

With Alfa Romeo now flying strong under Fiat's wing, Luca Ciferri talks to boss Giovan Battista

BACK IN IT

THE FUTURE IS FINALLY LOOKING bright and rosy for Alfa Romeo. After a decade of being in debt, Alfa has entered the '90s with a profit showing on its bank balance, and not a small profit either. The figure, as yet unconfirmed, should be over £200 million.

Parent company Fiat is mainly responsible for this return to corporate health, providing not only cash to debtors and investment for new models, but also a brisk new management to spur on a tired concern. The Arese and Pomigliano plants are now running at full capacity, thanks to production orders from Lancia. Over 157,000 Y10s were manufactured at Pomigliano last year and 57,000 Thomas at Arese. Alfa Romeo's own sales figures are slowly rising — up from 199,000 in 1987 to 228,000 in 1989 — but not fast enough to be self-financing, hence the reliance on its partner.

The situation is expected to improve further this year with the advent of the restyled Spider, the sporting Quadrifoglio Verde 164 and the revised 33 (see page 20) boasting Alfa's first production multi-valve engine. Also on the horizon is a slightly more powerful 75 and the monstrous SZ coupe, which will leave the Zagato factory where it is being built at the rate of one or two a day from this month.

And these are only Alfa's plans for 1990. Beyond that is rumoured to lie a new Spider, a new coupe, an all-new 75 successor, a sports car (perhaps mid-engined and developed with Maserati), a multi-purpose utility vehicle and a Range Rover rival.

Responsible for seeing the model strategy to its fruition is Giovan Battista Razelli, the 45-year-old Alfa Lancia SpA managing director, with direct responsibility for the Alfa marque. He is quietly confident. "In the future, we will proceed as do the Japanese: step by step, slowly, but never going back," he says. "Better performance as a company is just one of our tasks, because we are deeply committed to improving the quality and reliability of our cars. I think the new 33 clearly demonstrates our new approach. The 16-valve version has a very good power figure — around 80bhp per litre — and we are proud to consider this 16-valve engine one of the most powerful in its

class. We tested the 33 16V Quadrifoglio Verde very thoroughly against the VTEC-powered CRX by Honda. Our car was faster both in acceleration and top speed and also handled better.

"On the quality side, we worked solidly for almost a year on pre-production, building 100 pilot cars. We feel we have reached a quality level that is very close to our competitors' products."

Alfa fans the world over are eagerly awaiting details of the rumoured successor to the

brutal-looking SZ coupe, said to be more powerful than the 210bhp original now going out to the first of 1000 customers. Razelli, unsurprised by the question, is forthcoming. "Firstly, it will be a front, not mid-engined, coupe in the true Alfa tradition. Secondly, it will share minor componentry with future Maseratis. The two companies will work together very closely to develop a 'basket' of first-class common componentry. From there, each company will develop its own products."

Ah, so the new coupe will not be based on the Maserati Biturbo platform then?

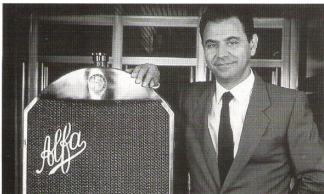
"No. Exactly. And the engine will be 100 per cent Alfa Romeo's own. We're considering several layouts, including a 3.5-litre V10 derived from the research and the road tests we performed on the engine we prepared (but did not use) first for Formula 1 and later for the Pro Car series." Asked if 'Mostro II' would be another limited edition production car, Razelli replies: "Not at all. Alfa will go back to its tradition of offering mass-produced performance coupes.

The number depends on the sort of vehicle we produce. It is clear that a V10-engined car will be more exclusive than a V6, which could reach a level of about 10,000 units a year."

Enough of coupes; how about Spiders? The revamped car has already appeared at the Detroit and Los Angeles motor shows and is due to appear at Geneva next month. But what of the successor? "When you have to create a successor to a legend, it's not important how long you take, because the real task is to create a new legend. I can only say that nothing brand new will arrive before 1993. Also, the Torino-based Spider is only one of the three solutions we are considering."

So, if there are three possible solutions, plans for a 164 spider are not completely dead yet then? "No, a spider and a coupe derived from the 164 are still possible, but not yet decided." Talking of model extensions, will Alfa add a Sport Wagon estate to the new 75 and 164 ranges?

"No. We will only have a Sport Wagon on our entry-level car. We are pushing to re-establish the traditional Alfa image of 'the family sedan that wins races', and that's something that does not marry with a station



"We are deeply committed to improving the quality and reliability of our cars . . . We have reached a level very close to our competitors'

Razelli about the wealth of plans to take the Italian car maker soaring through the '90s

THE BLACK

wagon on the top of the range." So what about an MPV and a Range Rover rival. What can we expect? "Most likely a very high-performance, luxury 4wd vehicle. I don't see an Alfa MPV in the near future."

How close are four-valve-per-cylinder heads on your four and six-cylinder engine families? "You can expect the 24-valve V6 in about a couple of years. For the in-line four we are still considering alternatives to the four-valve layout, because we are very pleased with our Twin Spark ignition, which — unfortunately — is a solution that cannot be used with four valves. We are also very satisfied with the road tests of the experimental Twin Spark 2-litre engine equipped with reed valves."

But it seems that the solution you prefer looks to be a Twin Spark with three valves — two for the inlet? "Yes, but my personal preferences are not enough to start mass production. The first brand new Alfa Romeo developed under Fiat ownership will be the successor to the 75, which was scheduled for 1991. The success of the current model will probably delay the launch of the new generation."

In the six-year product plan that Alfa Romeo recently approved, there is room for a sporty, two-door version of the 33 successor. The original Alfa Sud had both coupe and two-door versions, after all. "I am convinced that a two-door body in the 33 class — offered in a real sporty version — makes sense in future Alfa product strategy." The 33 remains the only Alfa offered with four-wheel drive. Can we

expect 4wd on the 164 soon? "We are proceeding step by step. At the moment we're testing different 4wd configurations for our flagship."

"When we find the solution which fits our expectations, the production development will start. Alfa Romeo is not trying to follow any 'fashion' in the car business. We add something only when it represents a real benefit to our customers."

When the 164 was launched two years ago, the Fiat/Lancia derived 2-litre turbo engine

was added as an 'emergency solution'. Doesn't Razelli think that Alfa deserves only true Alfa engines? "Of course. The 'emergency solution' won't last forever."

About the future of the V6 engine, someone said it would be abandoned in favour of an in-line six. "Not at all. When Alfa has to prepare a successor to its V6, it will be another V6. In addition, we are currently increasing the production of our V6 from about 100 units a day to several hundred," smiles Razelli. Enough said. ■



Second generation of SZ coupe (top) will be mass-produced. 75 successor (above) is first new Alfa under Fiat change. Multi-valve 33 (left) heralds improved quality standards. Re-styled Spider (far left)