



Berthold Design

FRANCO



CAR CRAFTSMAN

*When this Italian creates a car,
it's a work of art.*

Not long ago, Swiss carmaker Franco Sbarro received a telegram from a multi-millionaire developer in Singapore. "Make me a Challenge," it said, referring to the sleek Sbarro sports car. Sbarro cabled back his OK and noted the price, 300,000 Swiss francs (\$200,000). Once the agreement was struck, the buyer—whose name Sbarro has promised never to disclose—wired the customary 50-percent down payment and Sbarro got to work.

Sbarro is no ordinary automobile manufacturer. He doesn't just crank cars off the assembly line and ship them out. He fits his cars to the characters of their owners much the way a Savile Row clothier tailors a suit. "I had to know," recalls Sbarro, "who is this man?"

To find out he flew to Singapore for the weekend. At the buyer's home, Sbarro discovered no fewer than 35 cars including an Aston Martin, a Maserati, a Ferrari GTO, and several Mercedes-Benz—all of them sharp, snappy, quick-footed machines. "Now I know who he is," says Sbarro with a smile.

He returned to his shop, selected a powerful Mercedes-Benz eight-cylinder, 350-horsepower, bi-turbo engine for some extra zip (0 to 60 miles per hour in five seconds), strength-

BY • JOHN • SEDGWICK

Sbarro—an artist at heart—leans on a Challenge, one of the cars he designs and manufactures, holding a model of the same.



Carmaker Franco Sbarro says of his Challenge (above and right), "It's a crazy car." Sbarro's version of the Mercedes-Benz 540K (below) is equipped with an updated Mercedes-Benz 500SE V-8 engine.



Photos courtesy of UNICORN

ened the transmission, added a Dolby stereo system and an Alpine compact-disc player, replaced the side mirror with a black-and-white TV monitor (with a videocassette recorder attached), painted the whole a flaming red, and, as a final personal touch, added the buyer's name in flowing italics by the door.

The car took six months to build, and it stands now on the second floor of Sbarro's car factory—a yellow, flat-roofed, four-story building that was once home to a cigarette maker—in the small Swiss village of Grandson by Lake Neuchatel. The building is marked with the distinctive Sbarro emblem: a windhound leaping out of the Sbarro name. Up on the second floor the Challenge looks like an enormous axe-head laid on its side. Each door flips up and forward like the blade of a Swiss army knife. Even without the Mercedes-Benz engine revving, the whole car appears to throb with power as a straight line ascends from its razor-sharp leading edge up the hood to the windshield and then curves sensuously down to enclose a powerful rear. Inside, the Recaro seat holds you snug as you grip the steering wheel, ready to hurtle into the future.

Sbarro stands admiring the Challenge. "It's a crazy car," he says. "But I am a crazy man."

In an age that has tended toward mass production, standardization, and homogeneity, Sbarro is one of a kind. At 48, his tousled hair has started to gray, but otherwise he retains the youthful bounce and vigor of a much younger man. Indeed, as he talks he resembles nothing so much as a racing driver; his short, slight body is pitched forward on the balls of his feet as if to get a better view of the road, his arms flail as if to negotiate twists and turns, and his eyes—behind broad goggle-like glasses—gleam as if they had caught sight of the checkered flag.

Many of Sbarro's cars are literally one of a kind as well. He develops a prototype, produces a car, and then throws the prototype away, which means that car can never be reproduced. He is an artist whose medium is the automobile. He works the fiberglass for the prototype like a sculptor, giving shape to his vision with his powerful, meaty hands. And his brain is invariably brimming with new



ideas. Over lunch, for example, he might sketch a design in his notebook for a new car for a Swiss customer. It has the shape of a crescent moon. "A dream car," he says. "It is the customer's dream and it's mine."

And, finally, many of Sbarro's customers are one of a kind. He is reluctant to name them, out of respect for their privacy, but he lets drop that he has produced a mobile four-man conference room for the petrodollar billionaire Akram Ojeh, a souped-up six-wheel hunting car called the Windhawk for the late Saudi King Khalid, a sleek coupe in conjunction with the designer Pierre Cardin, and a road version of the Lola T70 for the British racing baron Eric Broadley.

All Sbarro's customers share a taste for the incomparable and a willingness to tolerate an artist's temperament. Although Sbarro cars can cost anywhere from \$60,000 to \$250,000, the craftsman insists on a 50-percent down payment with the rest due within five months. However, the car may not be finished for a year. "These things take time," he says.

Sbarro also operates on the basis of a handshake—no tedious written agreements for him. "I can tell in 20 minutes if they have the money," he says. (One tip-off is excessive haggling.)

Aside from a sketch, though, the buyer cannot be positively sure what he is getting. "I don't make blueprints," says Sbarro. "I make cars." And he guarantees his work for 20 years. In the rare case of a breakdown, he has been known to fly to the car and repair it himself. Such an approach—time-consuming, labor-intensive, high-priced—is not for everyone. That's the point.

At Sbarro's factory about 15 cars are in production at any one time. Since he began in 1967, Sbarro has produced 365 cars and 65 different models. If the cars aren't completely new, they are existing Sbarro creations tailored to the customer's specifications. For example, one Challenge was painted to match the color of a client's favorite dress.



Sbarro's BMW 328 (right) is powered by a 493-hp BMW 325i engine. His latest creation, the Monster (below), has the wheels of a European Airbus; a motorbike (below, far right) is stored on board for quick getaways.





Sbarro has been frustrated, however, in dealing with the whims of Arab royalty. A sultan from the United Arab Emirates initially let Sbarro select the material for the interior paneling of his Mercedes-Benz Gullwing. Sbarro installed wood. After that was done, the Sultan decided he preferred leather. Sbarro made the change, but increased the bill accordingly.

Sbarro has also re-created antique cars that have lamentably gone out of production. A popular one is the fabled Mercedes-Benz 540K, a powerful driving machine from the 1930s with a long aristocratic hood, a soft convertible top, and wheel covers that, when viewed in profile, flow over the wheels like breaking waves. Only 409 of the originals were built; a pair went to Hitler and Rommel. Now they sell for \$250,000 apiece at auction.

Sbarro's reproduction in fiberglass is so exact that it has earned the right from Daimler-Benz AG to bear its prized three-point insignia. In the Swabian region of Germany Sbarro found the plant that originally produced the distinctive headlights and prevailed upon the company to run off some more with the original tooling. Yet under the hood is a modern Mercedes-Benz 500SE V-8 engine capable of 136 mph, and the cabin is equipped with power brakes, power steering, and electric windows.

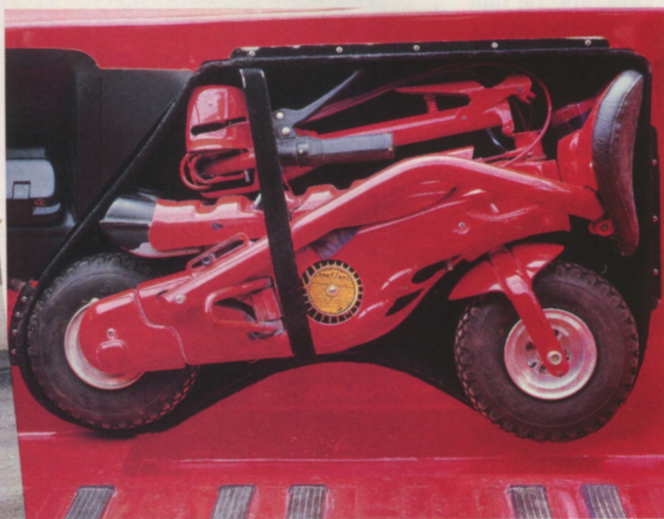
Then there is the sporty convertible, the BMW 328. When it was built in 1936, it first defined the sports car as a creature of breeziness and zip. Sbarro has spruced up his version with a BMW 325i engine tuned to produce 493 hp. Yet he has retained the original look so exactly—right down to the leather straps that buckle down the hood—that the car is much in demand by movie companies attempting to re-create the era. Sbarro's little roadster has appeared in Elia Kazan's *The Last Tycoon* and in Roger Vadim's *La Jeune Fille Assuive*.

Perhaps most magnificently of all, Sbarro has reproduced the legendary Bugatti Royale, the two-toned beauty that is as long as a railroad car, and still, as they say about racing yachts, thoroughly yare. The interior is velour, satin, and carpet; the dashboard is walnut. So determined was he to reconstruct the original machine down to its last detail that he reproduced 1,000 square-headed screws for the bodywork. Sbarro built his first Royale for an unnamed client for \$200,000. The client stores the car in Sbarro's basement museum. Now Sbarro drives it occasionally for family celebrations and rents it for 10,000 Swiss francs a day (about \$6,700).

Sbarro has also salvaged some significant originals. The most famous may be Greta Garbo's Rolls-Royce Phantom I (which now resides in a nearby automobile museum) in addition to a gorgeous Packard fire-chief's car, a Bentley, an Aston Martin, and many others, all of which are arrayed by the Royale in his basement museum. Currently an olive-green Daimler is stashed in a heap, more or less, by the garage entrance. It was driven for a time by King Khalid and still retains its Arabic license plate. Sbarro holds the plate in his hands and turns it up one way, then the other. "I don't know which way it goes," he says with a laugh.

Sbarro cars are made by him and his crew of 15. There is no heavy machinery in evidence anywhere in the shop, and certainly no mechanized assembly line. The factory is divided into about a half-dozen large rooms, each of them resembling a repair shop, where the workers can tinker with a different aspect of the cars—the chassis here, the engine there.

Sbarro makes his mark chiefly on the body, as he labors to create the distinctive exterior styling—the curves, the flow,



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the tautness. The bodies are made of fiberglass largely because the material is pliant and can be shaped with bare hands before being hardened with a liquid additive. Sbarro also appreciates its strength, which he demonstrates by taking a large hammer and giving the hood of a Challenge a stupendous whack. "See?" he says. "No dent."

As for the cars' other parts—the engines, chassis, brakes, transmissions—Sbarro acquires them from other manufacturers. Only if nothing is available will he make a part from scratch. Sbarro is possibly the only carmaker in the world who assembles his cars in this manner; others such as AMG, Gemballa, and dp Porsche work exclusively on one type of car—souping up Porsches, for example. "They have a business," he says dismissively. "Mine is an art."

If you would seek to know Sbarro, look about his factory. His life is embodied in his cars. Italian by birth, he speaks French, German, and English besides his native Italian, but mostly he speaks Car—compression ratios, drive-trains, engine size, horsepower. These are the subjects that absorb him in any language. And he speaks of them in bursts of rapture, amplified by great sweeps of his arms, that bypasses the syntactical niceties of standard speech.

Asked which of his cars he likes best, Sbarro exclaims, wild-eyed: "Best? Best? There is no best. What's best—four-wheel drive or standard? What's best—four door or two? There is no best, only different cars for different things."

Sbarro lives for his cars, and he has nearly died for them. He walks with a limp that stems from a car crash in France that occurred when he was driving back sleepless from working the pit in the 24-hour Le Mans race and was sideswiped by another car on the highway. "Maybe I should have stopped in a hotel," he says. "If I had been fresh, the accident might not have happened. But as it was, I was just—" he mimes the racing driver bombing down the track—"Brrrrmmmmmmmmmm." Then he looks on the bright side: "It's good to go to the hospital every once in a while." He taps his head. "It puts everything right up here."

Sbarro is also missing the tip of the fourth finger of his right hand. A car he was unloading at his factory smashed it. "Maybe an employee should have handled it," he says, "but I didn't want anyone else to do my work for me."

Sbarro lives with his wife, a beautiful blonde named Francoise who does the

company books, and his two young sons, Fabrice and Fabian ("my two best works," he says), in a small house a half-mile down the street from the Grandson factory. The house doubles as a factory for the company's line of "baby-cars." In a downstairs garage, Sbarro produces adorable children's versions of the Mercedes-Benz 540K and the BMW 328 and other replicas that are exact in nearly every detail. They have 3.5-hp gas engines and go up to 30 mph. After the children lose interest or grow up their parents display the cars under glass.

Sbarro has no office per se; his office is the factory, where he can be found sketching a new design, tinkering with a transmission, or installing an engine from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m., five days a week. On Saturdays he puts in a few more hours and then devotes the rest of

BUYING FROM SBARRO

Sbarro cars are marketed in the United States by Unicorn, (4400 MacArthur Blvd., Fifth Floor, Newport Beach, CA 92660, (714) 955-4938), as well as in Frankfurt, Germany. Unicorn can provide potential customers with further information and illustrated brochures of popular models.

Although customers can place orders with Unicorn, Sbarro prefers that they fly to the factory in Grandson—which is located on Lake Neuchatel in Switzerland, about 20 miles north of Lausanne—to see his operation and discuss their plans with him in person. If the trip results in an order, the company will pay the customer's travel expenses. If not, says Unicorn director Stefan Michailoff-Spassoff, "at least he will have had an interesting trip."

Sbarro is keen to have customers make the journey in part to reassure them that their required 50-percent down payment (the balance to be paid within five months) is indeed going to an established and credible enterprise. The car itself may well take as long as a year to produce. Sbarro also likes to meet his customers so that he can better build a car that fits their style.

the weekend to meeting the journalists who have been flocking to him in increasing numbers in recent years, and to his family. Besides Françoise, Fabian has also gotten into the act. When one of Sbarro's Arab customers spotted Fabian sketching a car, he rewarded the boy with a gold watch.

Sbarro himself grew up in the tiny town of Lecce near the heel of the Italian boot. The town was so poor, he says, that even the Mafia didn't bother with it. His father had a small farm, but Franco never wanted to till the fields. "I was born in a V-8 engine," he says.

He was crazy for cars from birth. The only problem was, there weren't any around. No interesting ones, anyway. "When you think of Italy, you think of Ferrari, Maserati. All I ever saw were Fiats," he says. Sbarro couldn't afford even the simplest motorcycle; he had to settle for a pedal bike.

Late in his teens, Sbarro left Lecce to work in an auto repair shop in Neuchâtel, Switzerland—a modest job, but it thrilled him. His first month's paycheck of 400 Swiss francs allowed him to buy a motorcycle and still pay his bills and send some money home. Two

Sbarro works the fiberglass for the prototype like a sculptor, giving shape to his vision with his powerful, meaty hands.

years later Sbarro bought his own small garage, where he soon built his first car—a race car—and later was hired, at 23, by the developer Georges Filipinetti as the chief mechanic on his Scuderia Filipinetti racing team. With such drivers as Herbert Muller and Rico Steinman, Filipinetti won the Targa Florio and the Le Mans 24-hour race in 1967. It was then that Sbarro decided to go on his own and take over an abandoned cigarette factory in Grandson.

Over the years Sbarro designs have grown crazier and crazier, as his latest creation attests. He calls it the Monster. It looks like something that has emerged from a post-nuclear desert or has appeared on an alien planet. It is round, hulking, bug-eyed, and huge, with long chrome pipes that curl about its body to emit its ferocious exhaust,

colossal wheels that have come off the European Airbus, and the general demeanor of a rapacious insect gone amok. Theoretically a dune buggy, the Monster can go anywhere. Should it ever fail, it carries a spare motorbike in the back the way yachts sometimes trail Boston Whalers. It seems best suited for terrifying the mild mannered on the open road. "This one is a really crazy car," says Sbarro.

He is hoping the Monster will help him crack the U.S. market, the one corner of the world that is still relatively unaware of Sbarro's talents. The film director Sydney Pollack has expressed interest in the Monster.

Part of Sbarro's problem in bringing his cars to U.S. roads has been the formidable barriers to entry posed by the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency. The DOT, for instance, requires a crash test of all imported cars. One cannot very well crash a one-of-a-kind Sbarro creation.

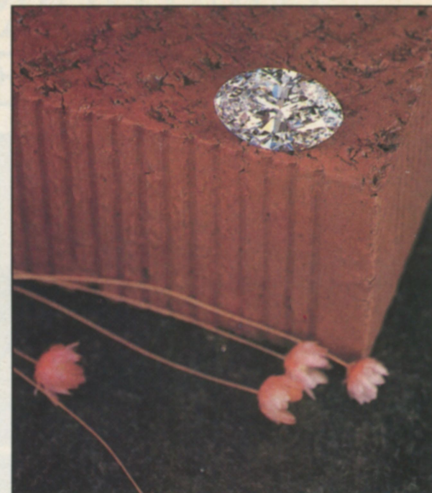
Beyond that sticking point, Stefan Michailoff-Spassoff, president of Unicorn, Sbarro's marketing firm, is leery of the American approach to car purchases. For one thing, Americans don't like to pay a fixed price. Michailoff-Spassoff winces at the memory of negotiating with a U.S. football star who insisted on seeing the breakdown of the bill and then haggled over every item. He never did buy.

Furthermore, Michailoff-Spassoff fears that wealthy Americans may be too impatient to tolerate the Sbarro requirement of money now, car later. "In America," he says, "people who have the money say, 'Let's go buy a car.' Then, if they don't find the car they want or one they can have, they go away angry and buy a boat."

Nevertheless, Sbarro has kept his eye on the American market. For him it seems a natural. Rich Americans, he contends, don't worry too much about flaunting their wealth. By contrast their European counterparts live in fear that the government will take note of their luxury purchases and will subject them to extra scrutiny at tax time.

One other thing makes Sbarro believe that the States will be receptive to his cars. "Americans," he says, "are crazy!"

John Sedgwick, who writes for other national publications such as Esquire and Travel and Leisure, is the author of the forthcoming book The Peaceable Kingdom.



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