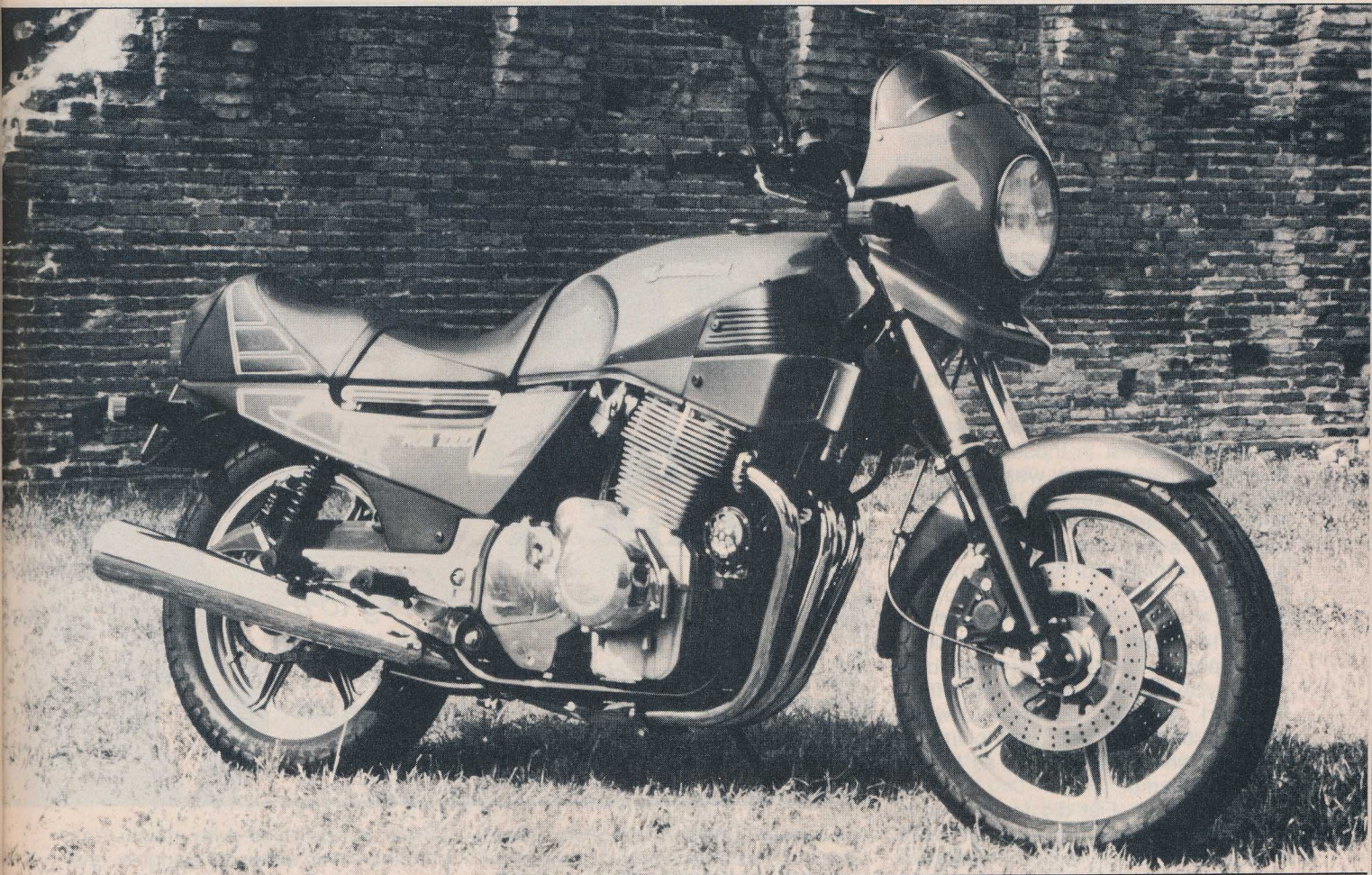


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# ● DIARY OF A ● GRAPE RUNNER

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*August 1983. Vedi Napoli e poi mori.  
By Buzz Buzzelli*



□ First things first. I am as Italian as a Lambrusco grape, and as American as a vine transplanted to Modesto. It is August 1983, and California is nowhere in sight. The rugged landscape of north-eastern Italy lies covered in rich, electric greens, bathed in a light that's clear and cool yet sets colors aglow. The light—it's understandable why great painters have lived and worked in Italy. All light is not created equal.

Nor are motorcycles. Look at the details and witness the Italian style of metalworking; ride any Italian machine and feel the long, sullen shift throws, the take-its-time steering, the fantastic brakes. A broad description of one Italian machine blankets nearly all Italian bikes and approaches nothing else.

Laverda's 1000cc three-cylinder RGA is the most updated Italian motorcycle in a decade, and it illustrates the point perfectly. It's a variation of the swoopy RGS (introduced last year), tailored perfectly to countries with speed limits. The RG-series is all new from the inside out, yet outwardly the engine looks exactly like the old one. Laverda's chief engineer, Guiseppe Bocchi, gutted the old engine and installed a new interior, leaving exterior evidence of the machine's heritage. Bocchi's design skills are evident in Lamborghini and Ferrari racing cars, in MV Agusta's last four-cylinder racer, in improved pieces within Ducati's Pantah. Bocchi updated Laverda's three, yet retained Laverda's unmistakable look.

Why would a designer radically update an engine and leave its exterior untouched? What is it that makes Italian designers cling to tradition? Bologna twins—Ducati/Cagiva—are desmos, Guzzi sticks to transverse V-twins, Benelli mimes Japanese engines, and Laverda, despite sweeping improvements, maintains its engine's 10-year-old look. Stagnation? Hardly. There is such a thing as national style.

Look at a Harley-Davidson and see America: massive, imposing and direct. Study the details and understand the American people—a nuts-and-bolts utility dominates. Part A attaches to part B with fastener C. America's heritage of mechanical simplicity and hard-working pragmatism, seen in such classic forms as Detroit-born V-8 engines with their hydraulic lifters, naturally shows up again in Milwaukee engines.

Look at Japan's motorcycles and see seamless machines made of parts that accommodate each other—an integrity reflecting cultural cohesion and cooperation. Consensus styling and committee engineering. This year's technology replaces last year's technology, naturally and unquestionably. Witness Honda's Interceptor.

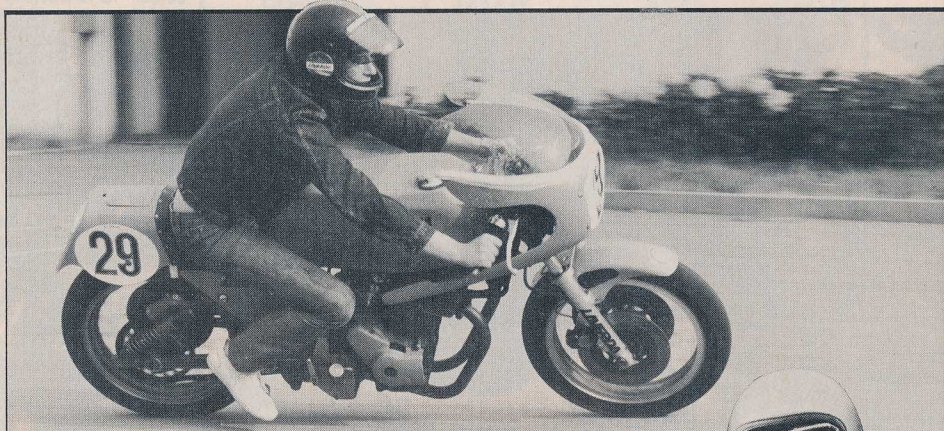
Italian motorcycles have a national style because they share common history. Italian motorcycle makers date back generations. In those early days the main marketplace was at home; exportation came second, if at all. Production numbers reflected the small domestic market, and the factories shaped machinery for this small market. The Italians built what they damn well wanted to build, and there were enough domestic buyers for pure Italian bikes. The Japanese, on the other hand, built motorcycles for world export right from the start. As world traders and world builders, the Japanese draw plans for new machinery using ideas as big as the world market.

After the war, Fiat did for Italy what Henry Ford did for this country: make inexpensive cars in large numbers for the masses. Italian motorcycles were not safe in their own country. The utility car soon supplanted the utility bike, and many Italian motorcycle makers lost their traditional customers. Anyone with enough money to buy a big motorcycle (125cc and up) could afford a nice civilized small car, and eventually companies like Bianchi, Mondial, Parilla and dozens of others folded. The large-capacity motorcycle, no longer utilitarian, became an expensive toy for those who could afford the luxury of sport motorcycling. It's not surprising, then, that Italian motorcycles became progressively and uncompromisingly sporting. The end point of this history lesson, almost 40 years after the end of World War II, can be seen in large-displacement high-performance motorcycles.

When I walked through the gates of the Breganze-based factory I saw my waiting 1000cc RGA, flanked by a red RGS. Side by side, the RGA has a different seat and a higher handlebar. A small handlebar-mount bikini fairing replaces the S-model's full-zoot coverage. Both bikes use the same running gear, chassis and 120-degree-crankshaft engine. There's no mistaking Italian aesthetics—the engine's sand-cast aluminum pieces have a deep, rich texture, accented by the highly polished sidecases. My tongue, however, might easily have been mistaken for a red vel-

mountain. Whenever possible Fulvio squeezed everything from the big three. Laverdas cruise effortlessly at 200 metric clicks—125 mph. Some European motorcycles arrive stateside overgeared simply because they are made for this wide-open cruising.

In tight turns the big three steers slowly and heavily by U.S. standards, but never as clumsily as the old Jota. Italians like slow-steering motorcycles, a preference born on their roads. With no speed restraints, Europeans desire motorcycles with high-velocity stability; low-speed considerations lose impor-



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*To own a Laverda is to belong to a community. Laverda owners visit the factory, and, of course, Massimo Laverda (far right) is there, entertaining, explaining, listening.*



vet necktie. Dottore Fulvio Menegotto, Laverda's sales manager, greeted me with an invitation—a ride and lunch at Asiago, a resort town in the northern Dolomite mountains.

At first starting, the Laverda three emits a peculiar rumble—sort of a cross between a vertical twin with a bent valve and an in-line four with a bent valve. That soon changes. As revs pick up the rumbling blends into a forceful rush, and the separate exhaust notes converge into a ripping scream. All the controls have a positive feeling, the gearbox shifts slickly and smoothly, and the switches and instruments are nicely laid out—very un-Italian.

Menegotto and his S-bike led the way. The lunch route went through downtown Breganze, such as it is (and it is very small), and through several other villages before scaling up the

mountain. Motorcycles with quick, easy steering—with steep fork angles, shallow trail and 16-inch front wheels—handle just fine at 55 or even 85 mph. Push beyond 100 mph, however, and quicker-steering bikes may feel unpleasant and twitchy to riders accustomed to railroad-car stability in bumpy 120-mph sweepers.

Despite its heft, the RGA easily negotiated the kinky mountain switchbacks. Its bar, slightly longer and higher than the RGS's, offers better leverage, though wind protection is compromised. The S-model's seating tucks the rider nicely behind the wind-penetrating fairing, shielding him well at high speeds; the A's smaller fairing provides reasonably nice protection for the rider's upper torso up to 140 kph (87 mph)—above that speed the wind rips at the rider's head, quickly tiring his

neck muscles. On switchbacks the S-rider's arms tire; on the Autostrada the A-rider's neck feels as if it's in a noose. Think of it this way: S for speed, A for America.

Over antipasto, Menegotto explained Laverda's unique image and the importance of maintaining it. "Our customers expect our product to be and look a certain way," he said. "If we change, we'll lose our faithful following." It's the Harley-Davidson dilemma, a tightrope walk: change enough to attract new buyers but not enough to turn off the regular aficionados.



As we ate steaming gnocchi floating in a white sauce under a mountain of Parmesan cheese, Menegotto detailed the Laverda philosophy of building motorcycles, exactly opposite of the Japanese: small numbers. Even if Laverda could compete with Japanese production numbers, the company is not interested. "Of course, we hope to increase production slightly," he explained to me. "But our customers want an exclusive, unique machine—the only one in town. If we produce thousands of machines and dozens of models, they'd lose their appeal." Laverda's concern is maintaining that exclusive appeal through limited numbers.

Ever watch an Italian cook? Butter flows as if it costs a nickel per pound. And there are plenty of other deliciously fattening treats: prosciutto, salami, cheeses, and sauces so rich and so

thick that spoons will float on top.

Perhaps you endorse the work-ethic approach to eating and see food as another obstacle in the day's chores, something to be dispatched with immediate haste. Obviously you're not Italian. Rush-A-Meal is incompatible with the Italian way of eating, where each course is served between lengthy and relaxed conversations. A four-course lunch can last two hours; a full seven- or 10-course dinner is double-feature entertainment. Italians treat eating as art, not work. Italy has no fast-food chains, no hamburgers and no clowns.

Italians ride their motorcycles in much the same manner, negotiating canyon roads hours in length. The Italians, not particularly fond of chromed sissy bars or stepped seats, are serious about riding. If you intend to pose on a Laverda you will do it at speed, please, and not on the boulevard.

When we returned, Laverda enthusiasts had swept into the factory from all over Europe for an annual Laverda owner's meeting. There was a banquet, and stories in every language. I didn't need to speak the languages—the gestures and expressions told everything. Menegotto and Massimo Laverda, who orchestrates product development, mingled while the French riders gave each other awards and kisses. I joined a group of rowdy and robust Italians surrounding an equally robust assortment of wine. Then we took spins around the

factory's half-mile test loop on a twin-cylinder 750cc SFC racer. These big twins, out of production since 1978, were tough as anvils and won several 24-hour races during the early '70s. That's what many people like about Laverdas—toughness. One British rider suggested that the 750 twins represent everything British twins should have evolved into but never did. Call it misplaced nationalism.

The next morning, as Massimo Laverda gave me a factory tour, he explained why Italian motorcycles cost so much. In Italy high social costs—currently Europe's highest—are a key force determining the price of Italian motorcycles. According to Massimo, for every 100 lire he puts in an employee's pocket, he pays the government 120 lire. German social costs remain a fairly steady 42 percent and Japanese about 35 percent. This cost is buried in everything the factory purchases—materials, tooling and utilities. Political dimensions to social problems run deep. Massimo explained the problems troubling Italy and Italian business since Italy adopted its new constitution at the end of World War II. After dictator Benito Mussolini dragged the country through a war no Italian wanted, the country understandably shaped a new political constitution fragmenting power—no single person or group could accumulate enough power to drive Italy in one clear direction, but that in itself created a problem. Currently, power is so divided no one person or group can effectively solve the country's problems.

Despite ideological differences, the unions have common goals, and they are about the only political and economic institutions that can marshal effective, cohesive power. Forceful unions constitute a political driving force; the ponderous bureaucratic government can only react.

Just as Massimo was showing me the V-6 racer, all the factory workers walked off on a 30-minute strike. Massimo, never missing a beat, explained why this was neither surprising nor a problem. The Laverda factory, he maintained, has a three-year union contract specifying the union's maximum number of striking days. It's all put in writing and clearly predictable: Laverda enjoys about 30 months of productive tranquility and six months of strike-disrupted production. Factory managers simply schedule around the strikes. Ineffective governments, staggering inflation, soaring interest rates and even occasional economic collapses don't distract modern Italians. Life goes on.

The Italians go on, building the present out of the past. The two merge united so tightly it's hard to know where one ends and the other begins. The RGA is like that too. ■