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ITALIAN *for* BEGINNERS

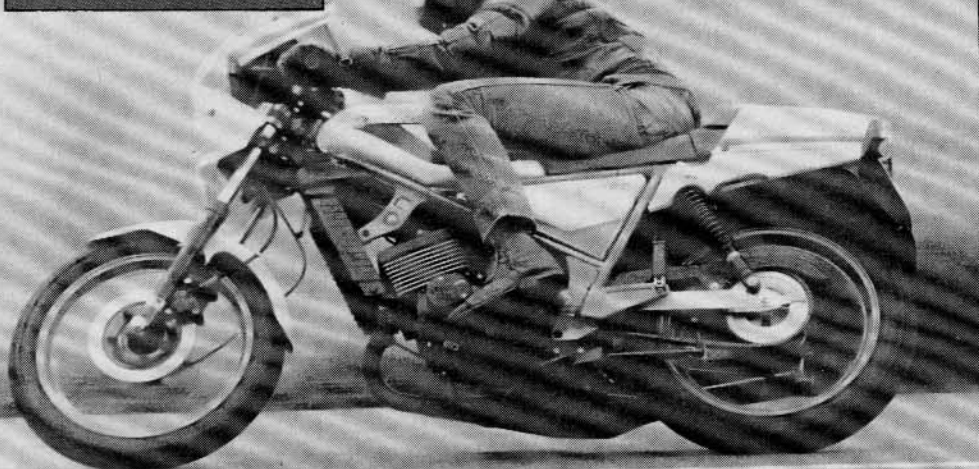
AS WELL AS LOOKING LIKE AN RGS,
LAVERDA'S 125 SPORT OOZES LATIN CHARM.
BRECON QUADDY BLAGGED A RIDE ON THE
ONLY ONE IN THE COUNTRY

EVERYONE KNOWS the Italians have both extremely expensive tastes and a totally disproportionate sense of national pride. There's no point pointing out the peeling chrome, lumpy paint and crappy electrics of a recent vintage Wop scooter to the bloke who built it because he'll only shrug: 'Wassamatter? It's-a Eetalian, it's-a very good. (Shut up-a your face, British philistine).'

You want more, you pay more. You no want-a to pay, you buy Japanese. End of statement. It's a problem which has long faced anyone except, please excuse me for using the word, scooter riders who want to ride Italian but haven't the cash or full licence needed for a big Guzzi or whatever.

Looking at the range of learner-legal 125s in this country you'd

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never guess that Italy has a thriving and fiercely competitive 125 industry. The two Cagiva 125s we've tested recently only gave the impression that Latin learners are still putting up with stone age engineering and quality control.

Sadly, the reason we don't see many alternatives to Jap learner bikes in this country is the old one of uncompetitive price. While young Claudio willingly shells out nearly £1500 for his hotshot Gilera 125 even though it's more expensive than Honda's similar MBX, it won't work here.

But behind the limelight currently falling on the fast, 16in-front-wheel monoshock Gilera RV125 all over Italy at the moment is the story of good old Laverda's biggest success to date. Yes, not the Jota or the Corsa but a humble 125 which took off so fast a couple of years back that production of the big triples was delayed while the small Breganze factory frantically stepped up output to cope.

At over £1100 in Italy, it wasn't surprising that none were imported into the UK although the original, all fire engine red, version looked amazingly like a real RGS triple. Recently, though, a single 125 Sport found its way to London Latin-lovers Moto Vecchia thanks to a wandering Aussie who bought it in Florence, rode it to London and parted with it for the price

of an air ticket from Sidney to Adelaide when he became homesick. Money doesn't mean a thing to some people

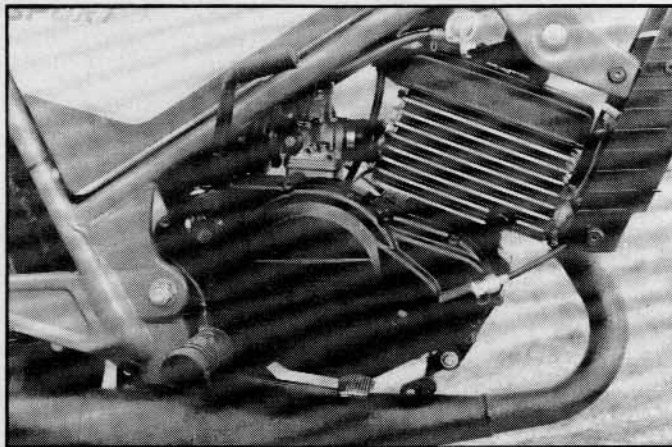
Unfortunately it's not an original all-red version but wears the new kind of flashy, contrasting paintscheme apparently demanded by Italian teenagers. It's still pretty smart, with its svelte handlebar fairing, RGS-style tank and removable tailpiece over the passenger seat. A pity the guy who bought it and rode it over fitted an aftermarket exhaust which didn't allow retention of the standard bike's belly pan.

Wheeling it out of the shop, I could see why the 125 isn't cheap. Inside the fairing is a neat instrument pod with Japanese clocks flanking home-grown warning lights. Switches on the meaty clip on bars are well above old Italian standards as is the overall

finish and fit of the plastic bodywork sections.

Okay, so even the Cagivas passed that test — but there was never mistaking their noisy, vibratory motors for anything fit for the 1980s. Pressing the choke lever on the Lav's 28mm Dellorto carb and prodding the lever was very different. Even with the cheapo spanny fitted, it fired first kick and quickly settled down to a smooth, quiet tickover once the watercooled motor warmed up a little.

The motor used to be all Zundapp until Laverda began making their own heads and barrels. Now the Zundapp bottom end and gearbox have been replaced by Laverda's own stuff. First thing you notice is the massive barrel which looks like an aircooled 350 rather than a liquid cooled 125. Dunno whether that's a legacy from



Hard to believe there's only a tiny 54mm diameter piston in there . . .

the Zundapp days or whether it follows from Massimo Laverda's 'make it big' policy: it's sure smooth and quiet.

But then the whole machine has a big, solid feel too it. Forks are 32mm Marzocchis, wheels are cast, ten-spoke alloy 18in jobs and a 260mm (10.2in) Brembo disc provides plenty of stop quotient up front. With a 54in wheelbase, 30in seat height and dry weight of 115kg (253lb) there's no mistaking it for a gossamer-like Jap 125LC.

Aside from occasional crowding from Jap-mounted learners trying to get a closer look, riding the Lav was no problem. It's smooth thanks to large rubber bungs on the engine mounts and remarkably stable for a lightweight save for the close-set forks' tendency to wobble, slightly at ultra low speed.

Price, of course, wasn't the only reason for the Laverda's non-appearance in this country. Power output is quoted at 16bhp, making it decidedly non learner legal although capable of over 75mph and delivering respectable acceleration. Unfortunately, this particular bike is almost definitely within the UK learner power limit.

The exhaust might have something to do with it, but even though the 54x54mm reed valve mill revs happily past the redline (8000rpm) just like its bigger brothers, the expected rush of horses never materialises. It quickly runs out of revs in its comparatively tall bottom gear, and needs plenty of throttle to get the most power while going up through the remaining four well-spaced ratios.

A wrist tuned to a Jap 125LC's peaky 10,000rpm revband would find the Lav's tractability surprising, however. Although it sometimes bogged around 2000rpm and wouldn't clear until the clutch was pulled in, it'd usually trundle happily around at low revs, or rev out with no apparent power step. Too much low rpm running may have been the cause of the bogging down since it only happened in traffic.

On the other hand, previous experience of transmissions on Italian lightweights hadn't prepared me for the Laverda's. The clutch is light and engages smoothly while the gearbox is positive without suffering the excessive lever travel of a triple. Wish they were all like that.

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The handling is superb and my 12½ stone had far less effect on the way the Lav could be pitched into a corner than it had on the last Jap LC I tried. The suspension seems firm but far more supple than that on most large Wop bikes — the Sebac shocks being especially good. Standing on the brake pedal didn't seem to provoke much reaction from the 6in Grimeca sls drum (not a bad thing considering the widespread learner bad habit of hardly using the front brake) but the front Brembo was powerful enough to squeal the front Pirelli Mandrake with just a light squeeze.

Moto Vecchia's bike had a 3.25in rear tyre which added to the confidence-inspiring way it could be cranked over but may have contributed to a tendency to run wide coming out of a bend since the Sports leave Breganze with a 2.75 section rear boot which matches the front.

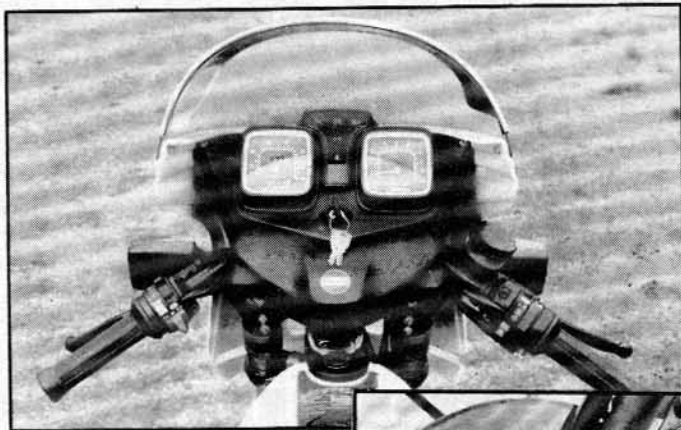
Aside from apparently having no toolkit (you need an allen key to remove the tail hump), the Laverda's spec lives up to its high price. A 90W alternator powers its 12V electrical system which feeds a bright headlamp and

indicators, while sparks come courtesy of a Motoplatt CDI unit. There's no side stand and the kickstart lever prodded my calf every now and then, but overall the 125 displayed all the usual Italian style with none of the frustrating idiosyncracies.

According to photographer Kel Edge who's ridden a standard Sport at the factory test track, the beast should be able to go as well as it handles even if getting it to do so might mean finding and refitting the long and rather unlovely standard pipe.

Looking around at the number of unrestricted 125LCs wearing L plates, the Laverda's 16bhp potential's hardly going to stop a well heeled learner bending the law to get the classiest passport to a full licence currently going. But watch it: judging from the Cologne Show the competition among Italian 125 hotshots is hotter than ever — and you never know when someone's going to turn up in Colliers Wood with a Gilera . . .

Stop Press: Too late! The Sport has already been snapped up by a wealthy Italianophile publishing magnate planning to find its lost horses. Do not despair, though, since we hear Three Cross Motorcycles are considering importing a few . . .



(Above) Zocchi forks, Brembo brakes and real clip-ons show why the 125 Sport isn't cheap. (Right) Purposeful stopper lives up to its reputation

