HANDLING, HORSE

In the 1980s, America had fallen out of love with Moto Guzzi's big V-twins. But some specialists kept the faith and created built-to-order, super-spec specials. Nolan Woodbury rode one of these unusual survivors

Photos: Ricky J Hernandez, Highway 94 Photo and Nolan Woodbury

No other motorcycle feels like a Moto Guzzi. Straightforward and purposeful, the rider folds in, not on. Hands reaching and feet resting high atop rear-set controls, motion is instigated by thumbing a starter that wouldn't look out of place on an old Buick. Fed by two sucking intakes, noise – more than slightly reminiscent of a healthy small block V8 – spits from hollowed exhausts as the big-twin's internal mass churns. With torque you feel in your spleen the sensation deepens with each mile and is accompanied by a clattering, mechanical symphony that's best described as beautifully chaotic. Raw boned, the Guzzi is surprisingly athletic, but it's not for everyone. Heed this warning: once bitten, there is no cure.

It was a lovely weekend in Southern California, full of good cheer, travelling with my best girl Merry to visit our friends Bill and Domani Ross. I know we've arrived when I spot a white 850 Le Mans III sitting majestically atop a wide, sweeping drive. We'd barely shaken hands when Bill pointed to a pile of bike gear with instructions to suit up. Dressed more for the beach than a motorcycle ride, I swap my flip-flops for something more substantial while the big twin warms. Pulling on a Shoei and strapping in, a grinning Bill pulls alongside. 'You ready?'

Urban legend to those who admire Tonti's sporting vision, the special-build Jim Woods Le Mans comes from an era when hot Guzzis were rare. According to the ancient writ, the machines from Jim Woods' Glendale workshop dominated the back roads of So Cal; running in packs and astonishing those foolish enough to engage. Surrounded by naysayers, Woods was one of the few apostles of the Mandello doctrine in the USA at the time.

Because the 850 Le Mans II was not imported here, the original 850 of 1976 was replaced with the updated 850 III in 1983. Squeezed in between was the CX100; a model that mixed the 850 II's angular motif with the small-valve 949cc engine from the SP/Convert line. Common for a time, the CX100 claims Guzzis shortest production run for Le Mans models. Forced to modernise for global emission certification, the Le Mans 850 III differed from the first-series by virtue of a thorough mechanical and cosmetic restyle. Behind those changes was former racer-turned-corporate magnate Alejandro de Tomaso, who on his way to saving famous Italian automobile marques (and starting his own) paused long enough to scoop Guzzi off the junk heap. In 1976 de Tomaso directed his Modena-based styling agency to square off Guzzi's line of 350 and 500cc small-blocks, then ordered the same angular treatment applied to the 850 twin five years later. By

Buying an old bike? See more small ads at www.RealClassic.co.uk

OWER & HERITAGE

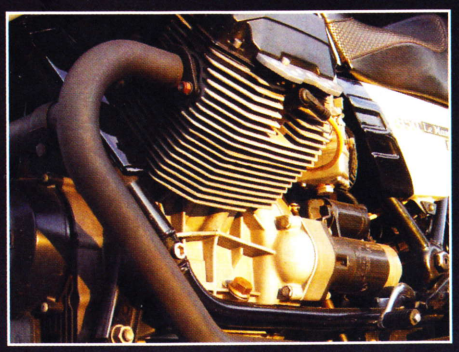
the mid-1980s the Le Mans was decorated with yards of swoopy, 'Flock of Seagulls' inspired ABS, a 16-inch front wheel and an engine punched out to 949cc, but not before the Le Mans 850 III set new sales records for the line.

Uprated or not, the 850 III was down on horsepower compared to the herd of rapid Japanese superbikes coming on the scene. Viewed as a delightful if dated early 80s anachronism, this description was repeated ad nauseam by the press. Drama also surrounded a change of US importer and it all caused many to proclaim that the bloom was well off the rose at Moto Guzzi.

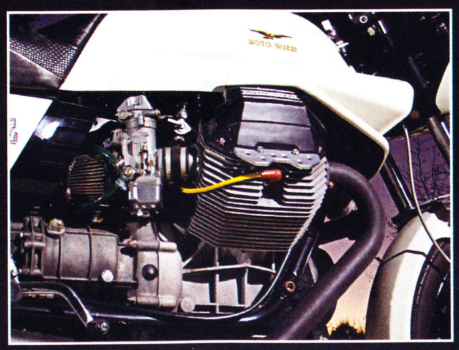
'We knew what the Guzzi was, and what it could be' said Jim Woods, who now owns a highly successful Honda dealership. 'It wasn't

an original line of thinking, but we were selling them and we wanted to sell more, so we went racing. In addition to being durable and unique, both the Ducati and the Guzzi had a clear advantage in handling. We figured more power would swing the balance, and it did'.

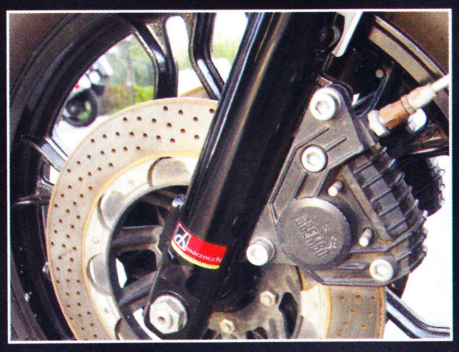
If there's such a thing as the average Guzzi enthusiast, Ross isn't it. Blanketing most of the ➤



The MkIII was the first Le Mans to sport Guzzi's square-fin cylinder head. On this special it's been trimmed in black to match the pipes, sump and so on



From the outside, this looks pretty much like every 844cc Guzzi Vee you've ever seen. Inside lurk Carrillo conrods, a Raceco camshaft, balanced crank and pistons, ported, lightened and polished everything

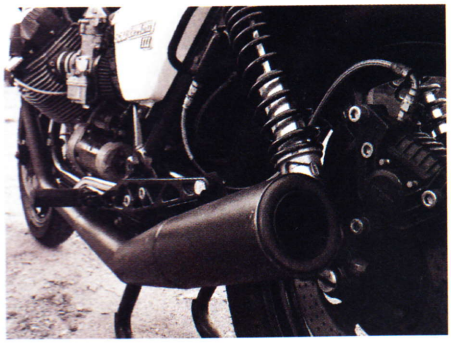


The Brembo brakes needed no tweaking, although front end was uprated to 38mm Marzocchi tubes and the wheels have been enhanced with Kal-Gard's black coating

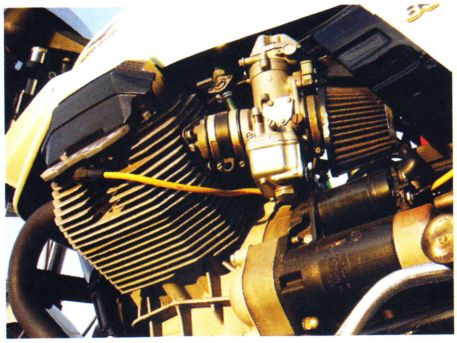
available moto-spectrum, 53 year old Bill Ross has toured cross-country on his vintage Falcone single, built (and ridden) record-breaking, Guzzi-powered Bonneville LSR racers, assembled show winning restorations and much, much more. His path to this Woods Le Mans began with spotting a late-90s four-valve Centauro Sport on eBay. 'I procrastinated and missed the V10' said Ross, 'but the owner said he had another Guzzi for sale. He explained it wasn't running, but was modified with some performance parts.' Intrigued, Ross hooked up his trailer and trekked north to see the Le Mans. 'I had a pretty good idea it was a Woods Guzzi. I'd never seen one in the flesh, but I recognised some of the Woods Motor Shop features from books and magazines.'

Wanting to confirm what he already suspected, Ross's research into the bike's ownership history traced its path back to its original owner. Lightly crashed, the Le Mans sat for some years before it was traded, then sat some more after that. 'It was rusty and beat up, but so incredibly cool,' Ross remembers, smiling. 'When I contacted the first owner, he not only confirmed the bike was purchased from and blueprinted by Jim Woods, but all the technical details and the special parts too.'

There's heaps more RealClassic reading to enjoy online at www.RealClassic.co.uk



The two-into-two, beautifully welded and balanced exhaust system is another one-off custom-built item. The originals would have been bright chrome



A standard Le Mans would normally wear 36mm carbs. The Jim Woods workshop matched race-spec 40mm Dell'Ortos with K&N filters

'ALTHOUGH THE DESIGN CAN AND HAS BEEN TUNED TO A SURPRISINGLY COMPETITIVE DEGREE, THE REAL APPEAL OF THE MANDELLO TWIN IS ITS COMBINATION OF LONGEVITY, DURABILITY AND ABILITY TO ATTRACT RIDES YOUNG AND OLD WITH ITS CLEAN LINES AND THROWBACK VIBE...'

Once home and under the lights of his workshop, Ross began to disassemble the Le Mans, keeping what was good (which was most everything, save for the scarred-up fairing and badly upholstered seat) and tossing what wasn't.

Each Woods Le Mans was made to order, so no two are alike. Some left the shop with only simple cosmetic modifications, like Woods' trademark Kal-Gard painted wheels, rear drive box and bits of polished alloy. Learning many tricks from cylinder heads prepared by tuning icon and engineer CR Axtell, Woods pre-formed all but the most extensive porting and polishing modifications to engines he assembled for the local hot shots. Once the engine was apart, Ross was surprised to find the factory-issue 83mm pistons and Nikasil bores (uprated with Carrillo rods) but a closer examination revealed the engine's intake ports had been opened to accommodate the race-spec 40mm Dell'Ortos, reshaped and polished rocker arms, a Raceco .390" cam, gear timing, a lightened flywheel and a windage baffle in the sump. Replacing the factory double-wall system, the rattle-can finished 2-into-2 exhaust is a bit of a mystery. 'It's possibly one of two custom sets which Woods built' Bill said. 'The headers are BUBs but the whole thing is welded, not clamped. It looks and sounds better than anything I've heard.'

I find my groove as Ross and I sail through a lovely set of sweepers. Now prettied up with owner-applied Mini Cooper white and vintage 'Eagle' tank transfers, the Woods Le Mans feels reassuringly familiar. Not unlike the litre-sized Le Mans I've owned since 1985, the shrieking gear whine from the engine joins the ever present baritone exhaust to pound the rider with hammers of sound.

With 35-years of ownership experience I've ridden a lot of Moto Guzzis, and this one feels good; tight and right. The best available in 1984, an aftermarket 38mm Marzocchi fork and Koni Dial-a-Ride shocks transform the Guzzi, making a good handling bike truly great. The Strada fork is especially impressive, smoothing the ride and offering more composure under hard braking. Speaking of that, the original Brembos and dual-piston callipers remain, de-linked and fitted with stainless hoses.

Like the stock 850 III, the Woods Le Mans pulls harder when the engine reaches 6000rpm. Unlike the stocker, you don't need to spin it that high to make power. Giving a nod to Bill's tuning skills, the work lavished to the engine make the Woods Guzzi feel more like the big-valve 949cc twin than the comparatively anaemic 850. With its pie-plate flywheel, ripping the throttle open at five-grand rewards the rider with an instant ➤

Quiet proficiency abounds on the Jim Woods special-build 850. The Corbin saddle is obvious and you might also spot the Koni shocks. The brakes have been de-linked and performance boosted with Frentubo stainless steel brakes hoses

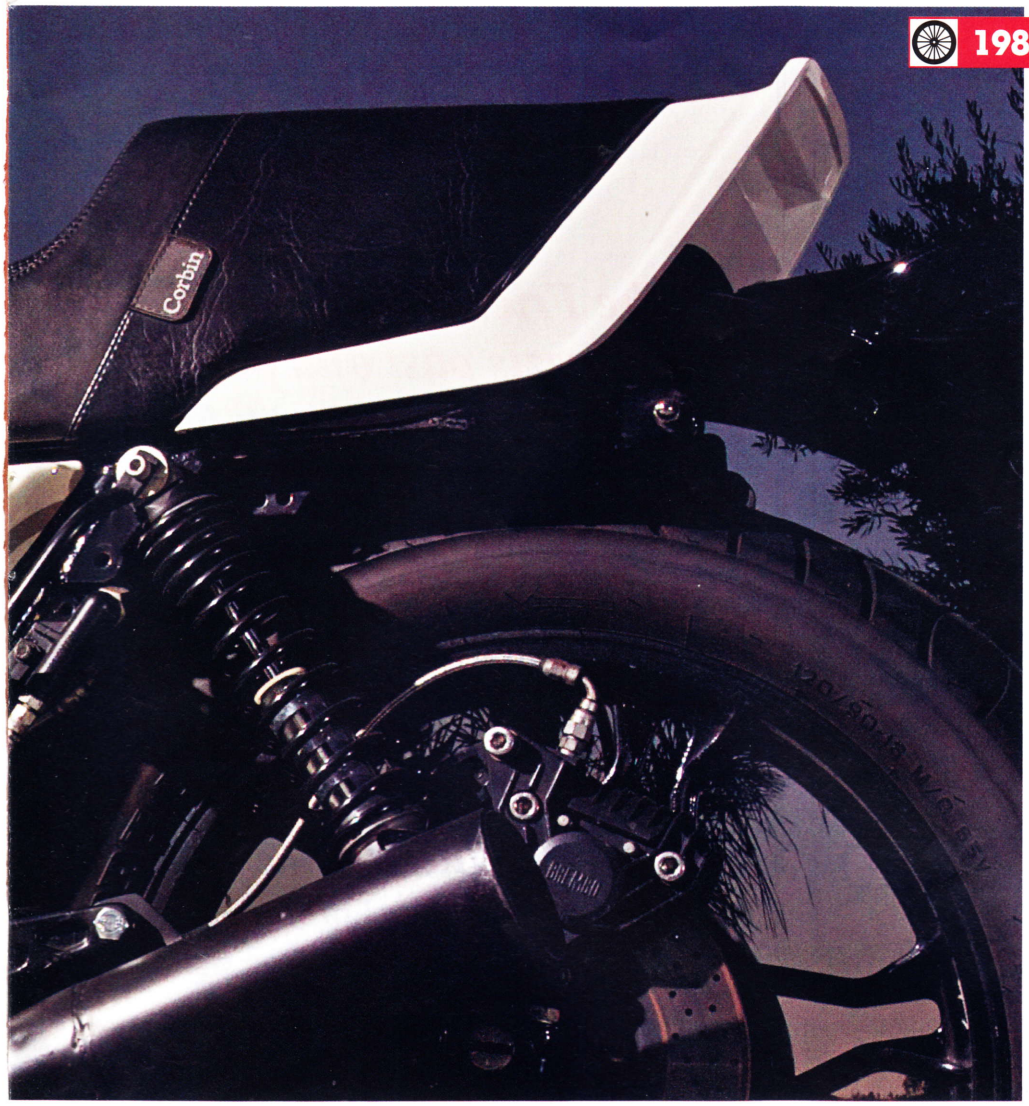
The angular fairing, designed in Guzzi's own wind tunnel, was new for the Le Mans III and featured an additional spoiler to deflect cooling currents around the cylinders. This Special wears an Airtech replica fairing, sans turn signals

explosion of power. 'The first owner decided to keep this bike an 850, even when others were boring and stroking to 950cc' Ross said over coffee.

Although the design can and has been tuned to a surprisingly competitive degree, the real appeal of the Mandello twin is its combination of longevity, durability and ability to attract riders young and old with its clean lines and throwback vibe. I'd wager a case of Castrol R that the vast majority of Guzzi twins sold worldwide are still in use. And while never produced in great numbers (10,000 Le Mans IIIs were made between 1981 and 1984), big twin production over the last 40 years has been steady. More than enough for a generous supply of spares and popular enough to support a solid aftermarket.

For Bill Ross, the Woods Le Mans exists as a time capsule that can, and is enjoyed on a regular basis. Offering only a half-hearted apology for my obvious gushing, it's impossible to remain unbiased when the visceral charm of the Woods 850 Le Mans III sends any hope of objectivity straight out the window. At the foundation is an almost unidentifiable something... an unshakable confidence that's rare to find and thrilling to experience. **Rc**

Buying an old bike? See more small ads at www.RealClassic.co.uk



FACT PACK 1983 MOTO GUZZI 850 LE MANS III

Engine:	Air-cooled, four-stroke 90-degree 844cc V-twin
Bore and stroke:	83 x 78mm
Compression:	9.8:1
Carburetion:	2 x Dell'Orto 40mm
Ignition:	Dyna III with high output coils
Transmission:	Five speed constant mesh with dry, dual-plate clutch
Primary drive:	Helical gear
Final drive:	Helical bevel gear (33/7) 4.71 ratio
Chassis:	Full cradle steel frame with double downtube
Rear suspension:	Round section swinging arm, Koni 7610P x2
Front suspension:	Marzocchi Strada, 38mm
Front brake:	Brembo 2 x 300mm cast iron discs, dual-piston calipers
Rear brake:	240mm cast iron disc, dual-piston caliper

THANKS to Jim and Joe Woods, Simi Valley Honda SeaDoo CanAm Spyder, Bill Nation, Pro Italia Motors, Kent Riches, Airtech Fiberglass, Mike Gotlieb, Marco and Ray Brinker,and Bill and Domani Ross for their assistance in compiling this article

Our American correspondent, Nolan Woodbury, who snapped this shot, is a bone fide old bike enthusiast with a particular penchant for Moto Guzzis. See more of his articles and photos at vintagemotorcyclesonline.com