

It turned out to be way more than just a derelict Maserati

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

SAN FRANCISCO Bay area collector Michael Rubenstein has been a car buff all his life. He's had a particular penchant for Maserati — something about the design of the company's Mistral has always resonated with him.

"Around 2006 or so, I decided I had to have one," he said. "Starting with the typical sources, I called Maserati clubs

around the world. Finally, I talked to the head of the Maserati club in Toronto who, as a dealer and a master mechanic, had owned a Mistral for 25 years and was going to sell it because he was becoming a priest and was selling all his worldly goods."

Perfect and red

Rubenstein got on a plane and flew to Toronto to see the car.

"It was everything he said it was. It

was perfect, and it was red," said Rubenstein. "And I thought, 'God wants me to have this car.' So, I bought it."

When Rubenstein began showing the car, it became a family affair. Even his eldest grandson — who was 13 at the time — participated, making sure the wheels and tires were spotless once they rolled onto the green.

"We loved it and had great fun with it until my wife got cancer," he recalled. "Keeping the car didn't make sense anymore," he said, so he sold it — something he called "in retrospect, a terrible mistake."

After a number of years, Rubenstein received an email from the executor of a large estate who had a car he couldn't identify. He hoped Rubenstein could.

"He sent me a picture of a Mistral, and I could hardly believe it," Rubenstein said. "Once again, here came a Mistral, a total barn find that had been sitting under a ramp in a building in San Francisco, unloved for 40 years. The heirs knew nothing about it. They'd never looked at it and didn't even have a key for it."

Rubenstein, with his son-in-law, Tim Hoxie, and

Gene O'Gorman, a foremost collector and authority on Maseratis, went to see the car.

"Unlike my red one, which was absolutely perfect, this one was very sad," Rubenstein said. "It needed a lot of work. Still, Tim and I thought about it and decided we had to have it. We were going to make it a daily driver, something fun to drive around. But the car was a mess. It took a lot just to get it started."

Will history repeat?

Rubenstein called Frank Zucchi, an authority on restoring and painting Mistrals who had helped him with his red car and asked him to paint it.

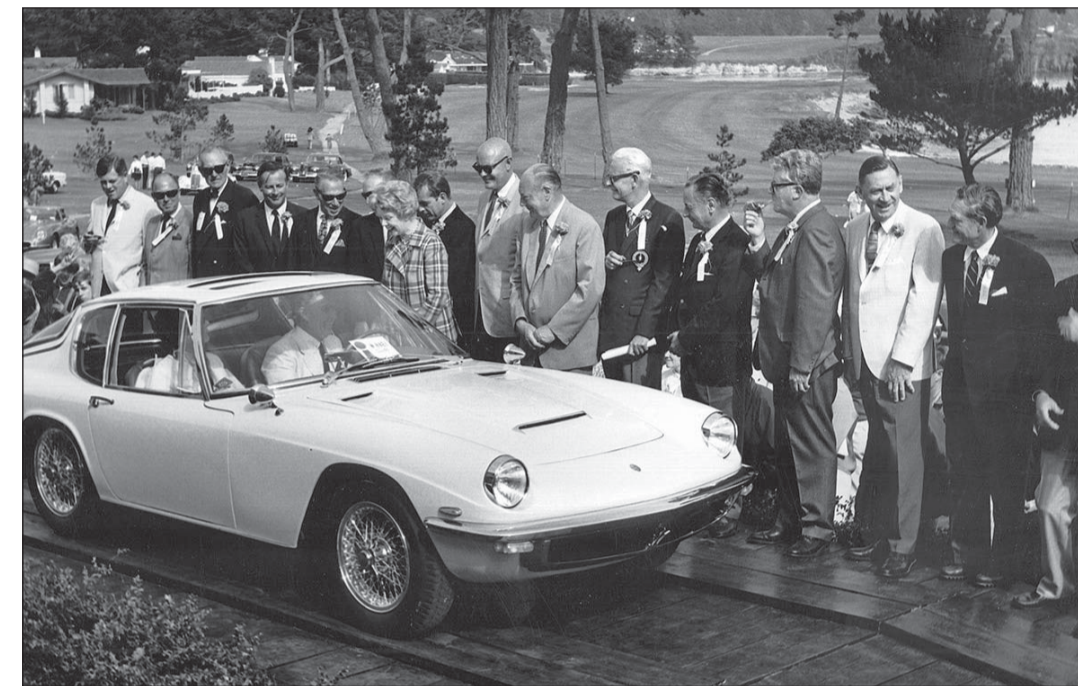
"Frank already had so many projects, he said he was too busy," said Rubenstein. "I told him I was going to put my Mistral on a trailer and send it to him so he could tell me what he thought about it." He didn't hear from Zucchi for three weeks.

Later, when he followed up and asked Zucchi's thoughts on his 1964 heap, he responded with an unexpected comment.

"In 1968, my father restored a 1964 Mistral, and we won Best of Show with it at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance," Zucchi told him.

"He ran inside and came out with a photo of a beautiful Mistral surrounded

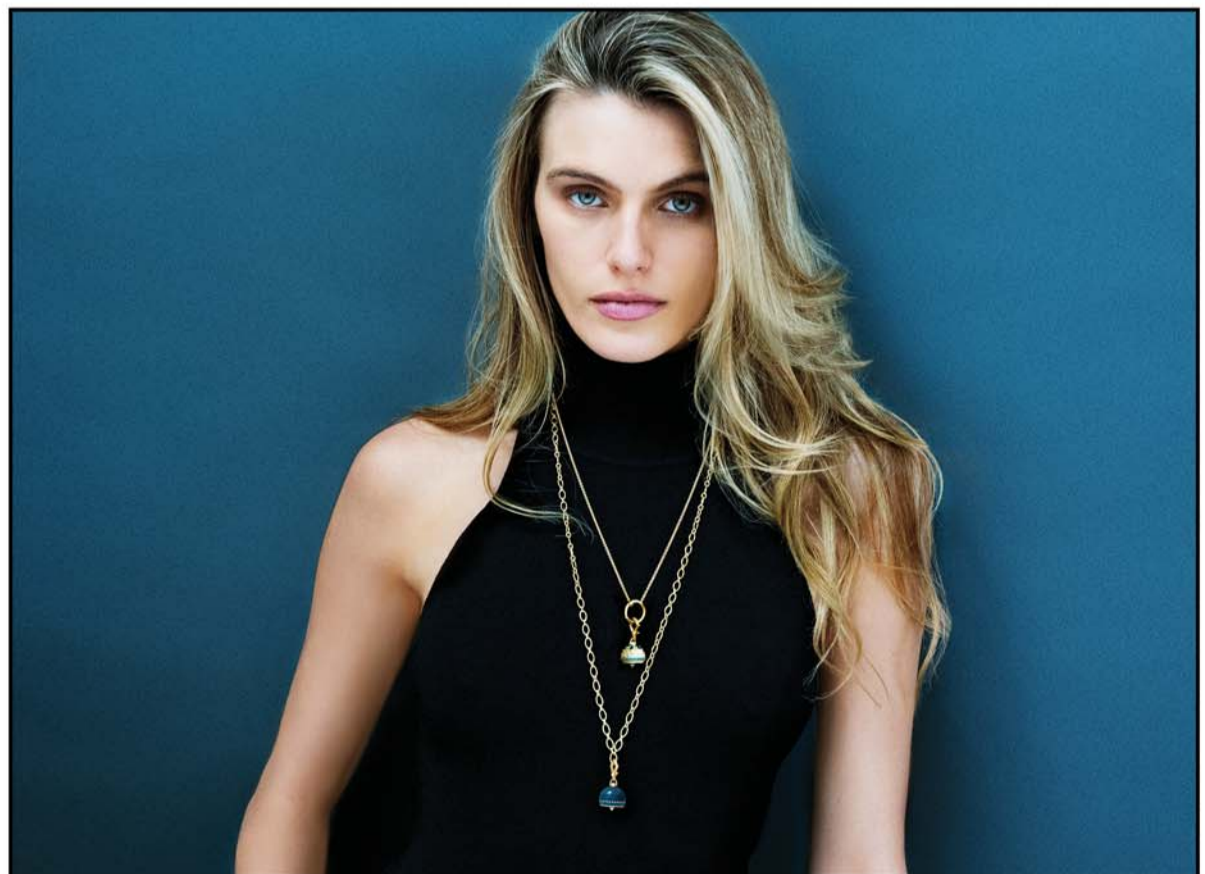
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PHOTOS/COURTESY WILLIAM C. BROOKS, PEBBLE BEACH CONCOURS D'ELEGANCE

You can see Michael Rubenstein's newly restored Mistral at Pebble Beach Sunday. Seen here in 1968, it won Best of Show, but was later neglected for decades.

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BUTTON

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tain terms that he couldn't be seen driving around in the British car, so he had to sell it.

The Jaguar, the only one painted bronze, was raced in Argentina and moved to Europe a few decades ago, according to Button. There, it was entered in classic races at Le Mans, Monaco and Goodwood.

"The first time I drove it last year was at the Goodwood Revival," said Button, who has raced at the other main event there, the Goodwood Festival of Speed, for years.

Seeing it coming

Hitting 135 mph on the straight at Goodwood in a 70-year-old car with drum brakes can be a bit harrowing. "You can see the accident coming if it's going to happen — it takes like 10 seconds," he said, contrary to being behind the wheel of a modern F1 car, when it's over before you realize it.

While the Jag sports its original XKC engine block, it's been tuned by a modern crew that has coaxed 80 or 90 more horsepower out of it, putting it closer to the 300-horsepower mark.

"It's super powerful, but nothing else has changed," he said.

Button took the Jaguar out at Sonoma Raceway a few weeks ago, just to make sure everything was working properly and see how it handles on a tighter road course. He got better acquainted with its drum brakes — which require hitting the pedal hard enough to avoid too much feedback, but not so hard that you lock up the wheels.

"There are a lot more braking zones, so it's tough for a car like that," he said, adding that he's also learned it tends to jump out of gear in third, which can create tricky situations.

"It's a handful. I look forward to trying to tame it," he said. "Laguna Seca will be more challenging for the car."

Piloting a car that's way more analog than digital obviously requires a hands-on approach.

"You're kind of working in unison with the car," he said. "That's why I like classic car racing — you're more connected."

At Laguna, Button will also be tag-team driving an entirely different animal, a 1967 Alfa Romeo GT Jr. that has an engine roughly half the size of the Jag's and is quite a bit lighter than the English car's 2,200 pounds. It's also got wider, more contemporary racing tires.

"The Alfa GT Jr. has raced all its life," he said. "As soon as it rolled off the production line, it started racing."

Button is co-driving the Alfa in the Dan Gurney Saloon Car Enduro with friend Mazen Fawaz, the car's owner. Fawaz is the CEO at Singer Vehicle Design in Los Angeles.

While he's in town, Button will also make a stop at The Quail — A Motorsports Gathering and host guests in his capacity as a Rolex Testimonee. He's looking forward to seeing his many friends in the industry.

"It's a really nice time to catch up with old friends and see a lot of great cars and machinery," he said.

Renaissance Man

Button, like many competitive drivers, started racing go-karts when he was a kid. He was 20 when he went to drive for the Williams F1 team in 2000, and was racing for the Honda team when the Great Recession hit in 2008 and the manufacturer pulled out, leaving him without a ride. Enter Ross Brawn, who bought the team for \$1 and ensured Button kept his job. He went on to win the championship in 2009.

After he left Formula 1 in 2017, Button went on to other racing pursuits. Among them, he said during a



PHOTO/MARY SCHLEY

At The Quail — A Motorsports Gathering in 2021, Jenson Button (left) shared stories and insights during a wide-ranging Fireside Chat with Philip Kadoorie, son of Sir Michael Kadoorie.

Fireside Chat at The Quail in 2021, was his offer to race in the Baja 1000, a grueling off-road race, with a friend, as a birthday present.

He got so into it that he bought a truck to race, only to have it break down up in the mountains at around the 235-mile mark, stranding him and his co-driver for 17 hours until they could be rescued by helicopter.

That put an end to his off-road driving efforts.

"I realized I don't like to get dirty," he quipped.

He has collaborated with Radford and Lotus to design cars and last year was asked by Mobil 1 — one of his former F1 sponsors — to race part-time in the NASCAR Cup. Button competed in several races, including an inaugural run on the streets of Chicago.

"It was a lot to get used to, but I enjoyed the challenge," he said Friday.

When he's not on the track or on the road, Button works as a commentator for Formula 1. Fortunately, the series takes its summer break in August, freeing him up for a trip to the Monterey Peninsula for Car Week.

MISTRAL

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by Phil Hill and all kinds of automobile dignitaries," Rubenstein said. Unbelievably, it turned out to be the same car.

Luckily, he persisted

In 1962, Zucchi's father, Arnold Zucchi, had established Continental Auto Body in Oakdale. As the story goes, four years later, he met Stanley Good, whose wife had ordered the '64 Mistral. Toward the end of '66, after getting into a fender bender at Tahoe, Good sought

someone to do the repairs, which is when he met the elder Zucchi, whose first name was Arnold.

"The car was still fairly new, and Good wanted to show it," said Frank Zucchi. "Dad detailed the heck out of it, tidied it up. They started showing the car in '67 and won everything. A year later, they took it to Pebble Beach, and it won."

Frank was 23 when he took over his father's business. "The last time we saw this car was around 1972," he said. "We never saw it again until Mike brought it in."

Understanding the work involved, Zucchi didn't want to restore the car. Yet once he recognized it, he called his dad, now 88, who confirmed the details of this particular Mistral.

"If Mike hadn't brought it to us, no one would have known this is the car that won at Pebble Beach. It's just a cool story," Zucchi said. "If it weren't for Mike, I wouldn't have restored it. Luckily, he was persistent."

'Truly spectacular'

Rubenstein and his son in law, to whom he has gifted the Mistral, look forward to bringing it to the Concours d'Elegance.

"It has been perfectly restored in a beautiful ivory with green leather interior," Rubenstein said. "It truly is spectacular and will be perfect when it arrives at Pebble Beach. We'll see what happens at Pebble 56 years after it won Best of Show. Maybe history will repeat itself."



PHOTOS/MICHAEL RUBINSTEIN

Can you imagine the winner of the 1968 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance Best in Show award somehow ending up in this condition? This 1968 Maserati Mistral sat unloved and unattended for so long, its last owner's heirs couldn't even find the keys. Fortunately, Michael Rubenstein purchased it, and his favorite restorer turned out to be the son of the man who showed it in '68. They decided to fix it up and are bringing it back for a proper homecoming.

Your guide to the weekend's amazing automotive events starts on page 30Cd'E