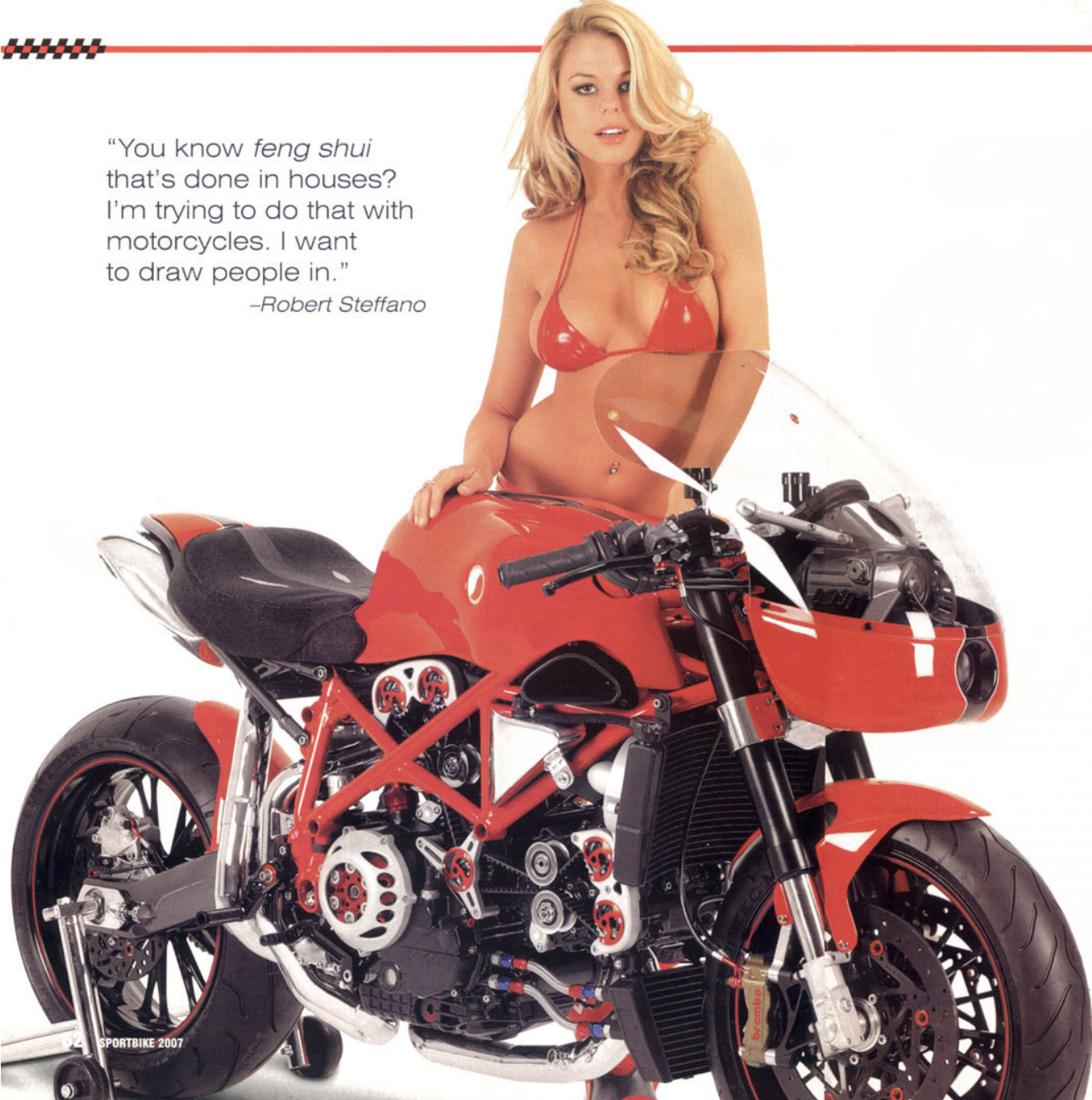




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Café Ducati

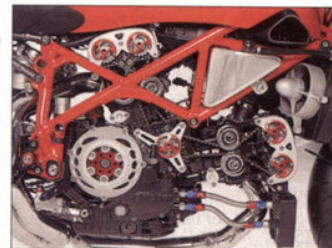
Retro undertones, high-performance overtones

by Mark Hoyer

SOME people tried to like the Ducati 999 when it made its 2003 debut. Others made no effort at all, mostly because they were so put off by the bike's styling departure from the almost universally accepted beauty of the 916. For his part, Robert Steffano just did what any creative bike builder would do: He threw the bodywork away.

"The 999 was very uninspiring, and it just didn't hit a chord with me," says Steffano. "But I loved what the bike did, and it seemed like a really great foundation for what I wanted to do."

What he wanted to do was build an a small series of exotic, high-end "café superbikes" under the Steffano Motors banner,



a limited-edition machine that incorporated styling elements from motorcycling history while still being a thoroughly modern, tire-shredding sportbike.

Steffano has a history of this kind of thing. Working as ACME Rocket Bikes, he and his small crew were willing to change just about any machine, even sportbike styling icons of our time such as the 916 and Yamaha YZF-R1. Both bikes were subject to makeovers using hand-hammered aluminum bodywork pounded out by legendary alloy sculptor Evan Wilcox, a NorCal neighbor of Steffano's.

This bike, the Café99, however, uses a Ducati 999 base and aerospace-grade carbon-fiber for all its bodywork, with





Most of Café99 is heavily reworked, but the Ducati 999 engine remains stock internally for standard warranty service at your local dealer. Steffano Motors says that with intake and exhaust mods, output is 150 horsepower. Working with the 375-pound dry weight, performance should be excellent.

the kind of styling the 44-year-old's company is becoming known for.

"I definitely didn't want to build a retro," he insists. "I'm going after a strong design concept and a build quality you just don't see these days."

Starting with a standard brand-new 999, the bike is torn down completely. "Every single thing on the bike is disassembled," says Steffano. "We strip the frame and remove a bunch of tabs we don't use, and we weld on other tabs, modifying it to our needs. Then we paint it a very rich red, same as the bodywork."

The subframe is custom and designed to accommodate the electronics, including the battery. The 999 has most of this electrical equipment mounted on the side of the engine. "We had to get rid of that huge battery thing,"

he says. "You want to be able to see through a V-Twin, right?"

That Vee motor gets a semi-gloss black finish, while all the hardware on the whole bike is polished stainless steel except for a few of the stock aluminum pieces that are anodized.

"It's really built as a showbike," Steffano says, "but what we do also takes a good 40 to 50 pounds off the bike."

Dry weight is a claimed 375 pounds. Part of this lightness comes from the trick, 20-spoke PVM forged-aluminum wheels and Brake Trick coated cast-iron discs. The calipers, too, are top-shelf, Brembo HP two-piece billet units.

What about that exhaust? "The headers come from LeoVince," says Steffano. "They make sets of them for us without mounting tabs, and we build them up to suit." But the most interesting piece is the aluminum muffler/tailsection. Outlets are on the side, with an unusual-for-motorcycles internal design.

"I still have to do some tweaks," he says, "because the muffler design is not used too much on motorcycles. It's a resonator and it sounds so sweet! Very Formula One racecar V-12. It's a trip!"

Internally, the engine remains stock. "The idea is to maintain a factory warranty on the engine," offers Steffano. "Intake runners are ours, made out of carbon-fiber, but we keep the stock airbox."

They even kept the stock 999 fuel



tank, just hidden under a carbon-fiber cover.

"The concept is that any Ducati dealer can service this bike," says Steffano. "Everything is stock. On the gas tank, you unbolt the fuel-cap assembly and the skin, the shell, comes off. The stuff I built in the past was so out there no one could work on it."

For a modern sportbike, styling remains "out there."

"It's got lines that are very unusual," he says. "You know *feng shui* that's done in houses? I'm trying to do that with bikes. I want to draw people in and make them comfortable."

This philosophy extends to the normal modes of "comfortable," too, such as the seat and riding position. First the seat: It is made from stingray hide. Steffano classifies this material as "amazingly luxurious" and having an "organic texture" you don't normally see on a motorcycle. Other benefits include it being waterproof (*duh!*) and very durable. "And the ladies like to run their hands over it," he says with a laugh, adding, "Seriously, it is an integral piece of the overall design, which includes organic elements from the natural world."

Ducati superbikes have never been known for their ergonomics, and the 999, while better than previous models, still needed some "humanizing." To that end, the bars are raised 3 inches and the footpegs are dropped 1 inch, both components beautifully made CycleCat pieces.

"We're not building a racebike, it's a café superbike," he says. "And it's a showpiece. There is something here for everyone. People respond to it."

All this exotica costs just under \$75,000 in a limited production run. And no, the girl is not included. ❧



Hand-fabricated aluminum exhaust resonator with side outlets is Café99's signature piece. All the bodywork is aerospace-grade carbon-fiber, although the stock 999 tank remains under the curvaceous outer cover. Seat is covered with stingray, and mounted to a custom-fab subframe that carries the battery and engine electronics.

