



Wheels Of Change

There is a wheel brochure in Alpina's reception listing two models. This marks a historic moment in the history of the company's trademark 20-spoke 'cotton reel' rim, one of the industry's 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' icons. From its inception as a 13 inch alloy in the '70s, its history has been one of only occasional dimension changes and periodic subtle revisions, such as a softening of the outer rim or the introduction of a centre cap.

But now the Classic model has been joined by the Dynamic. This came about when the company was doing a spot of development work with BMW on the X5. It decided the cotton reel's slender spokes were too dainty for an SUV, and worked up a design similar to the one worn by the V8 Roadster.

The X5 project never actually materialised, but Alpina was left with the new wheel. And with a little modification it looked great on the Roadster. "The Alpina wheel is an important part of the Alpina concept," Günther tells us. "So now the Dynamic will appear on different cars. Passenger cars like the B10, B3 and 7-Series-derived models will get the Classic design." This is revolutionary stuff indeed, but only to a certain degree. "You will notice," he says, "that although it has five main rays, the wheel still has 20 spokes." Plus ça change...

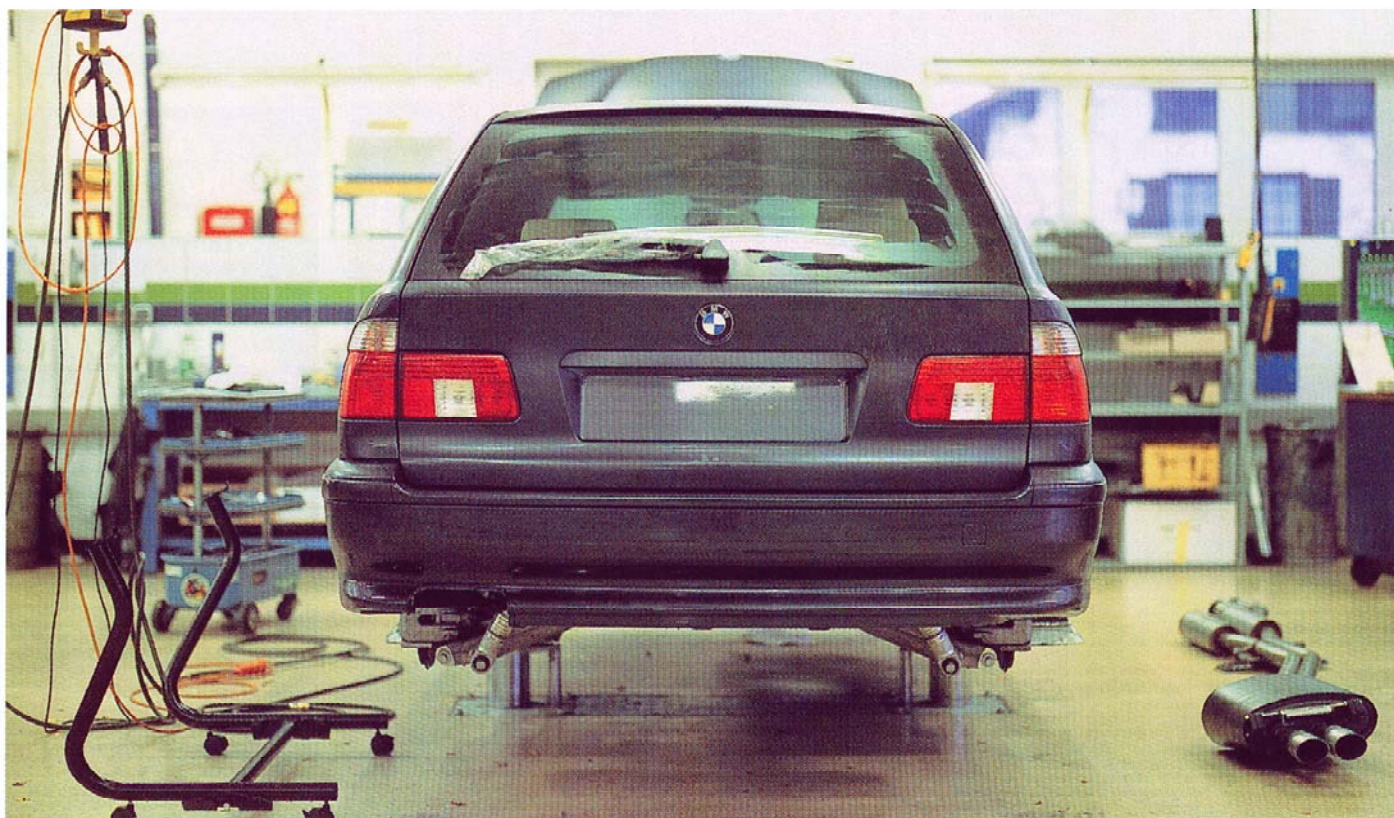
Cars arrive partially complete from the BMW plants and are perfected here in the Buchloe workshops.



always worked well together: "The kind of cooperation we have with BMW is unique," says Günther. That means your Alpina will have been assembled on the BMW production lines at Munich, Landshut, Dingolfing and Regensburg, using Alpina parts.

That's why two lorries make daily trips from Buchloe, laden with goodies to be bolted into the Alpina product that the factories spit out, and Alpina personnel are in the factories to oversee the process. On the VIN plate of an Alpina car, alongside the Alpina logo, is the legend 'BMW/Alpina'. Says it all, really.

In his office, Günther shows us photographs of the manufacturing process at work. The car being built is Alpina's recent model, the V8 Roadster. This is a pivotal model for the company, and one that needs



a manufacturing process as efficient and cost-effective as possible. Over the next five years, Alpina's volume production is to rise from around 800 to nearly 1500 units per year. That's because it intends to take on the American market for the first time. And the V8 Roadster is the flagship of that effort. Of its 550 unit production run, 430 are destined for the USA. And by the day we visited, all but three had been sold. The combination of big power, extremely demonstrative looks and an auto gearbox has proved irresistible to stateside fans.

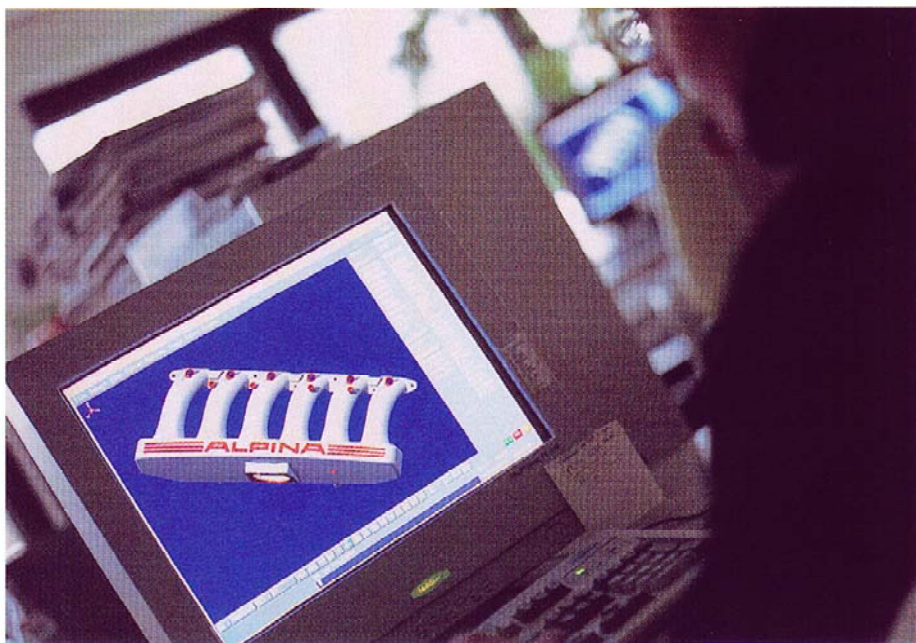
Almost finished cars return to base, to be put through whatever final processes they require. An Alpina is a bespoke car, so it may well have interior parts awaiting it in the finishing shop. These will have come from the trimming department, a colourful area where almost anything you desire is done with leather and Alcantara. We were amazed to find the famous Alpina chequered perforation stripes, backed with hide of a contrasting shade, are all punched out by hand.

That's Alpina through and through. The Buchloe premises is modern, having grown over the last three decades or so. In fact, builders were present the day we visited, completing the new reception area. Yet between sparse, obsessively clean, functional spaces are home-grown, distinctly gothic touches — a marble staircase here, a sculptural, wrought-iron balustrade there.

Some of the design touches point to another side to Alpina. For the last 25 years it has also run a premium wine-dealing

division. There is a huge warehouse of top-drawer product next to the car parts storage facility. We find it difficult to connect these two very different strands of one man's company until we get into the elevator to the cellar. In the bowels underneath Alpina there is a full-on, vaulted brick wine cellar lined with bottles of Burkard Bovensiepen's favourite wines, some of them virtually priceless. He is out of town, so his son Andreas joins us for a glass of Sancerre. After serving his time with BMW, he has joined Alpina to market the Z Roadster project — the brand's push into the US.

This is where it all suddenly makes sense. For Bovensiepen the wine and the cars are just part of the way he likes to live life. We see two disparate activities, while he sees the workaday extension of his own philosophy. Ultimately, we can see what makes an Alpina such a very different machine to a BMW — it's in the nature of the company. It is the creation of a man who has always striven for the finer things in life, and whose Blofeld's lair is a temple to the best of the best. Myself, I'll have a case of 1991 Ridge Montebello Cabernet Sauvignon please. And a B10 V8S. ○



Computer-based design studio uses the same software favoured by BMW and Airbus.