyes the car's recessed headlights, flowing fenders and subtle Kamm tail come together beautifully. If a 1968 Corvette and Ferrari 275GTB could bear an offspring, the Italia would be it.

Things are less dramatic inside, not kit car-crude, but certainly plain, dark and cramped. Contemporary road tests make no mention of the Italia's tight confines, so this criticism might be due to the larger-than-standard seats that have been installed. However, it's a convertible, so on a sunny day headroom is unlimited.

Steering, clutch work, and shifting the Hurst four-speed all require firm pulls and shoves. The thundering 351 Cleveland V8, topped by an Autolite four-barrel carb, steals the show with 310 hp and 385 lb-ft. A first-time driver might feel like he is gunning for pole at Daytona with that first dab on the Italia's gas. This car's yellow paint does more than whisper that this is one wild ride.

A 0-to-60-mph dash should take the 2600-pound Italia just over six seconds. The car is fitted with power-assisted discs all around—the fun can stop just as quickly as it starts. The suspension—front wishbone and a solid rear axle—is firm but won't cause kidney damage. Ambers has had heavier-duty springs and shocks installed.

Gutsy but stylish, this is a car its owners don't hesitate to take out and use. It turns heads like a Ferrari, but it won't break the bank at the repair shop. —NICK KURCZEWSKI

MARKET

Branson Collector Car Auction
Chateau on the Lake
Branson, Mo.
April 23-25

1968 Ford Mustang convertible
GT/CS California Special

Automatic. Engine identification number indicates 302-cid V8 not correct for year. Seller says 48,129 miles showing are "true but exempt." Very good paint, chrome shiny with no pits or dings. Newish top that fits well.



SPORTSCARMARKET.COM

Mostly original interior, new carpets. Firestone Firehawk tires. More than just a used car, but not ready for a weekend concours without some serious elbow grease being applied first. **Sold at \$17,490**

The California Special was another attempt to sell the Shelby-like sizzle without any of the performance steak. The car was festooned with special scoops, graphics and Shelby-style taillights. Five years ago, everyone would laugh when you pulled up with one of these "badge specials." Now, as all early Mustangs and especially Shelybs climb in value, even these poseurs are being pulled along. This was a decent price, and a few thousand dollars more wouldn't have surprised.

—KEITH MARTIN