

Jay and Henry cover a *Stabilimenti*

Farina-bodied Siata 208CS whose history is straight out of the Witness Protection Program.

Woodside, California, 28 August 1995—I'm sitting across from Knute Kolmann on the front deck of Alice's Restaurant, working on a grilled-cheese sandwich and listening to Knute describe his Siata 208CS when he found it.

I can hear the car ticking and pinging as it cools off just behind me. Then comes the much louder warning beeper of a big truck backing up. Knute raises his eyes and stiffens, just a touch, as a dualie maneuvers into the slot next to the Siata. "It had been sitting out in a field forever, and *man*, I wanted it. Before I got it picked up, though, a huge snowstorm buried the car. Then a snowplow ran into it."

The truck stops, parks and shuts off its engine. Knute's face relaxes again. "How bad was it?" I ask, picturing the hand-ham-

mered aluminum cracking away as a rusty steel blade ripped through the B-pillar.

"Bad enough. I mean, it didn't destroy the car, just tore up some sheetmetal. But you know, it wasn't *good*!"

When I haven't actually seen a restoration I have trouble imagining how the car must have looked. It's like trying to picture your full-grown acquaintances in nappies and bassinet, which is hard to get right and often damned alarming. Now the Siata is perfect: I've just spent 30 minutes in the diminutive GT as it held a fast but comfortable pace down Skyline Boulevard, a redwood-lined series of switchbacks and sweepers meandering along the spine of the Coast Range. Eventually this road deposits the faithful at Alice's Restaurant—Northern California's equivalent of The Rock Store.

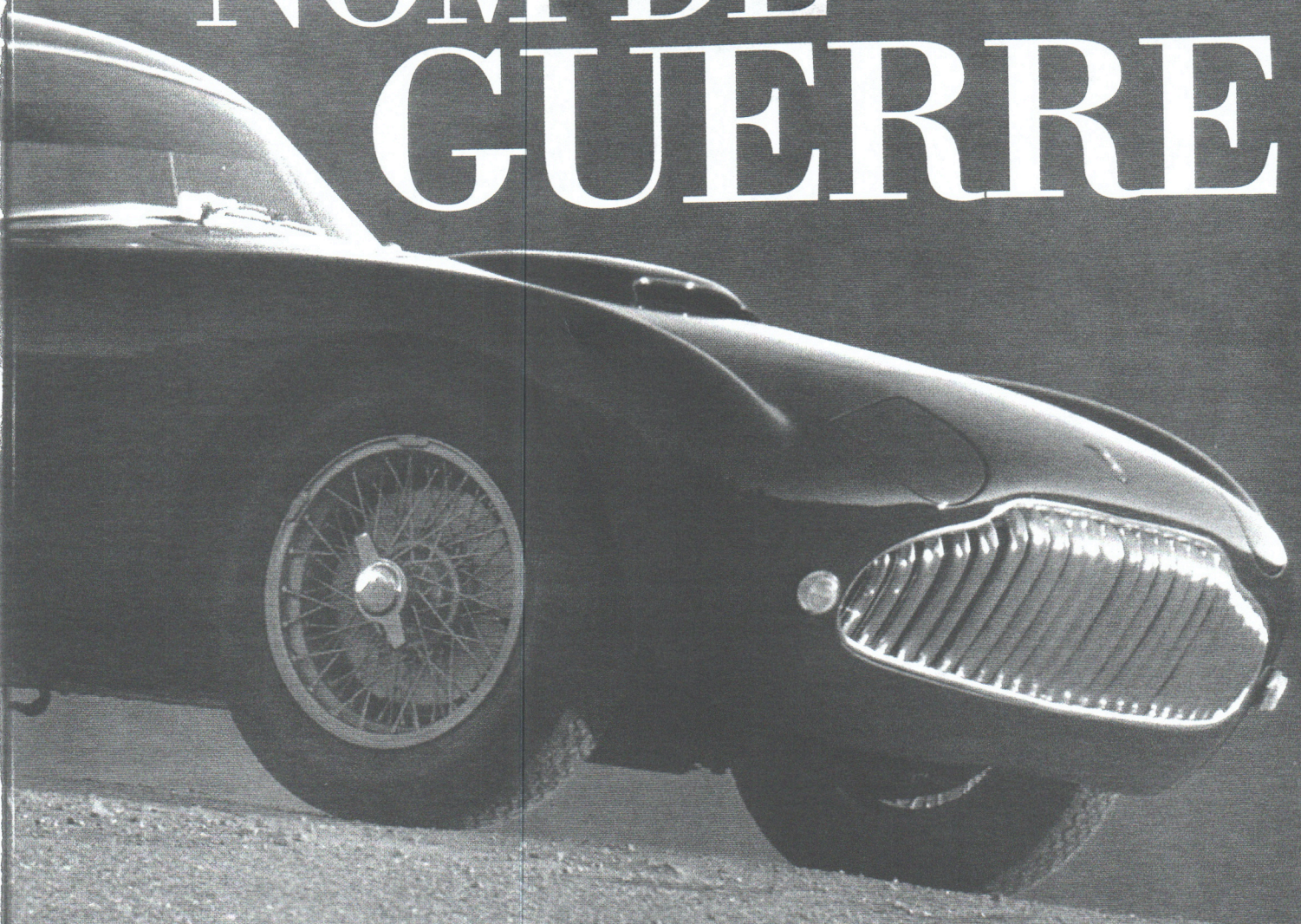
Hammering through the trees, the Siata

was loud, eager, tight, supple. Visually and mechanically, Siata 208CS #CS060 felt like new. Most likely, it felt *better* than new.

Knute found the car himself. He researched it, rescued it and eventually resurrected it. The vast majority of its flawless bodywork and mechanicals were restored by his own two hands. And he drives the hell out of it.

● **L'Aquila, Italy, 4 May 1952:** It was one of the rainiest Mille Miglias anyone could remember, but Gino Munaron and Franco Rol couldn't have been happier. While their works-prepared Siata 208CS gave up some horsepower to its rival Ferraris and Maseratis, its excellent roadholding and rain-cheating berlinetta body kept them right in the hunt. Five hundred and one entries had gone down the starting ramp in Brescia—including Lancias, Ferraris,

NOM DE GUERRE



Jaguars, Astons, Alfas and Mercedes—but the untested Siata continued to run magnificently. They were already battling for a top-ten finish.

Only two incidents had thus far marred the effort. "The cockpit was really low," Munaron recalls today from the vineyards he tends in retirement. "And any car is difficult to drive with your helmet against the roof! We fixed a piece of foam rubber to the roof with wire, but still our heads were always shooting against it. Also, when we had tested the car Saturday morning it was raining, and through the windscreen came some water—as you can imagine, the car was not perfect, for it was finished only the day before. So we made a hole in the footwell for the water to drain out.

"The funny thing was, after this, at anything over 160 kilometers per hour the

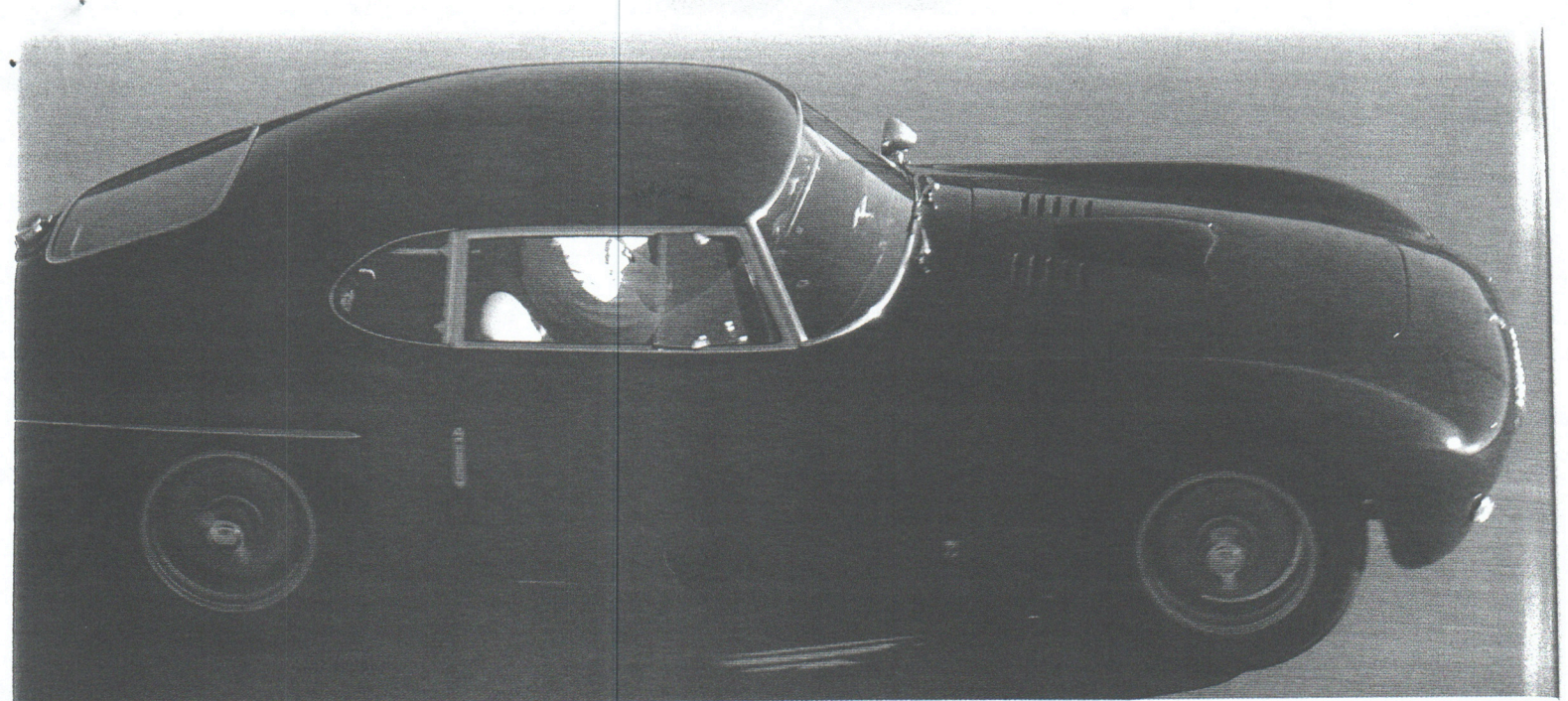
water did *not* drain out. It came inside like a faucet! Those were the only problems."

Franco Rol, a wealthy industrialist and talented amateur driver, had elected to run the Mille Miglia with a promising but still-unknown quantity, both the 208CS and its Fiat 8V powerplant were completely unproven. Siata—for *Societa Italiana Auto Trasformazione Accessori*, and sometimes written out as S.I.A.T.A.—was not new by any means, but it had certainly never competed on equal ground with Ferrari and Maserati before. The 2-liter pushrod Fiat 8V, meanwhile—so called to separate it from other firms' V8s—was only made public at Geneva earlier the same year.

Siata was founded way back in 1926 by Giorgio Ambrosini, an ambitious Turinese driver born in the small coastal town of Fano outside Florence. But until the early

1950s this firm had been content to fish in shallower waters. By World War II it was Italy's most famous maker of speed parts for the half-pint Fiat 508 Balilla and 500 Topolino. But while a number of Siata-badged specials had been spun off these chassis in the 1930s, the tuner only entered true series production with the Amica (Italian for "girlfriend") of 1949.

This tiny model used Topolino running gear in a Siata-made tubular-steel (later box-section) frame, the lot of it usually clothed in a Bertone-built body and garnished with two purely symbolic jumpseats behind the main buckets. A fully gassed-up Amica tipped the scales at less than 1500 pounds, and the average model's output was perhaps 20 bhp. Top speed remained limited to 65 mph. "Cute" is how you'd describe it today, or "sprightly" to be more charitable.



And yet somehow, just three short years later, here was Siata knocking on the big time. By early May, when Franco Rol took possession of his works 208CS coupe for the Mille Miglia, the unassuming Amica had been superseded by some incredible new performance cars.

First came the Daina, which was somewhat larger than the Amica and sported a modified 1395cc Fiat mill good for 65 bhp. While still an underpowered machine, the Daina's effective box-section frame and Bertone or Stabilimenti Farina coupe and convertible bodywork were both steps forward. Later versions came in a variety of shapes, sizes and outputs. The Dainas culminated in a trim Gran Sport barchetta and powerful coupe by Bertone or Stabilimenti Farina good for 100 mph, and then this live-axle chassis was adapted to all-independent suspension with an eye toward carrying Fiat's new 1.9-liter Four.

While the Daina was moving forward, allegedly it was American importer Tony Pompeo who catalyzed the next important Siata. Either the dealer/driver came up with the idea of a Crosley Hotshot-powered Amica himself or he passed the notion on to Siata from one of his associates. No matter which it was, the idea quickly led to the 750cc Siata 300BC, a small but fast car whose delicious lines and excellent performance brought the firm its first real measure of American attention.

So powerful was the lure of this vast market that in 1952, Giorgio Ambrosini's son Renato even came to the States for a personal tour. An Allied resistance agent during the war, Renato Ambrosini was

already Siata's heir-apparent—in 1964 he would become its leader.

The 27-year-old returned to Torino with a contract for a very special Siata indeed—a unique barchetta with torsion-bar suspension and a Chrysler Hemi V8—from the extroverted autophile John Perona, owner of New York's El Morocco nightclub. But as intriguing as the Hemi V8 might have been, another 8-cylinder engine had simultaneously come on the scene and offered the firm an even more alluring entrée into the big leagues: Fiat's *Otto Vu*—the 8V.

"Fiat first (designed) this engine for another car, a *normal* car," recalls Renato Ambrosini. But the cammy, all-alloy V8 "was too sporty. Fiat had to ask if we were interested in making a sports car with this motor (instead), and at this moment we (began to) work with Fiat. They (eventually made their own) sports car with another body, but we made (our) chassis lower than Fiat's. It was another philosophy."

Gino Munaron, very much dialed into the events of the times, recalls, "Fiat Engineering decided to build this car while top management wasn't even aware of it. They made it by, if you like, an *underground* system." Under the aegis of the legendary Dante Giacosa, most of the construction and development took place in Fiat's aeronautical department, not the auto works. This fact is borne out by the 8V's costly aircraft-style fittings, complicated assembly procedure and intricate aluminum castings—none of which would endear it to Fiat's mainstream auto engineers.

The 8V's eventual home would be the Fiat Type 106, a racy sports/GT in the



208CS at Turin, 1952.

Fiat's Type 106 was still going strong at the time, illustrating the simultaneous production of Siata and Fiat cars using the 8V engine.

Ferrari 166/212 and Maserati A6G mold whose various bodies from Fiat's own Carrozzeria Speciali, Ghia, Vignale, Zagato and Pinin Farina ran the gamut from luscious to fanciful. Due to its expertise in chassis tuning and an excellent longterm relationship with Fiat, Siata was tapped for development assistance on the Type 106, but, "It was not official at all," Munaron insists. "There was no Fiat-Siata, just Fiat 8V by Fiat. Siata was not involved at all, officially. Unofficially, it was." Ambrosini confirms this.

Whatever the relationship, the Fiat 106 program concluded after no more than 114 chassis were assembled. It's believed that 170 "chassis groups"—engine, transmission, suspension arms, rear end and steering gear—were constructed in all, however: The other sets had gone to Siata.

Conventional wisdom says Siata simply inherited a load of unused engines and components when the Type 106 went out of production. But this is clearly too simple: Fiat 8Vs and 8V-powered Siatas were actually produced simultaneously, which again underscores Siata's important, albeit covert, role in the program. In fact, an 8V-powered Siata racer even contested the Giro di Sicilia before Fiat's own 8V was announced to the public. The driver was Gino Munaron.

Adapting Siata's existing technology to the 2-liter Fiat 8V and its accoutrements was a snap. The resulting model was dubbed "208S" and quickly wrapped in sensuous Stabilimenti Farina berlinetta bodywork or built as a gorgeous spider of Michelotti design.

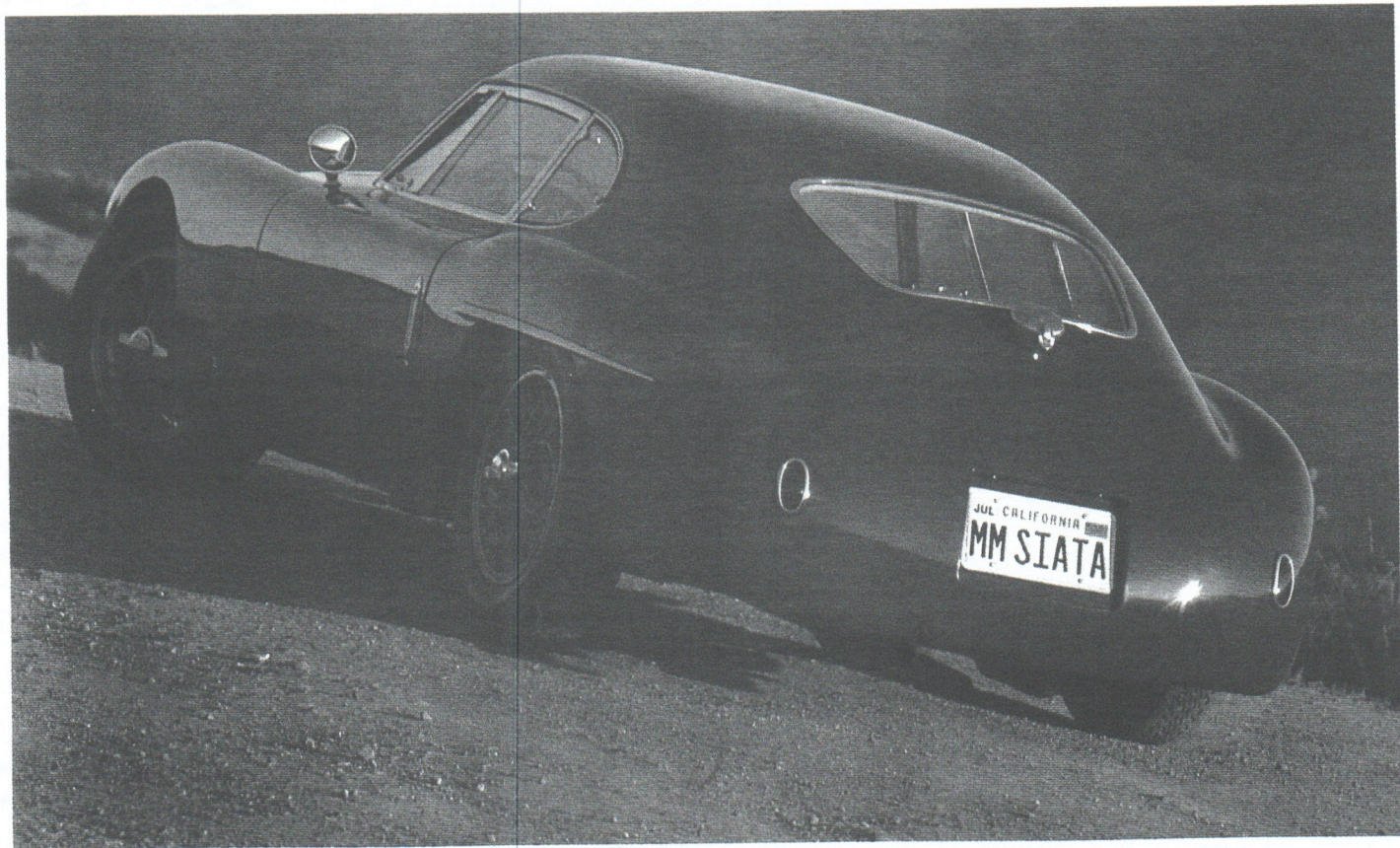
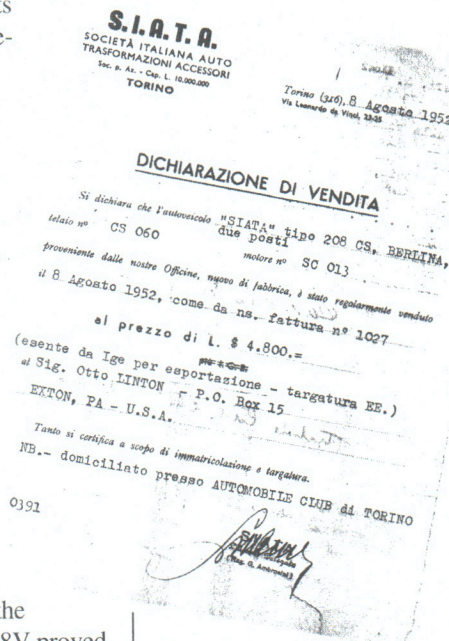
As advanced as the all-alloy 8V was in concept, however, in use its low-production status brought predictable problems. One was the lubrication system, which didn't always provide enough oil to the center main bearing if the engine was overexerted. (Kolmann, a talented engine man in his own right, has internally modified our photo car's oil galleries to get consistent pressure throughout the block.) Another purported weakness was its valvetrain, which some drivers didn't like to push much beyond 6000 revs.

These traits made the 8V impractical for production, but as an exotic sports-car engine they were simply par for the course. Treated with respect, the 8V proved a formidable and reliable powerplant.

Siata quickly realized it had a potential

Otto Linton's original bill of sale, F.O.B. Italy. He was

under the impression that CS060 had never been used before, and the price was set accordingly.



winner. Even without earning homologation as a GT car, the 208S acquitted itself honorably in the sports classes. And after Elio Zagato rammed his personal Fiat 8V through the classification process, it earned multiple Italian GT championships. Even Otto Linton, who drove Knute Kolmann's CS060 during the 1950s as both a touring machine and racecar, says "I never had any trouble with it. None. *None.*"

But back to the 1952 Mille Miglia, where we left Rol and Munaron: "We arrived 11th overall, third in the 2-liter Sports category," Munaron recalls of his own run in 208CS CS055. "Perhaps 8th or 9th would have even been possible, but between L'Aquila and Roma we had simply awful weather, and were obliged to go really slowly. It was *impossible* to drive, so we lost 15 or 20 minutes. Nevertheless, 11th, in my opinion, was really acceptable, (especially with) a brand-new car."

Then I ask the driver where Rol's 208CS went after the finish of the race. "After that," he replies, "the car was sold."

● **Torino, Italy, 8 August 1952:** To escape the encroaching Nazis, college student Otto Linton fled his native Vienna in 1938. Since that time, expatriatism had agreed with him: Just ten years later, Linton's love of cars and talent as a machinist had made the genial Austrian a prosperous and popular member of the East Coast's budding sports-car scene. An aspiring importer, Linton was also one of the SCCA's first members and a trackside competitor to Tony Pompeo, with whom he became friendly when the pair raced one another at Watkins Glen.

Eventually, through Pompeo, Linton purchased a Crosley-engined Siata (the second one built) to race in America. Otto was hooked: Linton remembers that, "Tony mentioned they now had a new model they were working on, a V8, and it sounded very interesting. I said 'Well, I want one.'"

Some months later, Otto Linton got himself to Via Leonardo da Vinci in Torino to receive his new car. Siata 208CS CS060 was a gorgeous road-equipped Stabilimenti Farina coupe, lavishly appointed in a tasteful cream paint scheme with a blue leather interior, Borrani wire wheels and Michelin X tires—the first, Linton believes, to reach America. "I was to pick it up and drive it to break it in, in Europe, for a couple of weeks. Then it would be shipped to the Glen."

Not surprisingly, "It was kind of fun!" he recalls today. "I was born and raised in

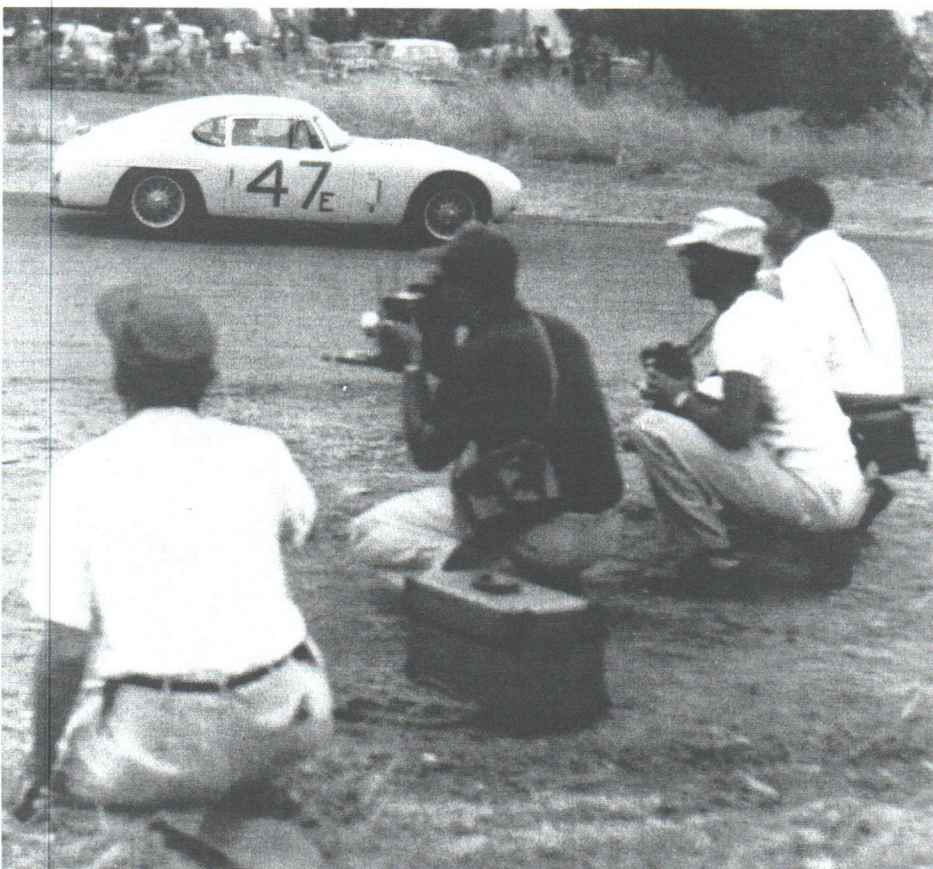
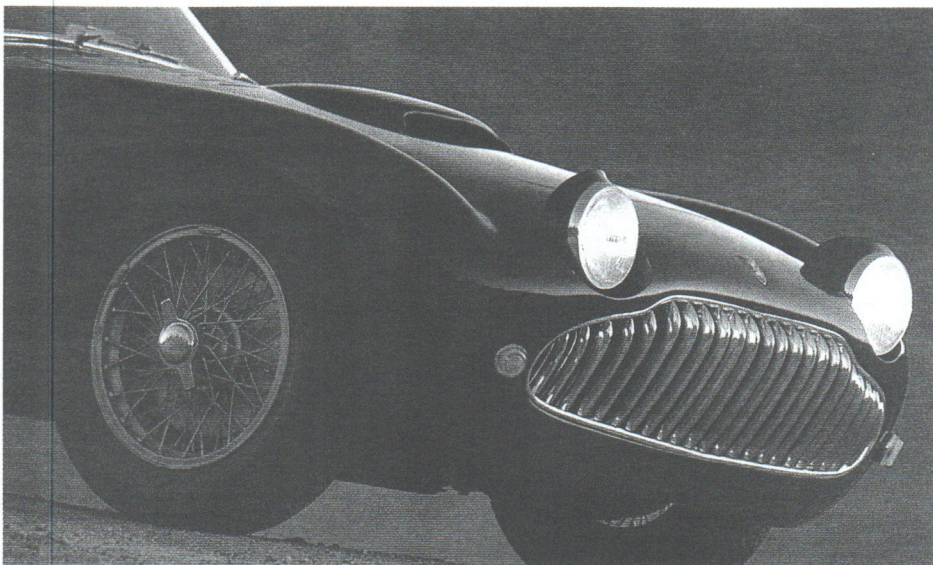
Vienna, and I knew quite a bit of that countryside, so I went all around to a number of different countries. At that time, it was an exceptionally comfortable car—well, compared to (its rivals), let us say!"

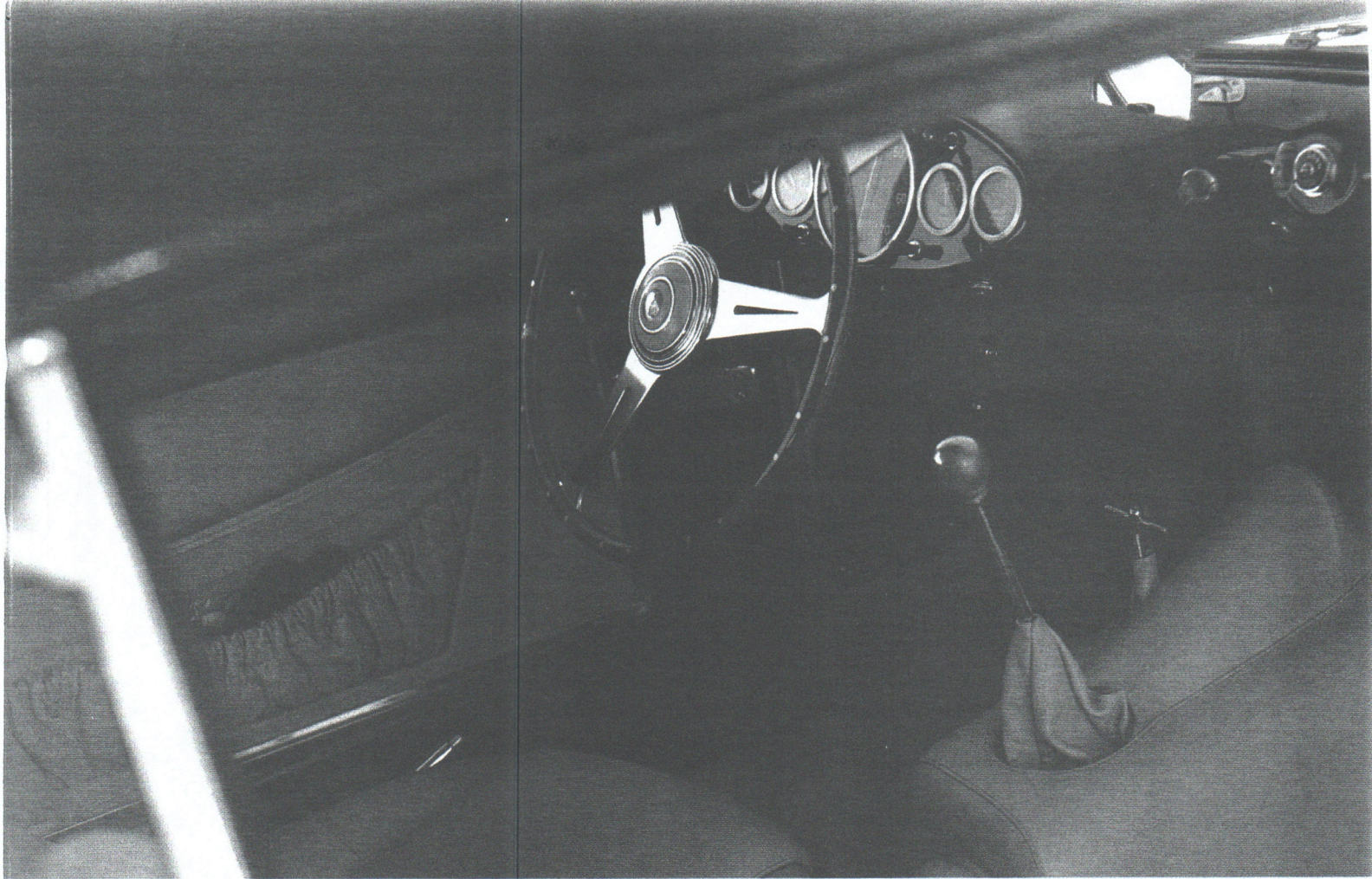
● **Watkins Glen, New York, 19**

September 1952: Linton's 208CS, which had been tidied up by the factory and sent by boat to New York, is late arriving at the dock. It finally clears Customs on Friday, the day before the speed festival at Watkins

Below: CS060 today.

The 1952 Mille Miglia cars carried extra driving lights in place of the outside grille bars. Bottom: Chassis CS060 in 1954 at Golden Gate Park, California.





Glen is due to kick off. Linton drives to the event himself and is eager to give the 208CS its first American outing when two laps into the main event, a Cadillac-Allard runs into the crowd and kills a young boy. The race is quickly called off.

Linton's next event (at Thompson, Connecticut) secures a first-place finish, however, and during the rest of the season CS060 travels the Eastern seaboard and acquits itself well. Running on the backroads that ruled the landscape in the days before the Interstate, Otto Linton enjoys a classic American road trip. In between dodging policemen and explaining the car to fascinated locals, he racks up top-three finishes at MacDill AFB, Brynfan Tydden and Lockbourne AFB. He even earns a 1st-place trophy at the Miami Automobile Show along the way, then cruises on to Sebring where he'll drive his Siata Amica Corsa. In 1953, a year after the tragic '52 race, Linton returns to the Glen and brings the 208CS home as E-class winner.

Otto Linton again: "I remember specifically that when I had it on the Glen I could easily outrun all the XK120s, without any trouble whatsoever. Thus, I had no com-

plaints about its performance or handling." In early 1950s America, the Siata was also an incredibly exciting touring car. "(On the road) we always had people pull alongside and look. The roof at the time was just about at the bottom of regular cars' windows. Always I got a lot of comments, and anytime I parked it, a crowd gathered." In Washington DC, Miami and New York, CS060 even served as a showcar.

Of course, being in the business of buying and selling exotica, eventually Linton moved on: "On the same (ship as the 208CS) was an MT4 OSCA which I liked tremendously. Eventually I decided to sell the Siata and buy the OSCA." Linton sold CS060 to Bob Murrell, a commercial pilot from Wyoming. With Murrell the car ran at Torrey Pines, Golden Gate Park and Palm Springs before disappearing from the limelight. From there it went through the Pacific Northwest, acquiring a Buick V8 along the way and just generally falling to pieces.

Many years later, CS060 resurfaced in Wilmington, Delaware. At this point, "I heard about it," Linton remembers, "and wanted to buy it in the worst way." But Knute Kolmann got there first.



Cozy 2-place interior

(usually) kept drivers dry, though its ventilation may not have been the greatest. CS060 carries Linton's luxurious road trim.

● **San Francisco, California, 28 August 1995:** Kolmann saw his first Siata in 1974. Always a man of unusual automotive tastes, he was in the process of tracking down an AC Greyhound when he spied a Siata Gran Sport in a Southern California garage. He wound up buying the car, and that began a fascination with the marque: Since then Knute's owned plenty of examples.

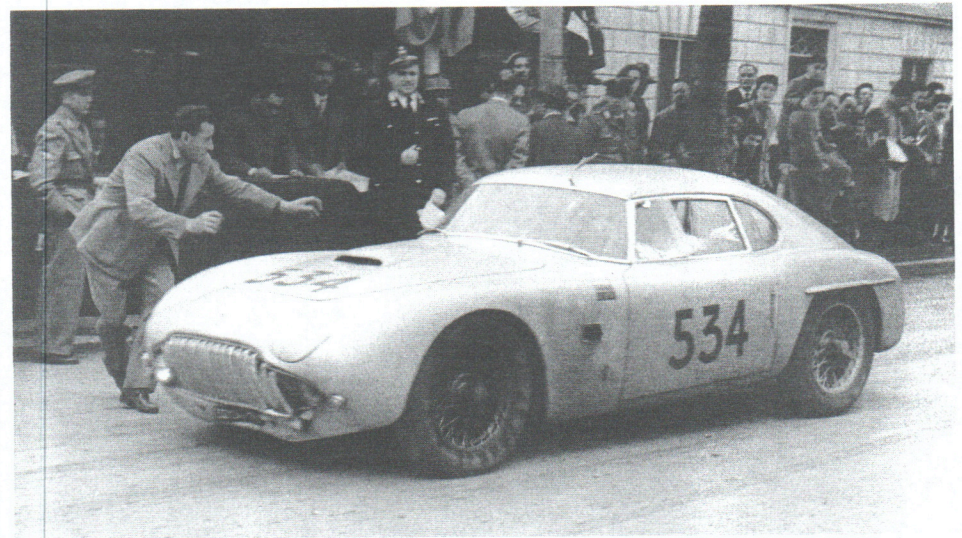
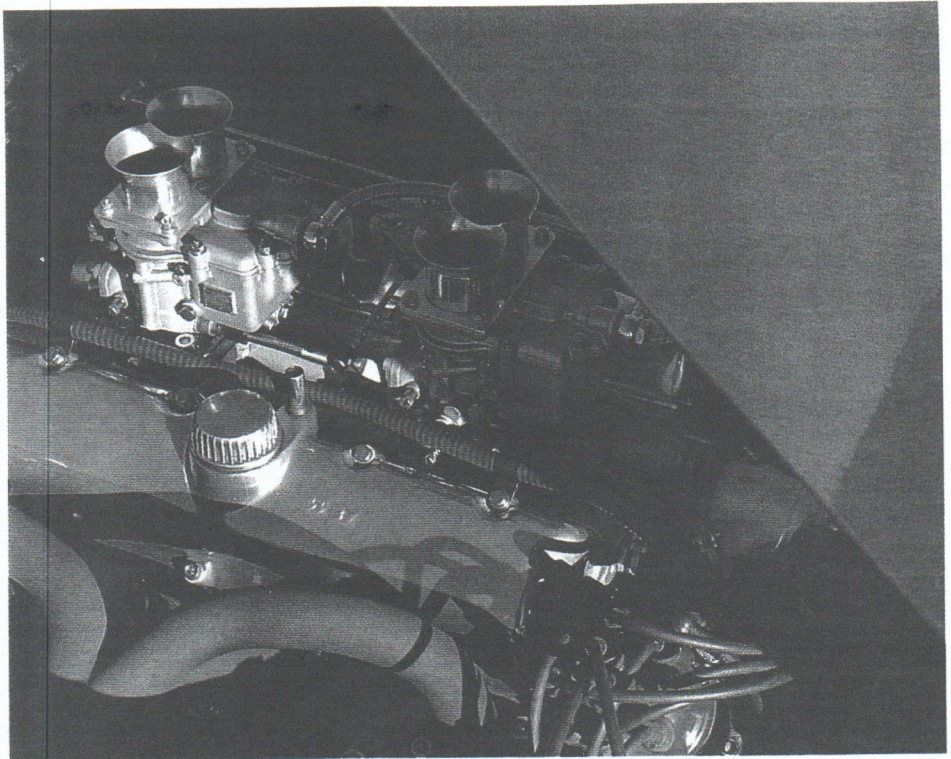
Of all the different versions, however, Kolmann quickly decided that a 208CS coupe was one of the models he *had* to have. Long-distance telephone research finally shook one out on a farm in Pennsylvania, and by the late 1970s a deal had been struck. The car, 208CS CS060, was shipped out west with the original Fiat 8V uninstalled but included.

The final fire under Kolmann's butt was lit by an invitation to show CS060 at Pebble Beach in 1993, a date looming ominously close. Knute was able to make it by the skin of his teeth: "The clutch, which we'd just assembled, went out on the way down," he recalls as we head back down the mountain, Knute downshifting for a tight lefthander. "And you've got to be able to *drive* the cars at Pebble. So I showed up really early in the morning, talked the guard into letting me park on the lawn, and then left it sitting up the slope. That way, when daylight came and they told me where to park it, I could sort of gun the engine like I was driving it, but really just let it roll into place!"

By this time, Knute had quit his earlier career in high-tech development and opened Classic Italian Sportscars, a Redwood City, California restoration shop he still runs today. But even at this level he knew he'd need help to get the car ready in time. Knute turned again to a man who'd been helping all along, John de Boer.

John and his father, Jarl de Boer (who incidentally owns another '52 Mille Miglia coupe, CS052), are probably America's foremost experts on Etceterini history and restoration. But John is quick to point out that his role in this particular resurrection was only a supporting one. "I just did little bits here and there," he explains, "probably starting six or seven years ago." One thing John took charge of was correcting the snowplow damage: "I straightened out all the good stuff up to a point and then fabbed a new piece and welded it in. Later on I made the exhaust pipes, some new grille bars, (just various) things like that."

De Boer also brought his expertise of the marque. Fewer than 60 8V-engined Siatas



were built in all, as 208-, 200- and 400-series models. Among the earliest and most interesting were the Michelotti-drawn Stabilimenti Farina berlinettas such as Knute's—Stabilimenti Farina went bankrupt during the program, so later examples carry Carrozzeria Balbo bodies that lack some of the early cars' finer details. Additionally, "I was looking at photos, and sort of determined that (Kolmann's coupe) was almost certainly one of the (1952 Mille Miglia works) cars," de Boer recalls.

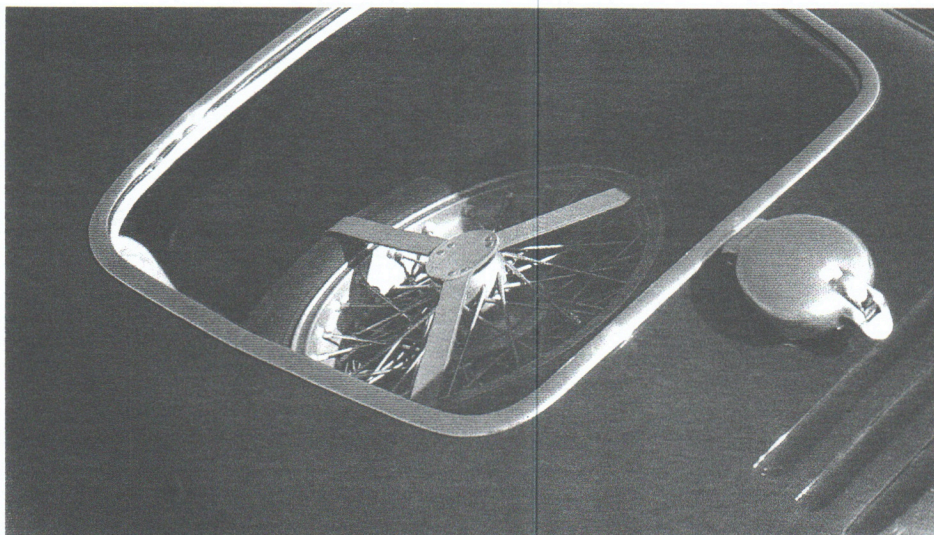
"They're all handmade, so they're all slightly different. Knute's had distinctive details."

But chassis CS060's history was already well known. It hadn't even been *built* when the 1952 Mille Miglia was run, and while

Above: Showing a minor shunt, Rol and Munaron at the '52 Mille Miglia. Top: CS060's engine is very likely the same one used in that race and in Siata's 208S prototype at the Giro di Sicilia.

some physical details did indicate a Mille Miglia car, others did not. The headlights and grille were different, the works cars' third wiper wasn't there, and so on. However, "When I found signs of the (third wiper) *having* been there," John goes on, "I started looking more." De Boer's own research had shown CS055 as the famous Rol/Munaron Mille Miglia car. Removing the solder on which Linton's chassis number CS060 had been stamped revealed CS055 underneath.

So what did this mean? After the 1952 Mille Miglia, Renato Ambrosini later told a bewildered John de Boer, Franco Rol traded his coupe in for credit toward a 208S spider. But while Ambrosini's memory goes flat after that, de Boer hypothesizes that Siata used the newly-returned CS055 to satisfy Linton's request for an all-new car. This means they removed the racer's unique fittings (such as extra driving lights and a larger-capacity fuel tank), repainted and retrimmed the platform and then renu-



bered it CS060 to be sold as brand-new.

To Linton, this is all news. He ordered a new car, and was under the impression that's just what he received.

De Boer agrees these events are unusual, but adds that this sort of deception "was done just enough by different companies" to make his assumption realistic.

Munaron adds, "At Ferrari, to renumber a car and sell it as new was *normally* the system!" Kolmann meanwhile points to the serial number evidence, and when I finally put this tale to Renato Ambrosini his answer is short and sweet.

"*I think it is possible,*" says the former Siata boss after a moment's consideration.

I am convinced.

● Point Richmond, California, 12

September 1995: It's been a few weeks since I've seen Knute and his car. I'm still casting around for research material and trying to learn Siata's arcane history, but as I approach more and more people, the one thing they want to express about this subject is always the same.

"I think they're just fabulous, underrated cars," de Boer insists of the 208S series. "And unfortunately, they never *will* be regarded as the supercar they should be, because of the Fiat connection. That's true of the Fiats as well, of course—the Fiat 8Vs should be regarded with the same awe as Ferrari 166 and Maserati A6G2000 cars. They're cars that you can drive every bit as quickly, and at the end of the day actually be relatively calm and refreshed, as compared to the 166 or A6G." Munaron and Linton both expressed exactly this opinion.

It all brings the time I spent with Knute and the car into sharper focus—the high, ripping engine noise, the whirr of its unsyn-

chronized fifth gear, the exposed structural beams in the footwell and the tight cocoon of hand-stitched tan leather. I vividly remember Knute happily chatting away as the gearbox slipped down a notch, the car set up for a tight, descending corner and the rear end lightly drifted through the arc. Gorgeous at rest, at speed the 208CS felt happy, predictable, willing.

"Always, always, it was just outstanding," Otto Linton had told me.

"The chassis was good, it was easy to drive, and it was also really comfortable—especially compared to the Ferrari or Maserati. An excellent, *excellent* car," insisted Gino Munaron.

Again, I am convinced. ●

1952 Siata 208CS

General

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive coupe
Structure: tubular steel frame with aluminum body panels
Market as tested: competition

Engine

Type: longitudinal V8, aluminum block and heads
Displacement (cc): 1997
Horsepower (bhp): appx. 145 @ 6000 rpm
Intake system: 2x2-bbl downdraft carburetors (Weber 36DCF)
Valvetrain: two pushrod-operated overhead valves per cylinder
Transmission type: 5-speed manual
Final drive ratio: 4.44

Dimensions

Curb weight (lbs.): appx. 1900
Wheelbase (in.): 94.5
Track, f/r (in.): 42.6/42.6

Suspension, brakes, steering

Suspension, front: independent by Dubonnet with coil springs
Suspension, rear: independent by Dubonnet with coil springs
Steering type: worm and sector
Wheels (in.): 4.50 x 400mm (Borrani)
Tires: 165-400 (Michelin X)
Brakes, f/r: drum, drum

Performance

Top speed (mph): appx. 130