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BLOG TEST DRIVE

1955 Fiat 8V Berlinetta Vignale Tipo Mille Miglia

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Restoring The Pride Of Turin From Mille Miglia flop to queen of the concours scene, this fabulous Fiat 8V has led an eventful life. Words Mick Walsh. Photograph

FIAT'S V8 GREAT

On the road in Turin's answer to Ferrari: the gorgeous, Vignale-bodied 'Otto Vu

With its vast entry running from Fiat diesels to mighty works prototypes, it's not difficult to imagine how the Mille Miglia grasped Italy every year until '1957. The race epic was on borrowed time, but for Italian enthusiasts who had watched it since childhood it was a must-experience event. Successful Milanese business Bonacina was a regular after WW2, and one thought immediately crossed his mind when he walked on to the Vignale stand on the opening day of the 1955 T. On 22 April, and spotted the beautiful, deep-blue Fiat 8V berlinetta.

'Alfredo Vignale's firm was the benchmark for quality, detail and style during the golden years of the bespoke Italian carrozzeria'

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1955 Fiat 8V Berlinetta Vignale Tipo Mille Miglia – road test

'It's easy to imagine you're roaring east to the Italian coast and the Ravenna time control, chasing other 8Vs and Lancia Aurelias'

A deal was done, and by the end of the day the 8V had been removed from display and dispatched to be prepared for the big race. Just eight days after writing the show stand, Bonacina roared up the ramp on Viale Rebuffone in Brescia to start the Mille Miglia driving solo. More than 400 other entries had already left the night before by the time the 2-litre V8 coupé was waved off at 4.31am, its crisp exhaust cutting the cold spring air as a pumped-up Bonacina began the race to Rome. Without doubt several members of his car club, Scuderia Madunina, were there to cheer him on as he chased after the 10 other 8Vs in his class. Before the sun had risen, many of the exotic Fiat GTs were already out with mechanical problems – including Bonacina. The original Dante Giacosa design just couldn't take the pace due to chassis and gearbox weaknesses resulting from engineering shortcuts made to keep the accountants happy.



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The manufacturing giant soon lost interest in the exclusive 'Ottu Vu', but the spare chassis were sold off, further developed by Siata, and graced with coachwork exponents including Vignale. At the peak of its business, and with orders from many celebrities, the Turin-based coachbuilder enlisted freelance stylist Giovanni to work long hours in an effort to keep pace with demand. Chain-smoking at the drawing board, the popular character turned out a vast range of designs including 'Demon Rouge' that would replace the sold Vignale coupé on the Turin stand and went on to steal the show.

Alfredo Vignale's firm was the benchmark for quality, detail and style during the golden years of the bespoke Italian carrozzeria. Chassis 66 was one of 10 Ottu famous concerns; all were handmade, based on Michelotti's final 1:1 drawings, with the aluminium shape hammered out in the traditional way around a wire form, with individual differences to a style that evolved from the [Aston-Martin DB2/4](#) built for King Baudouin of Belgium.

Despite the frustrating failure on his last Mille Miglia, Bonacina kept his stylish blue 8V as a road car for 14 months before selling it to Bruno Cadirola, another businessman in Milan, who drove the compact GT regularly around the city – no doubt ranking locals with his Torinese-built exotic: the cities were fiercely local marques. Eventually, the 8V was traded in with Ferrari dealer Gastone Crepaldi and, as with so many secondhand Italian performance cars, the Fiat was sold to broker Pino Lella, an Italian skiing champion who traded cars during the summer season.

The blue beauty was loaded onto the transatlantic steamer Antonio Pacinotti at Genoa and shipped in September 1958 to California, where new owner Shelly awaited his Latin V8. Export papers reveal that the value was declared at Lire1,000,000 – then about \$1600. The 8V had developed quite a following in the States, the exploits of Ernie McAfee with Siatas, but often the troublesome Fiat motors were swapped for tougher American iron. Just such a situation developed with the early 1960s. Pfeiffer, an aerospace engineer, went to great lengths to rebuild the original engine, 136. After making extensive drawings and notes, he sourced specialists including Hoffman, Edelbrock, Nardi and Vandervell, but the rebuild proved too challenging and Pfeiffer decided to swap the temperamental 2-lit 2.5-litre 'four'. The Fiat gearbox was retained, with a mating plate made by a local mechanic, and the original engine was set aside then later sold, ending up at Zagato.



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With the more practical Chevy power, Pfeiffer continued to drive the handmade exotic and regularly took it up to a resort in June Mountain. There, during a fall of the 1970s, local enthusiast Daniel Simpson spotted the mystery GT in the car park of the Vista Motel. Initially thinking the coupé was an early Ferrari, Simpson had to investigate.

The Vignale badges rang true, but the car looked too small to be from the Maranello stable. He couldn't resist popping into the motel to discover more, and I met Pfeiffer, who was the manager. The two became friends and every time Simpson passed the Vista Motel on holiday trips he'd call by to chat about cars.

Then, nearly a decade after that first sighting, Simpson asked Pfeiffer if he was interested in selling the 8V and a price was agreed. Based in Glendora, east of Los Angeles in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, the ever-inquisitive Simpson set about researching his new acquisition. Amazingly, in an age before the internet, he tracked down the original engine, by that stage dismantled and with Allan Johnston in Dallas, Texas, but it took another 13 years before the owner would agree to a sale.

During his 30-year ownership, Simpson took the Chevy-powered 8V to occasional classic car events including to Monterey for Concorso Italiano in 2011, where the 'barnfind' created huge interest among the mint Ferraris. The tatty Fiat was much photographed and featured in Drive-My's event report, which was spotted by local car enthusiast Jan de Rue, who had developed a fanaticism for the 8V.



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Having already saved and restored several challenging Otto Vu projects with Dutch specialist Strada e Corsa, including a Balbo 208 CS, de Rue was always searching for new projects. You can imagine his reaction on seeing the story of the Vignale coupé. Together with Lennart Schouwenburg of Strada e Corsa, he began tracking it down. "All working through phone local clubs. I even wrote the numbers we had, and gold. Jan made the call e planning a flight to LA to

Finally meeting Simpson and seeing the 8V Vignale was an unforgettable moment for Schouwenburg: "We arrived at the door and a small man with grey hair sitting in his kitchen for what seemed like ages, we were finally asked if we'd like to see the 8V. We went into the garden and there it was, already pushed out special, with so many unique features including the twin fuel fillers and tinted rear screen. The engine was dismantled but still had rare features such as early fuel pumps. It was such a cool 8V and I knew within minutes that Jan had to go for it. Later, at the kitchen table, the tense negotiations were like a game: the owner's pension fund, and both wanted a good price. Eventually we left with a handwritten note for the successful deal."

With payment sorted, chassis 66 was shipped back to Europe, crossing the Atlantic 55 years after the car first arrived in California. In the Strada e Corsa work Lennart and his brother Jurriaan began a closer examination of the project before dismantling it for restoration. The talented Italian-car specialist has developed a reputation with 8Vs via the 25 that have been through its shop. As well as building concours winners, the Schouwenburg brothers have developed modifications to the 8V more practical as a driver. The rebuild of chassis 66 was to prove one of the Dutch team's most straightforward projects. "The Fiat was low-mileage and complete, it was either crashed or restored," says Lennart. "Although the interior was poor and the engine dismantled, the car had only been painted and was complete. It was a fun and challenging deadline, and the car's originality ensured that the restoration went smoothly."

As with all of its major rebuilds, Strada e Corsa did the mechanical work and assembly while enlisting trusted Italian artisans for special tasks. Once stripped to Carrozzeria Quality Cars near Padua, where Walter de Bertelle and Luigino Tommasin returned the Michelotti-styled GT to a mint state – just as it rolled out of the bustling workshop on via Cigliano 29/31. "Of all the 8Vs, the Vignale cars are the most beautifully built," says Schouwenburg.

"The standard of finish is very high. The chromed bonnet hinges are typical – they were just painted on Zagato 8Vs. Everything was handmade with immense care and has individual differences."

While the body was being repaired and painted, Strada e Corsa continued mechanical work. The 8V engine was very much a prototype design, with weaknesses sorted by Fiat, but the Schouwenburgs have developed various modifications that aren't visible from the outside. The V8 remains a three-bearing design, but differences are improvements to the valves, camshaft, crankshaft, lubrication and cooling. Rare features with 136 included hand-cast Weber 36DCS3 carbs, worn on early Ferraris and Pegasos, and often replaced: "The original factory power was around 90bhp – we're now getting 145bhp."

The gearbox was always one of the 8V's weakest features. Developed from a Fiat 1400 saloon unit to keep down costs, it lacked synchromesh on both first and second gear. Strada e Corsa has engineered stronger internals within the original casing, which has transformed the change: "This car was also fitted with the rare overdrive option, which makes it much more driveable on long tours. The Vignale designs have more comfortable cockpits, with better seats and superb detailing: this is compared to a Zagato. The dashboard also has more gauges, including an ammeter."

Although Strada e Corsa has refined the 8V to make it more reliable, the attention to detail is painstakingly authentic as the wiring by Italian specialist Franc reveals. Once the car was finished in the original dark blue, owner de Rue decided to have its Mille Miglia race number 431 hand-painted on the immaculate body. The number, as always, denotes the start time of first owner Bonacina. Frustratingly, when the car was entered for the 2016 Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este, organizers decided that the historic digits be removed and the car presented as it looked at the '55 Turin show. This stunning Fiat has since been displayed at the Pebble Beach, Hampton Court concours, where it has upstaged many more exotic machines and won class awards. Acknowledging its one-off competition outing, de Rue has had the car repainted. "My dream is to own the Fiat 8V Speciale Pinin Farina," he says, "but this Vignale is very special. I love the unique features such as the blue Perspex fuel fillers. Although I enjoy the sportier character of the lighter Zagatos, the Vignale is one of the best 8Vs to drive."

As you open the door to the stylish cockpit, it's clear that this bespoke coupé was conceived for an Italian gentleman. The detailing is impressive, including the door sill plates, window winders, handles and dashboard knobs, while the seatback pull-cords are as elegantly plaited as curtains in a plush hotel. Other notable features include the Facel Vega-style painted veneer instrument cluster for the seven blackfaced Jaeger dials. The rev counter reads to 8000rpm, while the speedometer is marked to an optimistic 240kph (149mph). Even for a lighter Zagato 8V, the top speed would be closer to 120mph. Releasing the spare wheel requires a contorted body twist to the swivelling mount, which then exits through a panel in the rear body. The twin fuel fillers look impressive, but one is a dummy.

Warming the 8V is essential before the revs can be stretched beyond 3000rpm but, once the temperature needle wakes, this highly responsive narrow-angle gearbox opens up.

The note has a glorious rasp that gets ever more crisp as you find the sweet spot at 4000rpm with an extra power surge. The gearbox, although slightly clunky, works better with higher revs and, aided by double declutching, it's then positive and rapid through the gate.

With the engine mounted well back in the chassis, the all-independent set-up feels nicely balanced while the worm-and-roller steering through the thin-rim wheels has a delightfully light and responsive action. On our test route around the Belgian coastal flatlands, the Fiat's expensive-sounding bark can be heard for miles through the closely stacked gears. Strada e Corsa's stunning rebuilds always drive as well as they look, and this concours coupé reaffirms that reputation.

In the bright midday sun, it's easy to imagine you're roaring east to the Italian coast and the Ravenna time control early on 30 April, chasing other 8Vs and Le Mans through the rolling hills for 2-litre GT honours. It's such a shame that engine problems forced Bonacina to retire; I like to picture the locals inviting him into a roadside cafe for a collazione, and that he spent the rest of the morning marvelling at the passing spectacle of the Silver Arrows with Stirling Moss winning the 300SLR to victory.

Even with a retirement, having been in one of the greatest races in motorsport history just adds to the aura of this handmade beauty. Now sorted, and with a seat belt under its belt, it's time chassis 66 finally completed the Mille Miglia. It's a lucky driver who gets that chance.

Thanks to Jan de Rue and Lennart Schouwenburg; Strada e Corsa (www.stradaecorsa.com)

Left-right: thickly padded chairs; Fiat was complete down to etched gearknob and sculpted bonnet vent; tweaked internals have transformed V8's reliability. Chassis 66 wears numbers that indicate its 4.31am Miglia start time. Top left: the 8V's 1955 Turin Salon debut, where it was shown for just a day before being sold to Borja. Paired fuel fillers and tinted Perspex rear screen were among the unique features of chassis 0066. The twin exhausts hint at the power of the 2-litre V8. Impressively trimmed cabin, the Vignale 8V was among the most sumptuous of the Mille Miglia entries in 1955. Top left: original Vignale technical drawings signed by Michelotti.

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