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Sweet Little 16

By: Peter Bohr | Saturday, March 01, 1997 12:00:00 AM

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Autumn 1964: The Porsche 911 enters production in Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, Germany. In spring 1997, more than three decades later, the 911 remains in production as a modern classic of the automotive world.

Autumn 1964: The Donzi 16 enters production in North Miami Beach. In spring 1997, more than three decades later, the Donzi 16 is still in production as a modern classic of the boating world.

The parallels between the Porsche 911 and the Donzi 16 are striking, in more ways than one. Both are stunning performers in their respective elements -- land and sea. Both are renowned for their quality of construction, thanks to their builders' attention to detail. Both possess such clean, yet elegant styling that they have transcended the whims of fashion.

And it's no surprise that both are the highly personal statements of a brilliant man -- Ferdinand Porsche, in the case of the 911; Don Aronow, in the case of the Donzi 16. Drive a 911 or a Donzi 16 and you immediately become a participant in the genius of a superior mind.

Aronow died in 1987. To this day, many consider him to be the greatest figure in the history of offshore power boat racing -- and building. Not only did he win three U.S. and two world championships before retiring from active competition in 1970, he established a string of successful boat building companies.

Aronow created Donzi, Formula, Magnum and Cigarette, among others. When his production boats became such marketplace hits that they diverted his attention from his first love, racing, Aronow would sell the company and start another. And each new effort seemed to be as successful as the previous one.

Donzi Marine was Aronow's second venture. Aronow didn't invent the deep-V hull that came to dominate the sport of offshore power boat racing; that was the work of designer Ray Hunt and boat builder Dick Bertram. But in 1963, Aronow formed Formula Marine to beat Hunt and Bertram at their own game -- deep-V race boats.

To help in that effort, he hired noted racer and naval engineer Jim Wynne. Aronow's Formula Marine team came up with two hulls -- a 23-footer and a 27-footer. Both boats won races, and to help defray the costs of racing, both became the basis for production high-speed family cruisers.

A year later, Aronow sold the design and molds for the Formula boats -- and along with them, the molds to a fresh Wynne design: a deep-V inboard/outboard 17 foot runabout with a bucket driver's seat and wrap-around passenger seating.

"I've just got a funny feeling about that little boat. I really didn't want to let her go," Aronow said immediately after the sale, as quoted by his son in the book "Don Aronow: The King of Thunderboat Row" (by Michael Aronow, Write Stuff Syndicate Inc., 1994).

But as it happened, the buyers were unable to put the 17 foot Formula Jr. in production. Aronow and Wynne revised the design and the first Donzi -- the Sweet 16 -- was born. And quite a star it was.

After a cameo appearance in the Fifth Avenue window of elite sporting goods seller Abercrombie and

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Fitch, as well as a presentation at the 1965 New York Boat Show, acclamations and orders poured in -- including ones from President Lyndon Johnson (he used it on the lake at his Texas ranch) and from the Israeli armed forces (several boats saw action in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War).

Besides its undeniable good looks, the Donzi 16 was a sensation because of its performance. As with the Porsche 911, few competitors could match the Donzi's performance and handling in the mid-1960s -- or in the mid-1990s, for that matter. With a 110 hp Volvo Penta stern drive, the little 16 foot speedster would cruise along at 35 mph and sprint to nearly 50.

Present-day models, powered by MerCruiser 190 hp V-6 or 210 hp V-8 engines and outdrives, will get up on a plane in three seconds and will hit top speeds just shy of 60 mph. The Donzi 16 glides over calm seas, with barely an inch or two of hull in the water.

Twist the steering wheel and the deep-V hull grabs tenaciously at the surface, giving an unbelievably brief turning radius.

"You need to learn how to drive them," said Mike Miller, Donzi's current marketing coordinator. "You think you'll flip over, but you won't."

The deep-V bottom smoothes out the chop -- up to about 2 or 3 feet, that is. Rougher water isn't the Donzi 16's forte. With its low freeboard -- in a bank, passengers can reach over easily and skim the water -- and with the complete absence of a windscreen, the boat is most comfortable in protected areas.

True to form, Aronow sold Donzi Marine in 1965 and went on to found Magnum Marine and other companies. Donzi went on to several other owners, including the Chisholm brothers, who developed 18 and 22 foot versions of the 16-footer.

In 1989, Donzi came under the stewardship of giant Outboard Marine Corp. But Donzi -- and the 16, 18 and 22 foot "Classics" as they had come to be called -- were overshadowed by OMC's other projects.

Donzi found a new home in 1993 at American Marine Holdings Inc., a company that also owns Pro-Line boats. American Marine Holdings immediately set out to revitalize the Donzi name, and along with it, the Donzi Classic line.

During the past three years, the company has built and sold some 150 of the 16 foot Classics. Other than the power packages, the current 16 Classic is "about 98 percent" the same as an original 1964 version, said Miller. The air intakes, the driver's seat pedestal, the cleat arrangement and the instrument panel are the major modifications to the new boats.

The boats are still constructed to match Aronow's high standards. For instance, Donzi uses double- or triple-stitched fiberglass mat -- rather than the usual woven roving -- for extra strength. The stainless steel deck hardware is chrome-plated for a look of luxury. And the boats still carry twin lifting rings, making a Donzi 16 the perfect accompaniment to a mega-yacht.

Should you see a brand-new Donzi 16 Classic in your future, look no further than your nearest Donzi dealer. American Marine Holdings is establishing new dealers in the West -- an area that has always had rather sparse Donzi representation.

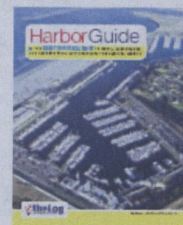
A new base boat with a V-6 typically sells in the \$15,000-\$16,000 range, though options (including custom graphics, exhaust system packages, stereo systems, trim tabs or a trailer) can add \$4,000 or \$5,000 to the tab.

But should you hanker after a Donzi 16 classic -- with a small "c," that is -- be warned that they don't necessarily come cheap, even if they are two or three decades old. So highly regarded are these Porsches of the water, pristine examples from the 1960s or 1970s can fetch nearly the price of a new edition.

A fitting tribute indeed, to Don Aronow.

This article first appeared in the March 1997 issue of SEA Magazine. All or parts of the information contained in this article might be outdated.

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