



CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

# Bizzarrini GT America

In conception, a car much better suited to America than a Ferrari. What went wrong?



**I**t's legal. Well, at least it's here before our very eyes. The affluent exhibitionist's device for flaunting without fear of jail as a consequence.

You don't believe it? Pick a bus stop. A crowded one at rush hour, and with no warning expose your Bizzarrini. Mouths drop. Great gulps of air are inhaled involuntarily. The women—the playful ones—show more than just a trace of admiration. The men are envious. It's an equipment match and they're at a considerable disadvantage.

There's more. No one will admit to handling Bizzarrinis. No one, that is, except Bob Grossman (who generally has his own

reasons) and who allows as how he's willing to do traffic in this specific article for eleven grand a hit. All the while, he disclaims with a shrug of superbly tailored shoulders even the vaguest bit of knowledge about the article itself.

Not willing to give up, we called a citizen of Connecticut whose name has been widely associated with Bizzarrinis—but he wouldn't talk. Said he kicked the Bizzarrini habit earlier this year and didn't wish to discuss it further. He did give us the phone number of the new importer said to divide his time between the fashionable upper reaches of Park Avenue in New York and Rome, but the telephone company had dis-

connected service and disavowed any knowledge of a new number.

Just on a hunch we called the Italian consulate. "Oooohh, si, si, si, Beezzahr-reene," came the instant recognition from a signorina who obviously hadn't been in this country very long. She had seen several Bizzarrinis in Italy and found them very exciting. But after searching through the files she was quite specific that there was no registered representative here. We are left to conclude that, in the United States, Bizzarrini is not destined to become a household word.

We know that behind it all is Giotto Bizzarrini, an Italian engineer who served three years at Alfa and then five at Ferrari (where he was involved with the GTO and the 3-liter Testa Rossa). He was one of the five bright types who got fed up with the Commendatore in 1961 and split. The 12-cylinder 3.5-liter Lamborghini engine is allegedly one of his jobs and he is known to have masterminded the Iso Rivolta Berlinetta. Proof of his prowess is that his competition version of the Iso was first in class at Le Mans in '64 and '65.

Bizzarrini's 1966 Le Mans entry was co-driven by Sam Posey but inadequate preparation and an English-French-Italian language problem thwarted success that year. Posey's reflections are that the Bizzarrini was really quite a good race car at that time although it was too heavy to be a serious contender for an overall win. It handled well enough but its greatest attribute was the aerodynamics of the body. The car was like a bullet at speeds approaching 180 mph and that was without spoilers, wings or other sundry tack-ons to hold it on the ground. The Bizzarrini we've been playing with is a streetable version of the race car named GT America for the U.S. market. So much for credentials.

Your first glimpse of a Bizzarrini clicks the irises open about three stops. It's the lustiest, most evil looking apparition ever to wear license plates. An "angry slotted monster"—a thigh-high symbol of obviously single purpose. The first one we laid eyes on lurked next to a Ghibli. Suddenly the Ghibli wasn't a Ghibli but rather a Maserati 2-door sedan, it was so tall. The

On the path to transforming a winning race car into a luxurious road car, one uncompromise has led to another—with the result being that the Bizzarrini GT America is a startlingly inept slotted monster.

Bizzarrini would be tested if for no other reason than we *had* to drive it.

You remember that the Bizzarrini has situated itself in the market at the \$11,000 mark—a lot of bread in anybody's values. And yet, if you think in terms of Ferraris, Maseratis and the ilk, the Bizzarrini takes on an affordable compact car glow. Even so, since such a giant lump of front money for a single car registers off the scale for one or two of our readers (and for the staff—to a man) and we feel obliged to break down the initial investment so that buying a Bizzarrini is in no way like a pig in a poke.

The entire \$11,000 value can be attributed to: ability to satisfy needs of latent exhibitionists (\$8,341); capability of traveling over primary roads at a high rate of speed (\$2,651); ease of driving (\$7); ability to travel over *secondary* roads, plus abundance of factory authorized service centers and parts depots, plus quality of workmanship evident throughout—something under a dollar. If, after this analysis, you get the idea that a Bizzarrini and a normal automobile overlap in only a few unimportant areas, you're beginning to get the point. It can be almost sinfully enjoyable as a fun car but as transportation it's a bad second to an arthritic horse.

After a 3-day road test we understand why the Bizzarrini network goes to such pains to remain anonymous. Nobody wants to take the blame. Regardless of what the sales brochure says, the Bizzarrini is no better than the low-average of the strange offshoot-from-the-mainstream European body-chassis/American-engine cars of the last half-dozen years, and distinctly worse than the more successful ones.

Projects like this can get started in an honest way. Talented men, of whom G. Bizzarrini is surely one, get hung up on automobiles and with their skill and imagination create a successful race car. It doesn't seem to be enough. Prompted by a heady desire to see their own name on fenders in every traffic jam in the land and a benevolent desire to share their own steel-and-light-alloy brainchild with the masses (at least the *wealthy* car-nut masses), they essay to convert their racer for street use and set up one haphazard production operation or another.

Unfortunately, there's a built-in problem. The precision well-oiled mind required to design a winning race car and the patient discipline required to transform it into a satisfactory street car seldom co-exist in the same man.

Anything done after the race is won is anticlimactic and enthusiasm wanes. A race car is a single purpose machine. Moreover, it's a purpose of little value on public roads and most likely everything required of a road-going car has already been compromised in creating the basic design of a racer. One uncompromise leads to another on the path to a road car and pretty soon you have a startlingly inept slotted monster—a fish out of water that can do nothing but look bizarre. *A Bizarreni.*

On paper the Bizzarrini's concept is a guaranteed winner. Highly styled body and chassis built in Europe where old world craftsmanship is still revered, combined with an infinitely reliable 350-hp Corvette engine and transmission. In conception, a car much better suited to America than a Ferrari and at a much lower price.

What went wrong?

It's even more puzzling when you are forced to admit that the basic layout of the Bizzarrini is efficient and in no way hides its racing heritage: overall height of only 43 inches for a low center of gravity and small frontal area. If you need to be told, 43 inches is exceedingly low for a front-engined coupe since the driver has to be high enough to see over the engine and needs head room on top of that. The Bizzarrini is more than satisfactory in these areas. Granted, the view of the road immediately in front of the car is limited and downhill right hand turns like to disappear behind the right front fender, but we didn't expect a pick-up truck view. Rear view is quite another story—a short one because there isn't any to talk about.

Certainly the driving position was above criticism. The steering wheel is far enough away so that your elbows don't crash into things and yet close enough so that you don't have to stretch. The seat isn't adjustable, by the way. Much to our big-footed enjoyment, there was ample space around the pedals so that our clodhoppers never overlapped from one pedal to the next. Really, it's a car a 6-footer can manipulate very well provided he never has to drive backwards.

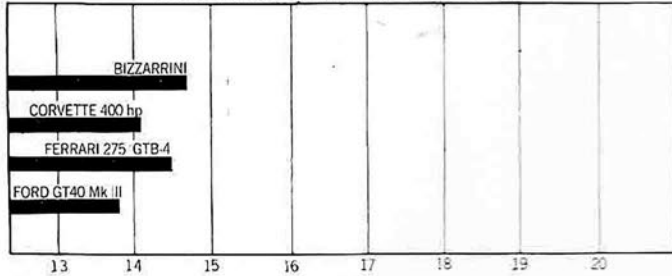
The mechanicals are exactly what you would expect of a front engine racer—a 1956 Cal Club C-modified that's been brought along gently enough so that it can live in the world of 1968. The engine and transmission are set very far back, there's fully independent suspension and 4-wheel disc brakes with the rears inboard. Even the

(Text continued on page 122; Specifications overleaf)

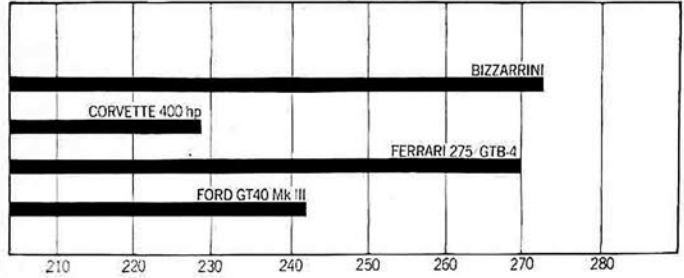


PHOTOGRAPHY: IRV TYBEL

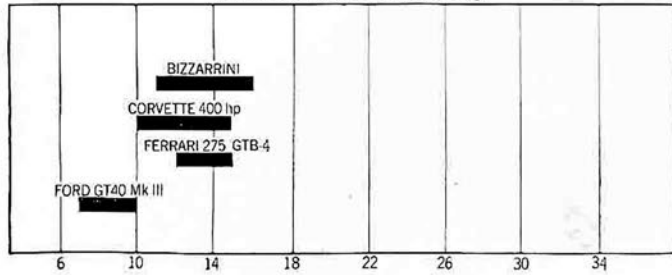
**ACCELERATION** standing 1/4 mile, seconds



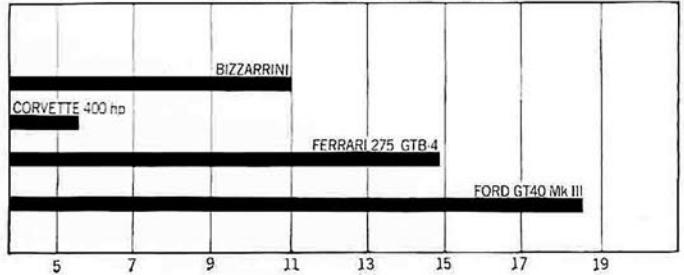
**BRAKING** 80-0 mph panic stop, feet



**FUEL ECONOMY RANGE** mpg



**PRICE AS TESTED** dollars x 1000



**BIZZARRINI GT AMERICA**

**Distributor:** Foreign Cars of Rockland  
354 Route 59 West  
Nyack, New York

**Vehicle type:** Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive,  
2-passenger coupe

**Price as tested:** \$11,000.00  
(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and delivery charges; does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges.)

**Options on test car:** None

**ENGINE**

Type: V-8, water-cooled, cast iron block and heads, 5 main bearings  
Bore x stroke: 4.00 x 3.25 in, 101.6 x 82.6 mm  
Displacement: 327 cu in, 5354cc  
Compression ratio: 11.0 to one  
Carburetion: 1 x 4-bbl Holley  
Valve gear: Pushrod operated overhead valves, hydraulic lifters  
Power (SAE): 350 bhp @ 5800 rpm  
Torque (SAE): 360 lbs/ft @ 3600 rpm  
Specific power output: 1.07 bhp/cu in @ 5800 rpm  
Max. recommended engine speed: 5600 rpm

**DRIVE TRAIN**

Transmission: 4-speed, all-synchromatic  
Final drive ratio: 3.48 to one  
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max. test speed  
I 2.20 10.9 61 mph (5600 rpm)  
II 1.64 15.0 84 mph (5600 rpm)  
III 1.27 18.6 104 mph (5600 rpm)  
IV 1.00 23.9 127 mph (5300 rpm)

**DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES**

Wheelbase: 96.0 in  
Track: F: 55.0 in, R: 56.0 in  
Length: 172.0 in  
Width: 68.0 in  
Height: 43.0 in  
Ground clearance: 3.0 in  
Curb weight: 3020 lbs  
Weight distribution, F/R: 53.3/46.7%  
Battery capacity: 12 volts, 62 amp/hr  
Alternator capacity: 444 watts  
Fuel capacity: 35 gal  
Oil capacity: 10 qts  
Water capacity: N.A.

**SUSPENSION**

F: Ind., unequal length wishbones, coil springs, anti-sway bar  
R: Ind., unequal length wishbones, coil springs

**STEERING**

Type: Recirculating ball  
Turns lock-to-lock: 3.7  
Turning circle curb to curb: 46.1 ft

**BRAKES**

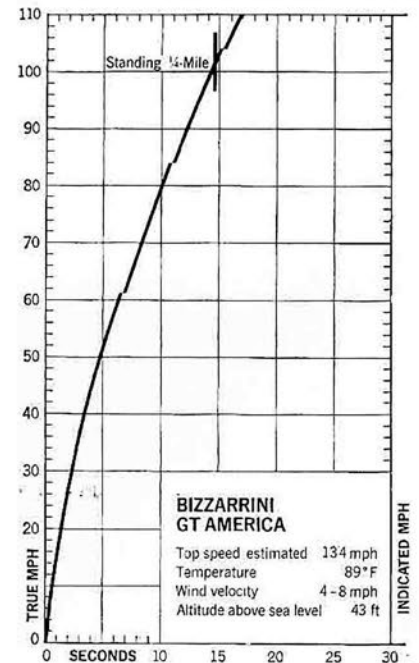
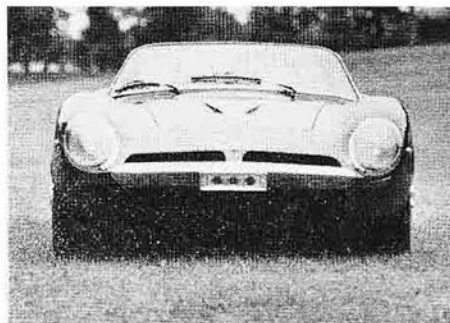
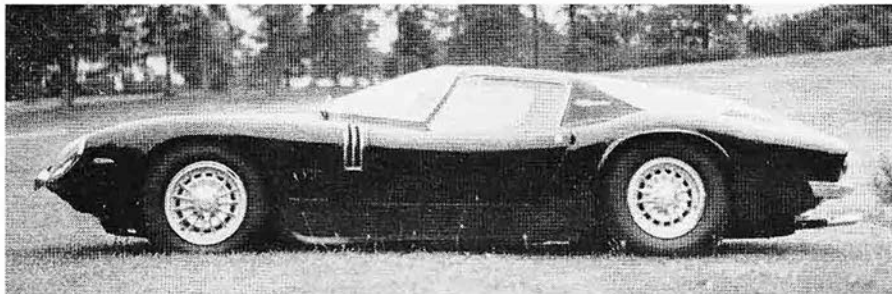
F: 12-in Campagnolo solid disc, vacuum assist  
R: 12-in inboard Campagnolo solid disc, vacuum assist

**WHEELS AND TIRES**

Wheel size: F: 15 x 6.0-in, R: 15 x 7.0-in  
Wheel type: Campagnolo cast light-alloy  
Tire make and size: F: Dunlop 185 HR 15 SP, R: Dunlop 225 HR 15 SP  
Tire type: Radial ply, tube type  
Test inflation pressures: F: 24 psi, R: 24 psi  
Tire load rating: F: 965 R: 1580 lbs per tire @ 24 psi

**PERFORMANCE**

Speed	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	2.4
40 mph	3.1
50 mph	5.0
60 mph	6.4
70 mph	8.3
80 mph	10.2
90 mph	12.4
100 mph	14.4
Standing 1/4-mile	14.7 sec. @ 101.0 mph
Top speed Est.	134 mph
80-0 mph	273 ft (.78G)
Fuel mileage	11-16 mpg on premium fuel
Cruising range	385-560 mi



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## BIZZARRINI GT AMERICA

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fuel tanks have been located within the wheelbase for minimum change in weight distribution as the gasoline is consumed. A 7.5-gallon tank has been located in each sill which gives the Bizzarrini's midsection a top-half-of-a-cantaloupe shape and the remaining 20 gallons of the 35-gallon supply goes behind the seats. You have to crawl in and out over some pretty bulky sills—but Dan Gurney never complains about that kind of inconvenience, why should you? All this is first rate thoroughbred stuff but that's about where it stops.

Good old G. Bizzarrini, crafty Italian entrepreneur that he is, must have written his enthusiastic advertising brochure before he changed the racer to a road car—or else he just enjoys fantasy. If the brochure weren't illustrated, you might think it was a whole other car being described. Like weight, for instance, which is supposed to be 2375 lbs., dry. How come the test car, down about six gallons of fuel, weighed 3020 lbs.? And the generous 5-inch ground clearance that turned out to be barely three inches? It's no wonder the Bizzarrini bottoms on tall tar strips with two aboard. That kind of clearance may be good enough on a smooth race course but it sure makes expensive scraping noises on New York streets and you better choose your driveways with a surveyor's transit. There you are in your 175-mph (advertised) GT America Bizzarrini creeping along amidst derisive honking horns trying to avoid tearing the bottom off. Maybe that's why it already looks like the top half of a melon.

While we're at it, let's not forget the 50/50 weight distribution which the scales say is more like 53/47 and the incredible 46-foot turning circle which, even then, evokes a great shuddering groan from the front tires as they polish a strategically placed piece of metal under the fender.

Not the least of our disappointments was the slow steering which requires 3.7 turns for that extraordinary 46 foot circle (a Corvette turns in 35 feet), and yet was so heavy you could easily believe the entire weight of the car rested on the front tires.

Where the Bizzarrini really finds its home is hurrying along smooth highways. The Chevy air cleaner makes a muted roar on acceleration, and the well-muffled exhaust gurgles, and the transmission whirs on coast so that the Bizzarrini sounds just like a Corvette—probably the most inspiring thing that could happen at this point. Directional stability is good, so that speeds in the 125 mph range don't take on the complexion of a dangerous operation.

The engine has a large aluminum oil sump and four-into-two tubing exhaust headers, but otherwise remains stock 350-hp Corvette. The hydraulic lifters keep engine noise to a minimum and have sufficient power above 4000 rpm to make the Bizzarrini feel like a jet. The close ratio gearbox with a 3.48 axle ratio is a com-

ination not available in the Corvette because it makes the first 30 mph of low gear a bit sluggish and the same thing happens in the Bizzarrini.

Since the tach wasn't redlined, we stuck to the 5600 rpm Corvette redline, although the engine would have loved to go higher if given a chance. Quarter-mile times suffered because of the long first gear and the Dunlop tires—which squealed loudly at the mere suggestion of drag racing and backed up their protest by refusing to grip the strip. The very fast 101 mph terminal speeds were accompanied by disproportionately low 14.7-second ETs.

Considering the nose-heavy weight distribution, the Bizzarrini has a rather peculiar selection of wheel and tire sizes. Dunlop SPs on both ends but 185 x 15 on 6-inch wide wheels in front with 225 x 15 on 7-inch wheels in the rear. Since there was no suggestion from the manufacturer to do anything different, we inflated the tires to the same pressure all around for the handling test. A combination of stiff springs and high control shock absorbers gave the Bizzarrini a very race-car like feel so we immediately began belting through our road course with confidence. With the standard tire setup understeer comes as no surprise. It can be overcome with power but a more uniform choice of tires is a much better long-term approach.

Also, the fantastic aligning torque (normally reduced with radial tires) which tends to straighten the wheels, made cornering a giant struggle. About 5° less caster would be appreciated. We'd say the Bizzarrini handles very well but requires more effort from the driver than can be reasonably expected.

In contradistinction to the steering, the Bizzarrini's power-assisted disc brake system has very good feel and fade resistance. The poor 80 mph stopping distances of 273 ft. (0.78G) are something of a mystery, but since the tires weren't very helpful in the acceleration or handling part of the test we suspect them here too.

Only in exterior shape does the Bizzarrini begin to look like an \$11,000 car. The interior is done up in a hopelessly unattractive cough-medicine red vinyl with gray carpets and a white headliner. The black, padded instrument panel has a wood insert which contains the very serious white-on-black gauges and a row of six unlabeled toggle switches—a kind of pitch-till-you-win situation. The bodywork on the fiberglass exterior would be a hands-down reject even in Detroit.

*Bizzarrini* has a certain very clear ineptitude about it—accompanied by its unwelcome great price. And yet there you are behind the wheel and everybody is watching—wishing they were you. And all the while you're wishing you were what they thought you were. Maybe if you could get it into the shop and raise it up a bit and fix the steering and . . .