

25 GREATEST CARS OF ALL TIME **SUPERCARS**



BY JEAN JENNINGS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM ANDREW

ALFA ROMEO 8C 2900

Star of the 1938 Mille Miglia.

Consider yourself a very lucky person if you have seen an Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Mille Miglia, one of the most beautiful and mighty Alfas of all time. If you were at the right place at the right time in Montauk, New York, on the longest day of this year, you would have

been that lucky. But not as lucky as the person driving it. That would have been me. And none of us is as lucky as Ralph Lauren. He owns this sparkling red, prewar beast that took second place in the 1938 Mille Miglia for its grateful (but fractious) Alfa Corse team manager, Enzo Ferrari.





Of about twenty Alfa 8C 2900B Corto spiders built between 1937 and 1939, four special models were constructed for the 1938 Mille Miglia. The race cars are easily distinguished by their cutaway doors; simple yet elegant external metal door hinges, hood latches, and gas filler cap; and extensively louvered and ventilated hood and lower side bodywork meant to both release heat and to cool the rear drum brakes. Only two of those Touring-bodied 8C 2900s are operational, and both of them live in the United States. This is one of the most precious cars in Lauren's vast collection, rumored to have brought him offers in excess of \$10 million. It's the first of the four race cars built, the car driven by Carlo Pintacuda, who led for most of the thousand miles until a brake problem near the end of the race allowed his teammate Clemente Biondetti to beat him in another 8C 2900B.

Restorer Paul Russell and Company brought this 8C 2900B back to its glorious Mille Miglia configuration once Lauren bought it in 2004,

matching the paint to a bit of red found under the fuel tank cover, and the leather for the seats to a tiny scrap of red leather found in the seat stuffing when the car was dismantled. It won first in class at Pebble Beach in 2005.

Imagine Ralph Lauren at daybreak in seaside Montauk. He opens the small, right-hand door latch with a twist, slithers in under the big steering wheel while resting a hand on the metal seat frame behind his back so as not to leave fingerprint dents in the fragile bodywork, and maneuvers his feet around the pedals. Once in the car, he presses the key into the ignition, reaches far left for the ornate brass knob of the electric fuel pump, and begins to slowly pump—five times, six times—until he feels the pressure build.

I HAVE MY WORRIES ABOUT THIS CAR. I PRAY FOR DIVINELY GUIDED FOOTWORK.

The straight eight fires up with a throat-clearing *WHORRK* and a soft rustle of combustion, then a great woofling rumble as he holds the revs at 2000 to clear the carbs. It is a mighty noise. Ralph is pleased.

Actually, Ralph is not there. His curator, Mark Reinwald, is pleased. He slithers out. My turn.

I have my worries. First, that little tai chi move into the driver's seat. Yes. Fits like a glove. Second, the pedals. Clutch left, brake right, and a little metal roller right between them to accelerate. I pray for divinely guided footwork. Frankly, I'm more worried about grinding the straight-cut gears, but Reinwald assures me that a decisive hand at the shift lever is all it takes. He also passes on some important advice from former owner Phil Hill. "He told me to let off the clutch without giving it gas. If it works for him..." It works for us, all right, and I head out into the dappled morning with the slightest lurch.

The eight large cylinders under the endless expanse of louvered hood are pressed into steel liners in a two-piece cast aluminum block. While 220 hp doesn't sound like much, it was prodigious in its day and helped propel the nearly 2500-pound roadster to a top speed of 143 mph. This day, however, I terrorize myself just south of 80 mph. The ride is surprisingly supple, thanks to a fully independent suspension with control arms in front and swing axles in back. The steering is dead accurate. My head is sticking out above the rimless windscreen, and my sunglasses are rattling.

I execute each upshift perfectly (less so the downshifts) as I roar up and down the Old Montauk Highway. "Roar" is a word that would not be disputed by the occasional morning bicyclist I passed. The sound of an approaching Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B could be mistaken for an aircraft on final approach. It's not a shriek but a mighty roar, underlined by the panicked supercharger whine. It's primal, exhilarating, and must feel a little disquieting to the pedalers to whom I give wide berth and wave. No one waves back. Pagans.

Perhaps the locals are too accustomed to Lauren's Montauk stable. But had you seen us, you'd have wept.

VILE GOSSIP



JEAN JENNINGS

I don't know Ralph Lauren, but I like his style. And that was before he lent us his priceless Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Mille Miglia.

I wear Ralph Lauren shirts and skirts, jackets, sweats, and caps, and I even have a couple of pairs of his shoes. And socks. I haven't used his paint, but every bed in my northern Michigan house (there are eight) is dressed in Ralph Lauren sheets, pillowcases, pillows, shams, down comforters, cotton blankets, wool blankets, duvet covers, and bedskirts. The bath linens? Ralph Lauren. I like to think that everyone who lives within fifty miles of the local rural outlet mall looks a lot better than they (or their houses) ever did before the label arrived. It's comforting to know that Lauren has been hoovering up my bank account and putting the proceeds into a car collection that I find inspired and enviable.

OK, I'm sick with envy. I first heard of Lauren (outside of my bedroom and bathroom) when I visited Paul Russell and Company in 1986 and saw a Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing that Lauren had in for restoration. Russell had painted something like ten silver aluminum sample panels over which

Ralph Lauren's car curator, Mark Reinwald, pumps fuel into the 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Mille Miglia. The exposed gas cap on this car is one of the features that differentiates the racing car from the production car.

the designer agonized endlessly before choosing the "correct" silver. "Don't worry, Paul," Lauren said during the long process. "I do this all day."

Not satisfied with any of his leather choices, Lauren brought Russell bolts of rich, tan garment leather to go with the approved silver. He had Russell hardwire a radar detector, then secrete it in a flip-down panel under the dash. I guess that means it wasn't an accurate restoration, at least not to the scrupulous Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance standards that drove several of Lauren's later collaborations with Russell over the past twenty years.

Who can forget the breathtaking, 1990 Pebble Beach Best in Show 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic Coupe? Three years later, Lauren's Russell-restored 1930 Mercedes-Benz "Count Trossi" SSK won top honors, and his 1937 Bugatti Type 57SC Gangloff Drophead Coupe won Most Elegant Open Car. The rare Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Mille Miglia from our list of 25 Greatest Cars (page 108) won First in Class in 2005 and won its class again at the 2007 Amelia Island concours. Of the sixteen cars in the 2005 exhibit "Speed, Style, and Beauty: Cars from the Ralph Lauren Collection" at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, seven were restored by Paul Russell and Company (order the book at www.mfa.org).

I can't tell you how many cars Lauren has amassed in garages around the country, but I know that he has every car I want to own, beginning with the first ones I laid eyes on as we drove down his narrow, winding, hedge-lined drive in Montauk, New York. Before curator Mark Reinwald opened a door of any of the three garages there, I had

already sized up an old Pinzgauer, a vintage Toyota Land Cruiser FJ40, and a 1944 Willys Jeep parked in the drive. I even wanted Ralph's trucks!

Reinwald pulled the Alfa from its snug berth and began pumping 110 octane leaded fuel from one of the three old Gasbot pumps next to the garage. I was now engrossed within. This little stable of Alfa-mates included a 1960 Jaguar XK150, a 1986 Ruf Porsche 930 Turbo convertible, a 1955 Jag D-type, a 1959 Porsche Carrera Speedster, a 1929 Birkin Bentley, a 1955 Jag XK140 cabriolet, and a 1959 Porsche RSK. My hand reached out instinctively for the 1930 Alfa Monza race car tucked in the far corner.

Reinwald threw open the doors of what I call the red garage, where every significant Ferrari in the collection sat alongside a red Jag XKSS. *Gasp!* Close that door. There are more garages here and several up in Westchester County, and then there's the wide-open space of Colorado needing something sleek and fast. Reinwald oversees the regular movement of cars among them all, as he oversees our dalliance with the 8C and the McLaren F1 (which you can read about on page 96). How can Lauren possibly choose among them?

Russell knows him well: "It's the season, the weather, his mood. Does he feel funky? The Willys. Beachy? The woody. Sporty? Elegant? It's a lot more than what a car looks like—it's what it sounds like and what it's like to drive. It's the entire sensory package for him." You can imagine a man so meticulous about how things look that he designed the jeans and shirts for the cowboys on his ranch, as well as the blankets for their bunkhouse. That man would know exactly how each of his cars would complement him and his environment at any given moment. You can also understand how he would need a lot of cars. ■



“ I can't tell you how many cars are in Lauren's collection, but he has every car I want to own. ”