

No question: "The man was a mess," says Marcel Schaub of the resourceful and headstrong Alessandro De Tomaso. Schaub should know, after all, he knew the sports car maestro and his factory in Modena personally. De Tomaso's erratic nature led to some inconsistencies in production - which is a much greater challenge for automotive historians today than it is for production. Back then. Today Schaub looks after a treasure trove of original De Tomaso documents, invoices and brochures, without which a report is possible but not advisable. If anyone knows about the Vallelunga as a dream classic, it is him - and so he immediately clears up any inconsistencies.

How many Vallelunga were there anyway?

They start with the general guesswork about the number of pieces built. "There were 60," says Schaub with certainty. And this is remarkable because the documents only show chassis numbers from 101 to 150. "But these are only the Ghia models," explains the expert. "There were also ten more: Fissore built five of them in aluminum, which was something like the pre-series. They are of course the rarities today." Ghia also built five more, including the factory or museum car without a chassis number. Plus two right-hand drive and two others whose chassis

numbers are different from the 50 production models. "Although you can't say exactly what is different about them compared to the series," explains Schaub. No one can say with certainty today whether these were changes in details that were not carried out later. But it all started with an open Vallelunga, the Spider, which was introduced in 1963.

"However, it doesn't have much in common with the later coupé," says Schaub. "The Spider was a Fissore design on a Beetle platform, while the Coupé later had its own chassis. You can see this very well in pictures. Both were powered by a Kent engine from Ford, had a modified VW T2 gearbox and the rack and pinion steering from the R4. "

The connection to Ford came about through De Tomaso's second wife and former racing driver Isabelle Heskell, who came from an American entrepreneurial family and who financed his company founding in 1959.

The Spider was more of a racing car than a road car that weighed less than 500 kilos and was said to have been able to go up to 220 km / h. That was enough to win the Italian championship in the sport class up to two liters with the mid-engine two-seater. The Fissore-Spider also successfully competed in street

races in the following years. But it remained a one-off and De Tomaso continued to refine his business model that his Modena neighbors Ferrari and Maserati were already practicing successfully: building and selling street models to finance the racing car department.

“A coupé promised more prospects of economic success,” says Marcel Schaub. “The Spider, not unlike the Porsche 550, was practically naked, open at the top and without a pane. A coupé with a fixed roof and windshield wipers offered more comfort. ”

### The Spider becomes a coupé

Fissore chief designer Franco Maina redrawn the Spider: the headlights moved behind plastic covers like on various sports cars of the time, the rear with the engine is arched by a panoramic window. The car is called Vallelunga because the Spider was presented to the public for the first time there. The Autodromo on which the Gran Premio di Roma was held at the time and where De Tomaso liked to test his cars.

"Monza would have been closer to Modena, but firstly, they drove much faster there and secondly, it was much more expensive to test there," says Schaub. So Fissore first made two, later another three prototypes out of aluminum, which De Tomaso

presented at the Turin Salon in October 1964. Special feature of the coupés: the body part behind the B-pillar could be opened in one piece. The rear is also designed like a racing car, the engine is still on the chassis, but hangs freely in the air towards the rear and the rear suspension is on the gearbox.

The response from potential customers encourages De Tomaso to launch a small series. But he falls out with Fissore, with whom he has worked for many years. But he doesn't need it anymore: In the same year 1964 De Tomaso bought the Carrozzeria Ghia and becomes his own manufacturer.

In Turin, a Fissore model is completely dismantled at Ghia because a template is required for the production model. "I'm not assuming that this pattern has ever been put back together," says Schaub. For reasons of cost, De Tomaso opted for a plastic body. The new material was very much in vogue in the 1960s. Lotus and Renault-Alpine also relied on the light material at the time. The consequences of this only become apparent afterwards. Stylistically, the coupé was so well received that it was honored in 1966 at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York as an example of technical progress and avant-garde design.

Ghia adopts the Fissore design, only the hinged rear section is omitted. In addition, a subframe for the engine and transmission is constructed, the rear suspension is now attached to the chassis. Overall, the car is designed more for the road than for the racetrack, although it remains a sports car.

De Tomaso only continued to rely on the Kent engine for the drive, which was to play a major role in motorsport. At that time it was used as a 1.5 liter by Ford in the Cortina and made 76 hp as a GT. The Vallelunga has a good 100 hp.

Only once, at the request of an English customer, is a Lotus Twin-Cam installed and something like a hybrid construction is created: the Fissore chassis with racing chassis at the rear is connected to a Ghia body. "There are more Vallelunga with Lotus engines, but they were installed later and not ex works," says Schaub.

While De Tomaso built the chassis for the Fissore models and then the final assembly took place at Fissore, Ghia builds many Vallelunga completely himself. "De Tomaso didn't have the space for such a production" explains Marcel Schaub. Based on his documents, he can even prove that the cars were even sold directly by Ghia. "The cars were already on the

Ghia stand in Geneva, when De Tomaso hadn't even had a presentation of his own." "

Small mistakes are part of it

The Vallelunga does not have any great success.

"The quality wasn't the best," explains Marcel Schaub. Since the engine and gearbox were designed as load-bearing parts, the body was heavily stressed by vibrations and in the long run it proved to be insufficiently torsion-resistant. The body got cracks - as with Renault-Alpine and Lotus - and the wheel suspension often tore off because the suspension was designed too weakly. That's the price of the low weight, because a more solid construction would have meant a few pounds more. But De Tomaso didn't care, he was already on his next projects. Among other things, the convertible Pampero based on Vallelunga. A unique piece that was to be followed by many more.

"He didn't really finish anything because he kept coming up with new ideas," says Schaub. "He was never interested in the small mistakes in his models."

Werner Burgmer, who drives the only road-legal yellow Vallelunga known in Germany on these pages, can only confirm that. "In Germany the car would certainly have been built differently and more

solidly, but would you have had this vision at all back then?" A small, light, puristic car with a polyester body? Probably not and that's why you accept the small mistakes and try to make them a little better during the restoration in order to extend the durability.

But no matter what condition the car is in, it remains "a road legal racing car," confirms Burgmer. It is not important to him whether it actually manages the theoretical 215 km / h top speed. "I never extended it because you first have to get used to sitting just twelve centimeters above the road and having the angle of view level with a truck axle. The car is so small, fast and light that you have the feeling that you are traveling at a real speed of 100 at 150 km / h."

Burgmer describes the road holding as irresistible and with street-legal racing tires - 175 front and 205 rear - the car is a real pleasure in good weather, for which he likes to leave his other, more powerful vehicles behind.

This is of course also due to a good shot of more power under the Vallelunga hood. Instead of the original 1.5-liter (120E), Burgmer had a 1600 with a cross-flow cylinder head installed. "The original Kent engine with its 105 hp was going well. But carburetor and exhaust manifold on the same side, one above the

other, that was too tricky for me. Because how easy it can be Car with fiberglass body catching fire. But the conversion is reversible, because the original motor is well oiled in a box and is regularly moved by hand. "

### An adventurous history

Burgmer has recently had the Vallelunga almost completely overtaken. "Apart from the yellow color, there is practically nothing left. "It's hard to believe what happened to the car that was salvaged from a Dutch greenhouse more than 20 years ago. There it stood with many other treasures at a vintage car dealer who had to be persuaded by Burgmer for weeks to sell him his dream classic. Presumably this only worked because the dealer still had a Vallelunga in stock.

But how he got to this or both Vallelunga, the Dutchman could not or did not want to remember. If the purchase was already an adventure, the restoration turned into a crime thriller all of its own. The commissioned expert in Düsseldorf first set other priorities and then cheerfully wrote invoices without shaking hands on the car. The whole thing ended in bankruptcy, from which Burgmer had to buy out his own car.

For five years, Burgmer didn't trust a restorer until he found a specialist nearby who within two years brought the Vallelunga back to the road safely for the TÜV inspection.

Rescuer, expert and documentary  
Vallelunga driver Werner Burgmer saved a model.  
De Tomaso expert Marcel Schaub helps identify  
models with his original documents. And Vallelunga  
fan Janosch Jurowski has created a register to  
document as many Vallelunga as possible worldwide.  
And to get on the trail of the last secrets, for example  
to clarify the whereabouts of the 18 unknown out of  
60 models that have not yet been found. Or to  
identify the 12, of which you only know pictures, but  
no chassis number.

The two master models, the Vallelunga Spider and  
the works coupé, are known to be in the works  
museum. But that was closed and the two rarities  
wandered behind closed doors not far from the Hotel  
Canalgrande in Modena. Nobody knows today  
whether the two will ever be seen again.