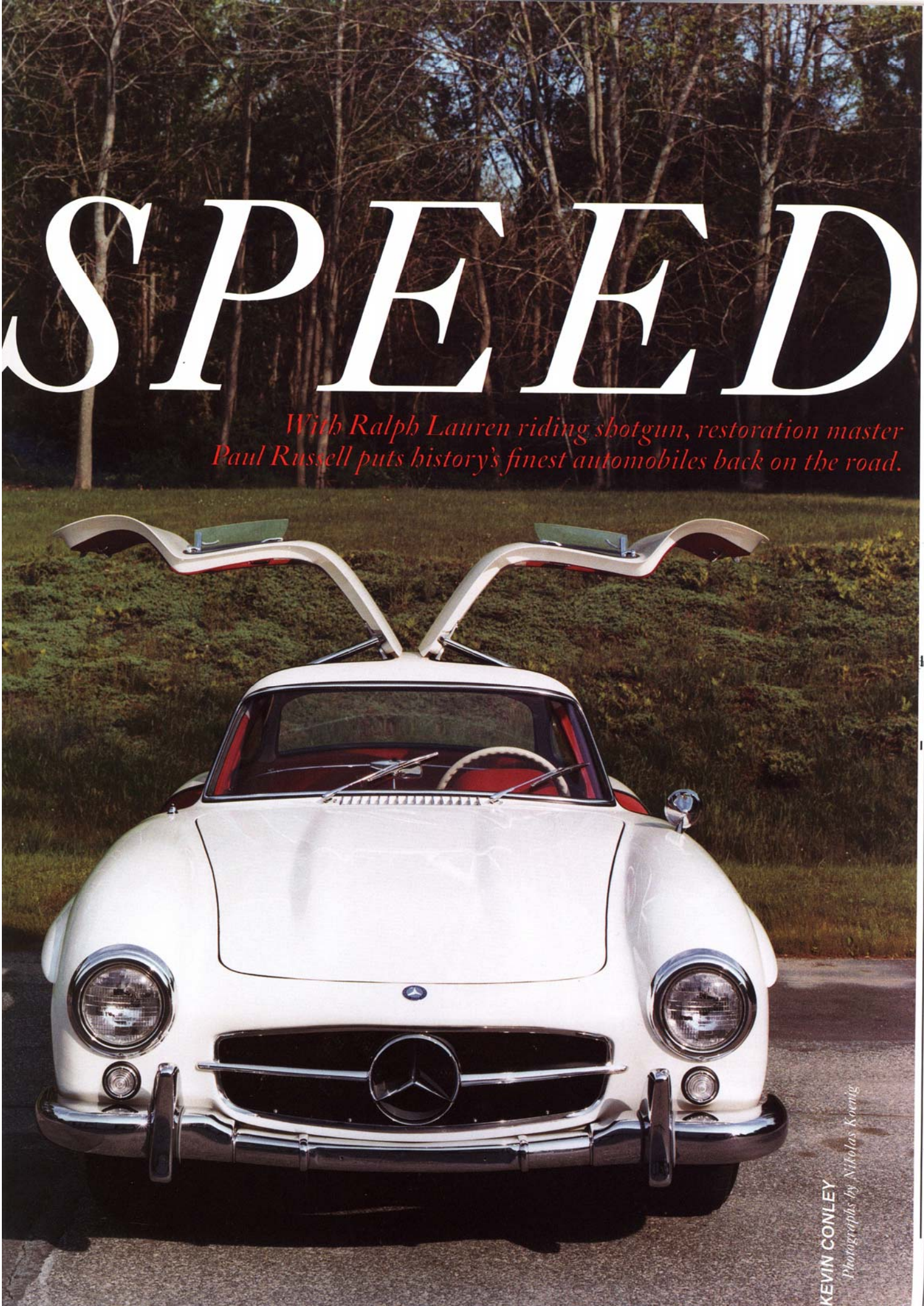
(RE)BUILT FOR

Hall of Famers: the 1955 Porsche 550 Spyder (front), immortalized by James Dean; the 1934 Alfa Romeo 8C-2300 (back); the 1955 Mercedes 300SL Gullwing (opposite).

SPEED

With Ralph Lauren riding shotgun, restoration master Paul Russell puts history's finest automobiles back on the road.



KEVIN CONLEY
Photographs by Nikolas Koenig

PAUL RUSSELL, the soft-spoken master of classic-car restoration, ignored a showroom full of sparkling coupes and vintage duettos annexed to his headquarters in Essex, Massachusetts, and headed straight to a rusted hulk in the corner: a 1932 Alfa Romeo with a cloth top foxed with rainwater and neglect. "This is like the car in the museum," he said, calmly, despite the utter improbability of the assertion. The show car he was alluding to—a 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C-2900 Mille Miglia—had spent the past spring gleaming under the bright lights of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the show "Speed, Style, and Beauty: Cars from the Ralph Lauren Collection." The car in front of him, however, was a mess. The interior was filled with loose parts secured by twine or stuffed in Rubbermaid boxes; the front fenders, scoured down to the sheet metal, were scrawled with the sort of Magic Marker lines that a plastic surgeon draws on bare flesh before taking up the knife.

But Russell, a silver-haired Yankee with an unmistakable perfectionist streak, could back up the claim. His shop, Paul Russell and Company, finishes somewhere between two to six total restorations a year, returning rust buckets to their original condition, at times even subtly improving them, adding the sort of individual options—fitted luggage and hand-stitched upholstery, period hardware painstakingly researched for authenticity—that the original owners may not have had the money or inclination for. "People say, 'Well, it couldn't have been this beautiful when it left the factory,' so perfect and fresh that it's a little unreal," Russell told me. "But after it's aged awhile it just looks like you started with a new car and took good care of it." The claim is plausible—if your idea of a new car is a 1938 Bugatti Atlantic or a 1955 Gullwing Mercedes, completely restored according to your specifications, at an average cost, Russell says, of between $300,000 and $600,000 (which does not include whatever you paid to acquire the rusted original at auction or on eBay).

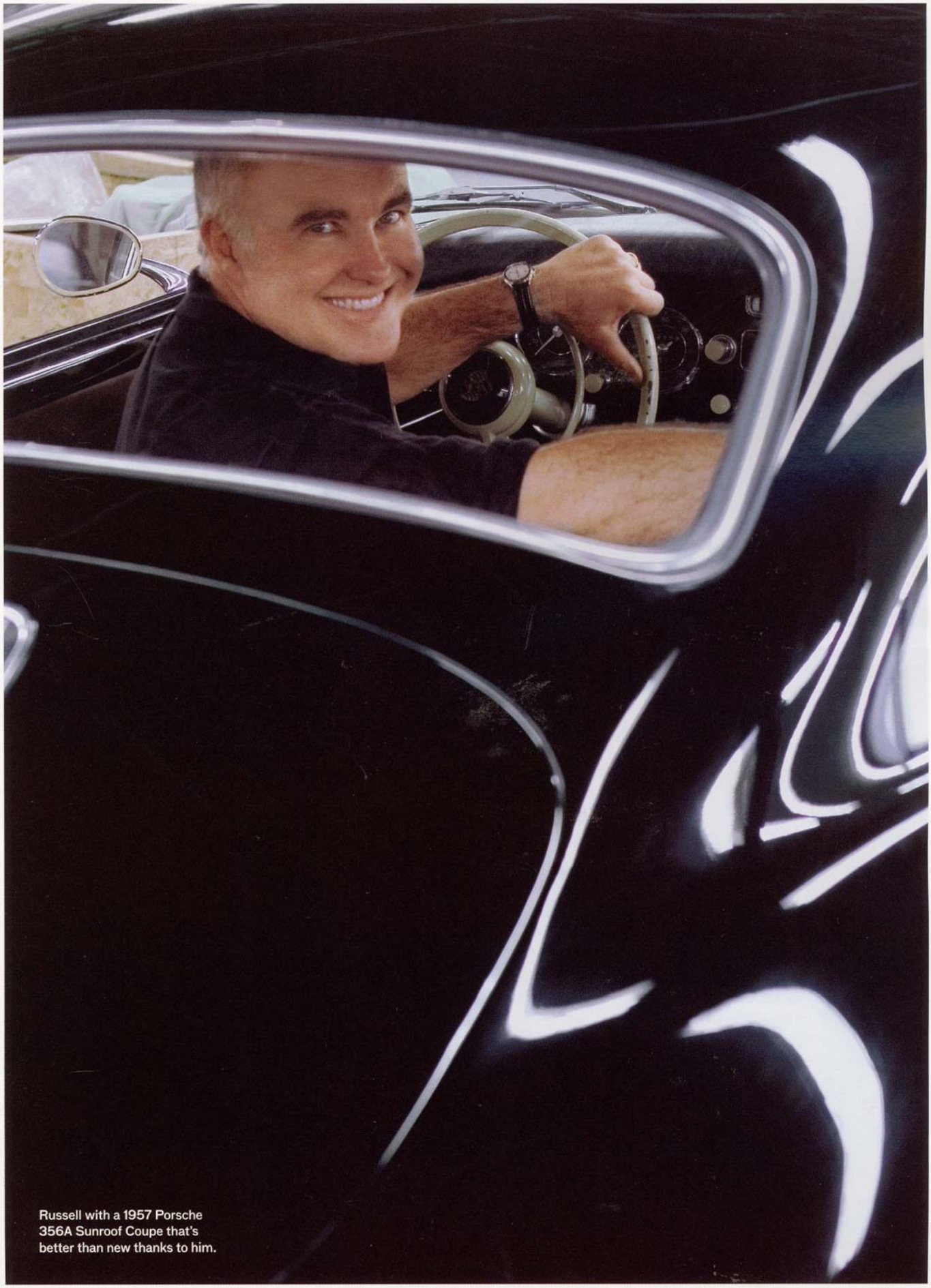
Russell leaned into the old Alfa Romeo with a mixture of familiarity and respect, the way a classics professor picks up his Thucydides. He pointed out the wood supports in the door frame. The earliest European carmakers were primarily engine and chassis makers, he said, and they relied on traditional carriage builders to provide the body of the car. Back in that era, Paris was the coach-building capital of the world, and luxury cars, like the members of the wealthy and titled classes who bought them, didn't shy from bold fashion statements. The best coach builders set the styles, and the car buyers of the '20s and '30s flocked to the annual Concours d'Elegance to see the whimsy and hauteur of their latest cabriolets and coupes. "People experimented with new styling," Russell said. "Some people would buy their Rolls-Royce with a summer body and a winter body"— changing the shell of their car as easily as they'd swap tennis sweaters for raccoon coats. He pointed to the Magic Marker on the fenders. The line traced the alterations of an earlier owner who had gone back to his coach builder to have the fenders enlarged when, sometime in the mid-'30s, fender fashions changed.

At Paul Russell and Company, a rust bucket can recover its former glory at an average cost of $300,000 to $600,000—not including what you paid to acquire it.

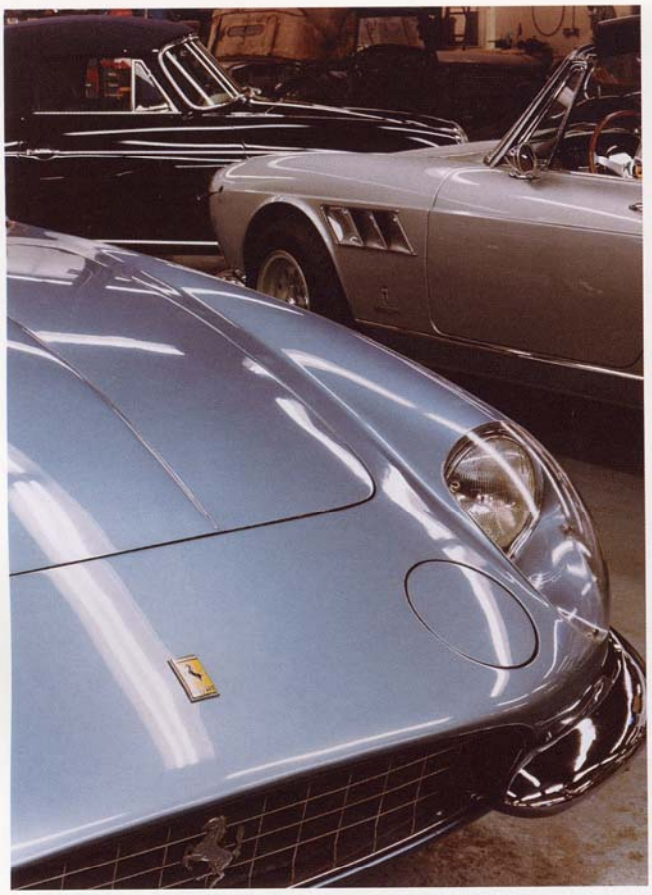
It should come as no surprise that many of the most stylish vehicles that Russell has revived belong to the fashion icon Ralph Lauren. Russell's first business was called Gullwing Service Company, because it concentrated on restoring and servicing Mercedes-Benz cars from the '50s, when the manufacturer's signature model was the 300SL Gullwing Coupe, whose scalloped doors opened upward, giving the impression of a gull in flight. In 1983 Lauren handed a 1955 Gullwing over to Russell and was pleased with both the final product and the lengthy collaboration that led to it; the two men share a capacity to obsess about both the details and the overall design. In fact, Lauren was so pleased that when he bought one of the rarest and most highly prized cars in the world—the 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic Coupe, a brooding masterpiece of Art Moderne design—he entrusted it to Russell, whose 1990 restoration then won best in show at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, the most prestigious prize in the vintage-car world. The prize launched Russell's second life, as the master restorer of a variety of automobiles, most notably prewar coach-built classics.

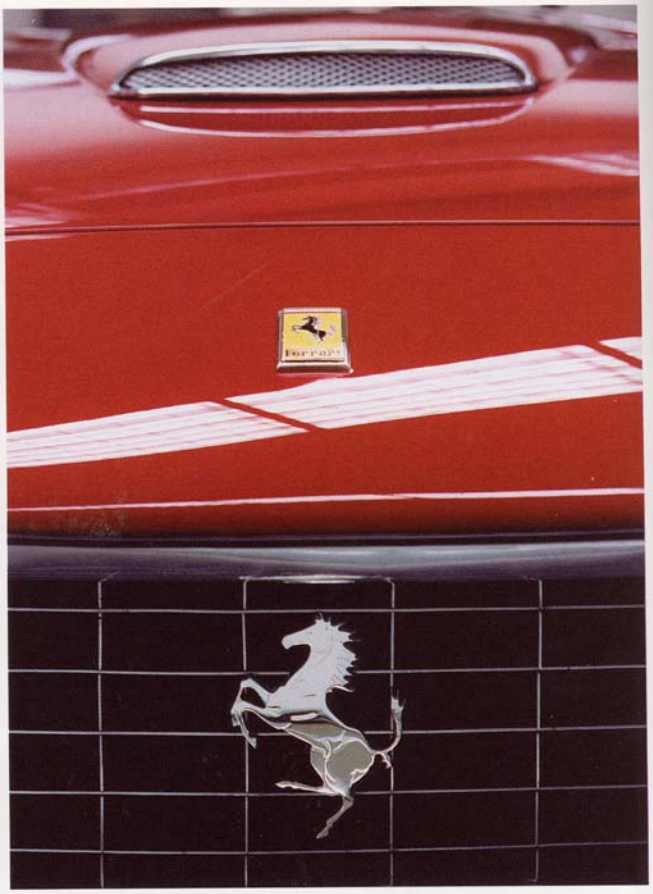
The seaside streets around Russell's 30,000-square-foot shop are filled with antiques stores and clam shops. On working days it's worth it to take your order of clams outside to watch the show: the Russell employees log more than 150 miles test-driving each of their re-creations, and it's not unusual to see a 1950 Ferrari 156 Berlinetta or a Porsche 356A Spyder, better known as the James Dean car, whipping by, favoring the gentle hills with the bygone roar of an antique engine in perfect running order. This sensation, the almost jarringly familiar feeling you get when you cross paths with celebrity, is multiplied when you step inside the shop. In the body shop, eerily recognizable silver body parts—the skeleton of a Ferrari, the tailpiece of an old Bugatti race car—balance on workbenches or hang from the ceiling. By the big open bays of the paint room, the recognizable shape of a '30s Mercedes (isn't there a picture of Neville Chamberlain riding in one of those?) sits drying under netting.

Russell moves from room to room, conferring with the artisans about crucial decisions. He directs the efforts and supervises the extensive detective work behind each restoration, poring over archival photographs to ascertain, for example, whether the bodywork was finished with Phillips or flathead screws. "I've sat in steamy apartments in Milan, looking through 1,400 negatives," he told me, which is as close as he comes to boasting. It's hard to imagine a greater



Russell with a 1957 Porsche 356A Sunroof Coupe that's better than new thanks to him.





300 SL

authority on the lost art of coach building, but you cannot coax him to admit it. "The more I learn about what they've done," he says, "the less I feel qualified to do it myself."

ONE MAN WHO DOES FEEL authorized to arrange the world according to his liking is Ralph Lauren. The guesthouses at his summer home, on the eastern tip of Long Island, hide in the landscape; on the hottest day the pool remains dappled in deep shade. Outside the main house a 1952 Chevy truck sits underneath a pine tree, the needles and pine cones falling just so onto the wood slats of the old flatbed. The original green of the truck has oxidized into a rich blue that holds the stains of years: hands, basketballs, the suntan lotion from a trip to the beach. Mark Reinwald, who maintains the 65 or so cars in the Lauren collection, has strict instructions never to wash the car. The color, he has been told, is perfect. And so it is.

No designer has a subtler touch with the preexisting than Ralph Lauren. His art is largely one of recognition: this great old thing looks better like so. Old cars are part of this aesthetic. He likes to match his 1973 Ferrari Daytona—the one black Ferrari he owns—with the right pair of sunglasses. The art behind such impulses should not be underestimated. Car companies (like Bentley and Maybach) that offer extensive customizing have found that clients rarely make use of it, leaving the disappointed coach builders to bemoan their clients' lack of imagination. Lauren does not have this failing. He has, for example, two old Land Rover Defenders: the one at his beach house he has had painted a sun-drenched tan, perfect for surf running, and the one at his Bedford estate is forest green, ready for the hunt.

"Cars are like children," Lauren has observed. "It's hard to say that any one is my favorite." But the designer doesn't have time to tend to 65 children. For that he has retained the services of Reinwald, who makes sure that all of his charges get regular exercise. The 51-year-old restoration expert has been buying and reviving old cars since high school, when he drove a '37 Plymouth he got from his shop teacher for 45 bucks, and has spent much of his adult life servicing and restoring vintage automobiles, so he has no problem reading the various moods of the cars in his care.

To make sure the cars are in proper running order, Reinwald tries to drive each one at least once every six weeks or so, and to verify his diagnoses he relies on second opinions from his son, Alex, who also works for Lauren. On occasion, their drives are casual—at lunch, Alex took a 1941 military vehicle over to Herb's Market to pick up a few turkey club sandwiches—but as a rule the two men go through a fairly rigorous checklist each time they take a vintage auto for a ride.

I watched the speedometer waver for a while around 100 before he hit the brakes. I could feel hair whipping around my head, and I am almost bald.

On that sunny day in June, while Alex was going for sandwiches, I helped Reinwald with the prep work for a 57 Jaguar XKSS—a silver two-seater (Lauren chose the color) with an hourglass shape, a big chrome exhaust pipe, a row of rivets edging the sheet metal, and a leather strap cinching down the hood. The car has the sporty fair-weather chic of a suede jacket. I stood behind it as Reinwald tested the brake lights and the directional signals. Then he invited me to take the driver's seat in the convertible—or what would have been the driver's seat if this hadn't been an English car. Reinwald, already buckled in to my right, drove us out of the garage area (twelve Ferraris, three Porsches, one Aston Martin, four Mercedes, a powder-blue Caddy, four Jeeps, and so on) and onto the road, made a turn onto a two-lane highway, and overtook a few pickup trucks out on business. He proudly showed off the car's smoothness at every speed (it takes a lot of care to make an old car roll through every gear), and I watched the speedometer waver for a while around 100 before he hit the brakes, to see if they were tracking properly. For fact-checking purposes I asked if the speedometer was working and received an equivocal answer, but I feel certain that we were going very fast: I could feel hair whipping around my head, and I am almost bald.

When we returned, we cleared a table in the garage (Reinwald's work space is as clean as an operating theater) and sat down for the sandwiches. Then it was time to ride in Lauren's latest acquisition, a special-edition McLaren F1LM. (The 1996 and 1998 McLaren F1s—which can reach 240 miles per hour, making them the world's fastest production cars—are also part of Lauren's collection.) As we were touring the garages earlier, Reinwald would often note the cars you could ride in all day. The distinction was important, because many of the cars Lauren owns give the driver an authentic racing experience, which is to say fast, hard, loud, and hot. Unless you're Mario Andretti, half an hour of that stuff is about as much as you can take. The McLaren falls into this category: the driver's seat, with a five-point harness, is set in the middle; two passengers can ride along, one on either side. The engine is so loud that everybody wears marigold headsets equipped with microphones in case anyone feels moved to talk during the ride. (You might want to say something like "Whoa!") I watched the speedometer go over 120, and then I stopped watching to look at the pickup we were rapidly closing in on. Reinwald braked, and the McLaren made a noise like an airplane decelerating. A little while later we were poking along in traffic, the huge 650-horsepower engine tugging at the light carbon-fiber frame like a derby horse pulling on an exercise pony in the pre-race parade. Reinwald spoke through the headphones: "It's very difficult to go slow in this car."

Clockwise from top left: three beauties—from top, the 1965 Ferrari 365 California Spyder, the 1966 Ferrari 275 GTS, and the 1964 Porsche 356C Carrera Cabriolet; the 1965 Ferrari 250 GT Lusso, one of the most gorgeous street cars ever built; Lauren's 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300SL Alloy Gullwing, now valued at $1 million; and BMW's classy answer to that classic, its 1958 BMW 507.