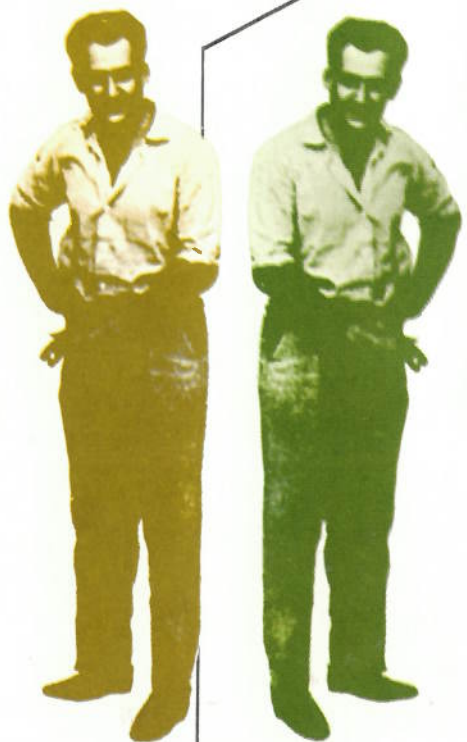


# AUTOMOBILE

*Quarterly*





ALFA ROMEO  
Through  
the  
Looking Glass

De Tomaso Takes on Ghia  
by gianni roglatti

**CARROZZERIA GHIA**, one of the most creative and prolific Italian coachbuilders, has gone international. In recent months the news that the venerable firm had been bought by the Argentine Alejandro De Tomaso, who in turn resold it to his American brother-in-law, has created considerable interest within Italian motoring circles. Most of this interest is speculative: What happens now?

It would possibly be easiest to examine what has happened to date, as this may serve as a base for predicting what might transpire tomorrow. Regarding Ghia's future, it is most readily said that De Tomaso, who retains the Ghia presidency, is putting all his energies into stabilizing Ghia as a solid commercial enterprise, which lately it has not been. As for the past, it is probably best to begin at the beginning.

Within the court of the Ghia works today stands a coach—a reminder of the company's founder and heritage. It was 1915 when a Piedmontese craftsman named Giacinto Ghia decided to put his years of experience gained in horse-drawn carriage days to use in the automotive trade. Mass production was virtually unknown in Europe in those days, and many continental manufacturers produced only chassis, leaving the choice of coachwork and coachbuilder to their clients. A number of carrozzeria produced selected bodies in small series; others preferred an ever-flourishing



variety. Giacinto Ghia was among the latter; the coachbuilding concern he founded catered particularly to the well-heeled and blue-blooded. And it was a prosperous venture, particularly during the period between the two wars, the glorious Concours d'Elégance era, when the rich competed among themselves in commissioning cars of the utmost luxury and extravagance in order to win prizes—and the coachbuilders happily went along with them, to win fame and fortune. World War II changed everything. Turin, being an industrial city, was the target of frequent air raids, and the end

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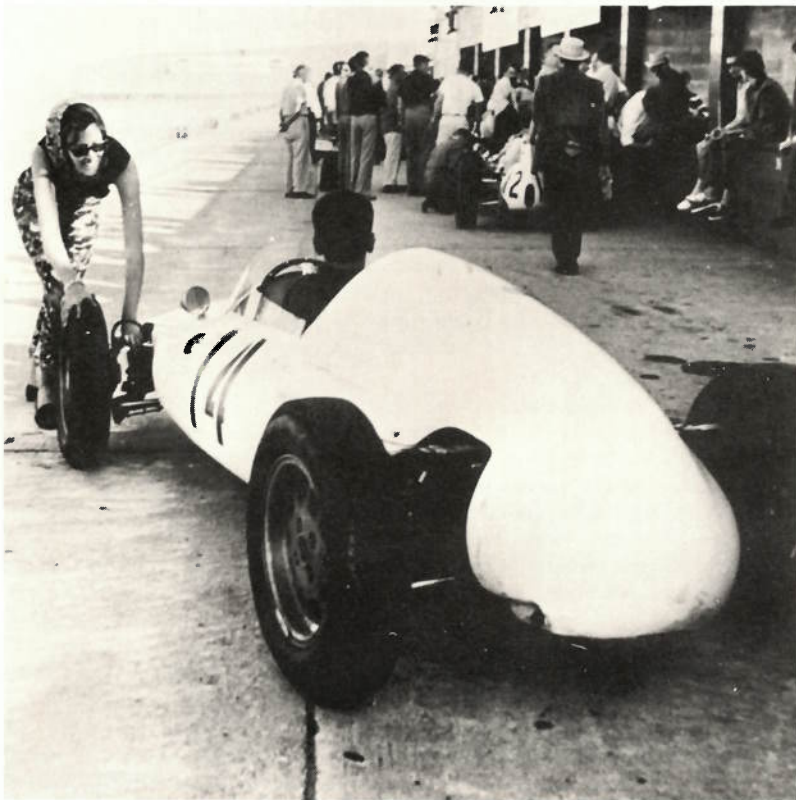
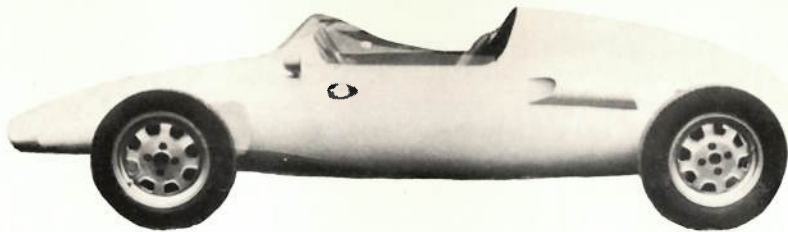
*From the family album, De Tomaso racing the two-liter Maserati in Argentina.*

of the war found the Ghia plant in almost total ruin. In the ensuing struggle to rebuild, Ghia first turned to the manufacture of bicycles and small trailers—then in great demand. Their recovery was slow, but by 1946 it seemed certain, and a return to coachbuilding eminence appeared equally promising. But in 1946, too, Giacinto Ghia died, and his heirs were faced with the problem of maintaining the recovery momentum. They appointed as manager Mario Boano, a talented stylist who later became noted for a number of daring designs, among them a coupé for Perón on Alfa Romeo's Disco Volante chassis. But Boano was an artist, and not a businessman, and he in turn secured the services of Luigi (Gigi) Segre, a man equally talented in the artifice of business and the science of engineering.

There arose between them, rather quickly, a fundamental difference regarding the coachbuilder's attitude. Boano envisioned the automobile as a work of art, Segre as an industrial product. Boano saw the automobile as an object principally to be admired, Segre as an object to be sold. Of course both, in a sense, were right. However, Segre gradually gained financial control of the company, and in 1950 Boano left. Segre, though not a stylist himself, knew what he wanted and hired those designers who could provide it. Once again the Ghia concern came to enjoy considerable success, so much so that Segre launched an associated operation, that of OSI, intended as a manufacturing plant for those Ghia projects which reached the production stage. Thus Ghia was retained as the styling center, with OSI as the prototype and production factory—certainly a proper way to organize things.

From 1950 until his unexpected death—at the age of forty-three—in 1963, Segre carried the Ghia concern to a renown it had never previously enjoyed—and succeeded, too, in having produced some of the most interesting designs of the period. Ghia's cooperation with Chrysler is particularly remembered—the many prototypes starting with the K310, one of which, the Norseman, went down with the *Andrea Doria*. Ghia also built Chrysler's Crown Imperials and the bodies for its turbine-powered cars. Other prototypes were made for Ford (Turnpike Cruiser, Lincoln Futura), Rolls-Royce, Alfa Romeo, Packard, the Volkswagen Karmann coupé, a Porsche spider, a Simca, the Renault Floride and R-16 prototype, and many others. Also in this period were such experimental cars as the Gilda, the Nibbio, the Selene I and II, and a streamlined dragster study.

Following the death of Segre, the operation of OSI reverted solely to Fergat, the Turin accessory manufacturer who supplies wheels for most Italian cars and had joined with Segre in 1960 to found OSI. Ghia affairs were placed in the charge of Gino Rovere, an ex-Ford man who instituted production of a good-looking coupé based on a shortened Fiat 1500 chassis. Once again, the unexpected—Rovere died in July, 1964. His place was taken by Giacomo Gaspardo Moro, formerly assistant to both Segre and Rovere. Ghia's Italian shareholders, meanwhile, had sold their interest in the company to a foreign group, most of the money reportedly belonging to Rafael Trujillo, the Caribbean dictator's son, who cared little for the company—so Ghia survived more by virtue of skillful, fresh designs than by sound management during this period. Gaspardo had more than one moment of despair, but manfully managed to carry on.



De Tomaso entered the Ghia picture in 1963, when he asked the company to design and build the body for his Vallenga coupé. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship, although not the beginning of De Tomaso's venture with cars. That had started long before.

Alejandro De Tomaso was born in Buenos Aires on the tenth of July, 1928. There were no paper routes for him as a boy, no worries other than how to enjoy the easy life. His mother was from the Ceballos family, descendant of one of the Spanish viceroys who had governed Argentina

way back in 1590; a street in Buenos Aires bears the family name. De Tomaso's father was of Italian descent—his grandfather having emigrated to Argentina in 1870—and his foremost interest was politics. An able and gifted man, and a member of the Argentine socialist party, he was entrusted while young with such cabinet posts as secretary of agriculture, industry and foreign commerce—often with more than one portfolio at the same time. When he died in 1933, only thirty-nine years old, he was the candidate for the presidency, and some say he would surely have won the election. One is tempted to muse about the different course Argentina might have taken, had the elder De Tomaso become president.

For Alejandro, his father's death was a deep personal loss, but it is doubtful that it changed the course of his life—which tended to follow spur-of-the-moment inclinations. His mother's family owned considerable rural property in Argentina, consisting mainly of a group of *estancias*, some near Buenos Aires, some farther to the north. Alejandro quit school at the age of fifteen and went to work as a peon on one of the estates. Not surprisingly, his progress was rapid: assistant superintendent at sixteen and head of the operation when not yet twenty.

But the country life was not for him, and he soon returned to Buenos Aires with idea of doing something—he wasn't sure what—in politics, as his father had done. With some friends he founded the *Clarín*, a newspaper that from the beginning opposed Perón and his government. He was arrested, beaten by the police and finally left the paper in 1950 to return to the country. In 1955 he was back in the political swing, taking active part in still another movement to overthrow Perón. It was unsuccessful, and De Tomaso decided then and there that racing cars was safer, if not more exciting, than politics.

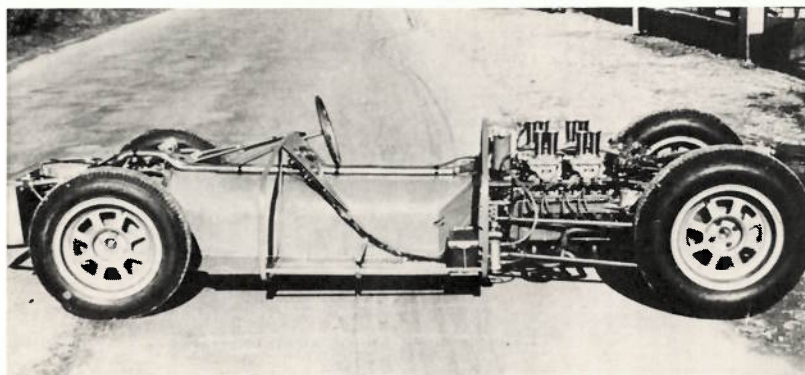
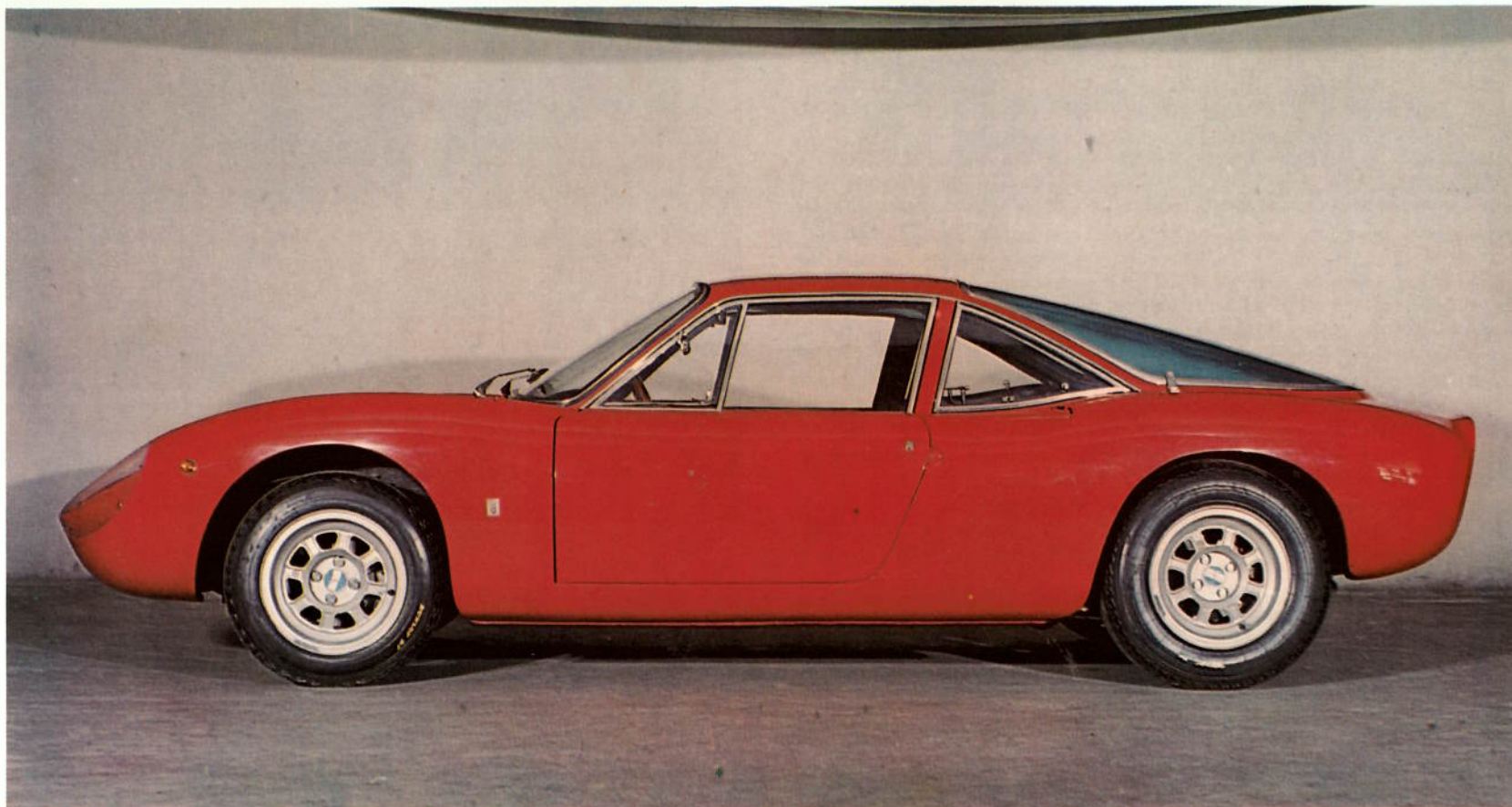
He had started racing in 1950 with an old Bugatti—probably a Type 35, he can't recall for sure—later graduating to a new 2-liter Maserati. Curiously, had circumstances been different, he might have remained in politics to this day, for the overthrow that was unsuccessful in 1955 was successful in 1956, but by that time Alejandro was in Europe and racing.

He drove mainly O.S.C.A.'s, both independently and for the Maserati brothers who had sold their interest in the company bearing their name to Omer Orsi and had gone from Modena to Bologna to open the small O.S.C.A. factory. One of his best years was 1958, when he co-drove a 750 cc O.S.C.A. to index wins and fine placings at Sebring and Le Mans. In 1960, starting with Cooper concepts and O.S.C.A. and Alfa engines, Alejandro built his first open-wheeled racing cars, for that year's Formula II and the Formula I of 1961. For some of his first cars he used the name "Isis."

De Tomaso liked the Maserati brothers, but disagreed with them on how they should manage their business. O.S.C.A. had designed an engine for the Fiat 1500 spider; De Tomaso thought they should be designing engines for their own car. Consequently in mid-1959 he had started with O.S.C.A. engines, to build his own cars around them. He was still on

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*Above: The first De Tomaso-assembled racer—Cooper frame, O.S.C.A. 1500 cc engine, Colotti gearbox—built in 1959. Below: With Isabelle that year at Sebring.*



friendly terms with the Maseratis, and in fact used their engines and their engine testing facilities for some time. In December of 1959 he took his first O.S.C.A.-Isis Formula II car to the United States for the Grand Prix at Sebring, where it retired early. Beautifully made, it was so enthusiastically received that he garnered orders for fifteen copies of it. The orders, however, were never filled, though he did later deliver some Isis Formula Junior cars to the U.S. In 1961 he built his first sports-racing car, with an 1100 cc O.S.C.A. engine in the rear, which was the scourge of SCCA's Class G in the United States in 1962. He also built an Alfa-powered car which was intended for the abortive Formula Senior. It was raced extensively and successfully in the U.S. by Bob Schroeder.

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*Above: The Vallelunga, 1965 Italian Speed Championship winner, 2000 cc sport class. Left: Circa 1962 sports car, with Ford V-8 engine and single-tube chassis.*

During 1962 De Tomaso was building an all-new Formula I car with a flat-eight engine designed by Massimino. This costly and elaborate experiment never raced, appearing only once in practice for the Italian Grand Prix in 1962. A flat-four along similar lines was worked out in 1963 for the one-liter Formula II of 1964, together with Holbay of Britain, but it was never used in a car, some said because it was too wide.

During that first visit to Europe in 1955 Alejandro had chosen Modena as his adopted city, and there he established himself as a sports car builder in 1959 with his second wife, Isabelle Haskell, a tall, blonde American whom he had met as a sports car racing driver in 1955 and had married in 1956. Of her, De Tomaso says: "She is an exceptional woman, a great help in every way, and without her I would have given up the shop. Her enthusiasm for my work can be best judged from the fact that she must get up at seven in the morning when I am out of town—and that is very often—to attend the shop, and she puts in very long working days, in an environment which certainly is not the most appropriate for a girl brought up in a well-to-do family. But she does it all with great joy and has a good understanding of my ideas."

That Alejandro has ideas is clear; that he has not been in the least interested in making his ideas work as practical propositions is also evident. He has fathered a good many advances in the automobile field, especially related to his racing car specialty, only to neglect them once sired, so that today they are generally recognized as other people's innovations.

Apart from making Formula Junior and subsequent F.III cars that were faster than anybody else's but sometimes lacked the necessary reliability, De Tomaso has made some very important contributions to the mechanics of the racing car. He was the first to develop a rear-mounted engine which was completely self-sustaining, acting as a structural part of the car chassis. This appeared on a single-seater racing car, equipped with a Ford V-8 engine and designed for Indianapolis, hopefully the first of a series of five cars. It was built in 1963 and shipped to the United States on the 27th of July, was reportedly tested, but was never raced at the Indianapolis oval.



This was due probably in part to its fuel capacity being inadequate.

This particular car had another very important innovation: The front section of the car was made up of a single piece of cast light alloy, with double walls, the intervening space being filled with fuel. The Italian press dubbed it "the racing bathtub." All in all, it was a revolutionary car, but it needed to be vastly improved to become a winner. Nothing more was done with the cast chassis idea, following a last attempt with a 1965 Formula III car. The idea of using the engine block as part of the chassis, bolting to it the rear suspension members, has since become common practice in Grand Prix cars, but De Tomaso has employed the system also in sports and grand touring cars, as for example in his Vallenga of 1965. This car had an interesting chassis made of a steel channel in the middle which forms a backbone that holds all the other members together.

Along this line he also made a weird-looking 2-liter sports car with the central backbone made up of one enormous tube, 13.8 inches in diameter and of light alloy sheet, riveted to a few thin ribs. This tube served as chassis and also as fuel tank, much in the present-day fashion. For power De Tomaso used an 1831 cc version of his flat-eight Grand Prix engine, but it was no more successful in this car, which was never actively raced. Much more successful were his very narrow and quick single-seaters for the end of Formula Junior and the follow-on Formula II.

The 1965 version of his five-liter rear-engined sports car, bodied for him by Gransport to the designs of American Pete Brock, featured a device that at first was thought useless—a movable wing placed high at the rear, the purpose of which was to increase wheel adhesion under certain conditions. In De Tomaso's opinion, this spoiler should be linked to the gearbox so that it remains in an inclined position in all but the highest gear. The principle, of course, has since been made famous by Chaparral. A 1966 model of the same car was bodied by Ghia.

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*Left: De Tomaso with Count Volpi in sports car prototype at Modena autodrome in 1964. Right: The 5-liter sports car introduced at the Turin auto show in 1965.*





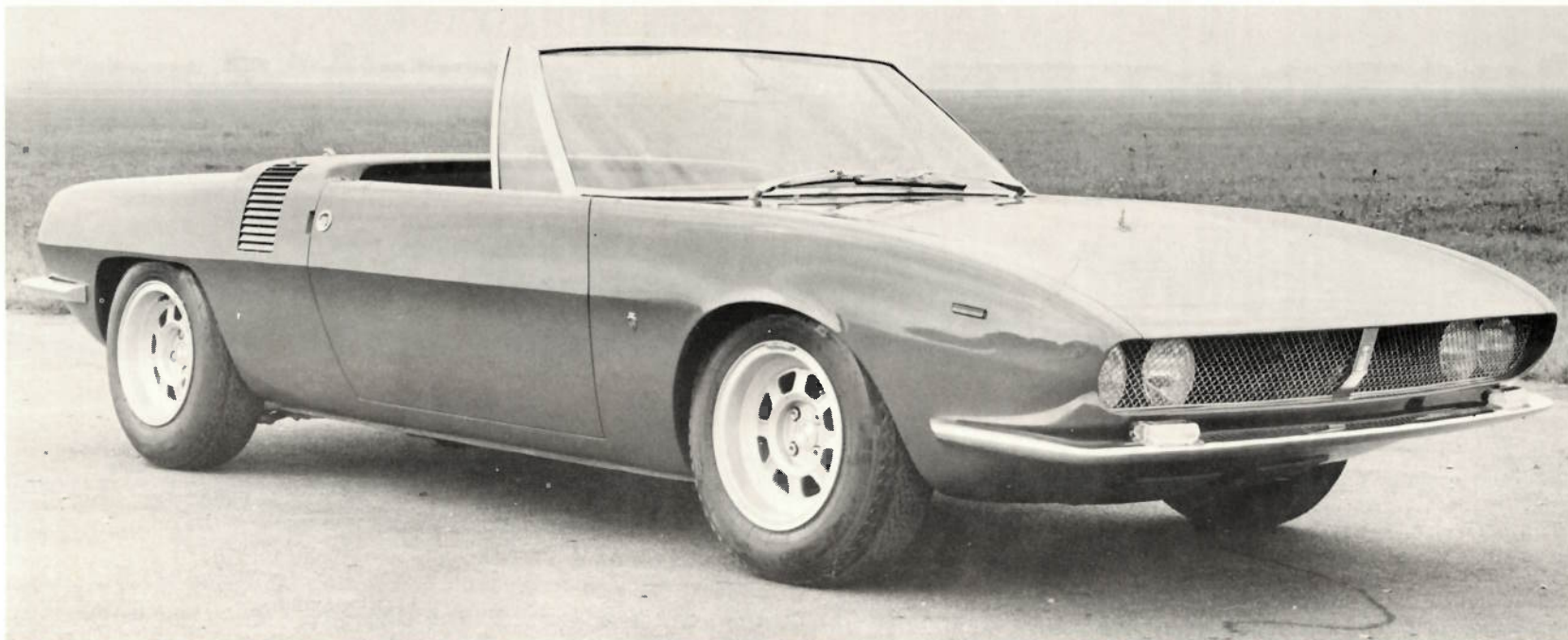
With the Vallelunga—a good-looking Fissore-designed coupé equipped with the four-cylinder 1500 cc Ford Cortina engine—the Argentine went into serious, if somewhat limited production in 1965. That the bodies were made by Ghia was just a coincidence at the beginning, that company offering the best solution to production problems. The association developed, however, into a whole series of cars uniting the daring De Tomaso machinery with the bold Ghia style.

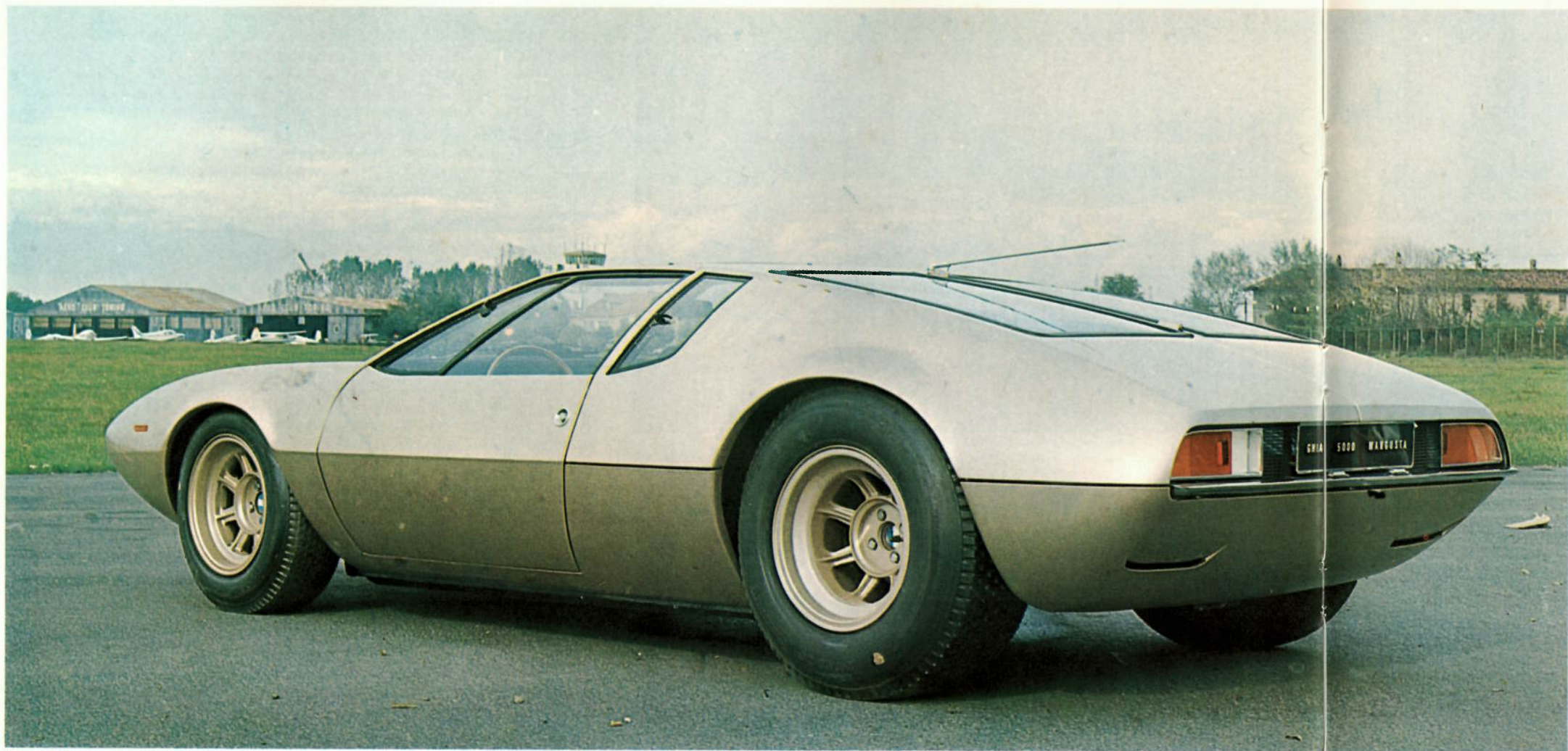
The Pampero was a proposed roadster version of the Vallelunga, and the powerful Mangusta is a thrilling Gran Turismo machine with racing car performance. All these cars are rear-engined and feature all-independent suspension, the Pampero (translate, the Pampas wind) being equipped with the four-cylinder Ford unit and the Mangusta with a big, 4.7-liter Ford V-8 refined by De Tomaso.

De Tomaso meanwhile has moved from his first small shop in Modena to more comfortable and enlarged premises, complete with a dynamometer test stand. In the past he has secured technical assistance from Colotti and Massimino, two famed Italian designers. Today he has his own team of designers, master mechanics and helpers, with Isabelle still supervising the small factory when he is away from Modena, which is often. De Tomaso

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*Above: The Rowan electric car, a study prototype introduced at the Turin show in 1967. Below: De Tomaso's Pampero, a 1498 cc 105 hp spider introduced in 1966.*





spends at least three days a week in Turin managing Ghia's affairs.

De Tomaso acquired Ghia in early 1967, and the circumstances regarding his acquisition are of some interest. Trujillo was in jail at the time and in need of bail money, among other things. The price he set for the sale of Ghia was very low, considering the assets and renown of the com-

pany, but the \$650,000 had to be in cash. Somehow De Tomaso came up with the money and got the company. Then in May, 1967, he turned around and sold controlling interest in Ghia to the Rowan Controller Company of Oceanport, New Jersey. Its chairman, John C. Ellis, is the husband of Isabelle's sister.

At the Turin show last November, two new cars were displayed at the Ghia stand. One was the striking "Thor," a version of Oldsmobile's Toronado; the other was an electric car. It was the latter that attracted the

most attention. The control and power components of the electric car were based on the De Tomaso/Ghia honeycomb platform, and it featured all the electrical components with independent springs. The bodywork was finished in a dark color. Now the question





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most attention. The Rowan organization, manufacturers of electrical control and power conversion equipment for over fifty years, commissioned De Tomaso/Ghia to design and build the car. It features an aluminum honeycomb platform chassis, about one-inch thick, on which are mounted all the electrical components. The overall effect is clean and beautiful, with independent suspension consisting of swinging arms with rubber springs. The body styling is advanced, but not outlandish.

Now the question arises—will De Tomaso succeed in making Ghia

stronger and prosperous, a big concern capable of building bodies on an industrial basis of, say, fifteen thousand cars a year? De Tomaso certainly is anxious to do it. But so far automobiles are just one of his many hobbies, together with sailing, architecture and history, dogs and horses. Automobile manufacturing is a serious business, one which must be understood and practiced on a sound commercial basis, if it is to be devoted to the production of saleable, serviceable cars. From all he says nowadays, De Tomaso means business. Now we shall see if he practices it. ☞