

Reelin' in the years

■ PALMELLI LAVERDA 878 SFC

When our Seventies superbikes were new, we were the fastest boys on the road. But today even a mediocre rider can fly on a modern sports bike. Get your own back with a hot sportster oozing classic soul. New meets old in the Laverda-derived Palmelli 878 SFC

ALAN SEELEY pics: Terry Joslin

LEAVING THE SUZUKI GSX-R RIDER FLOUNDERING IN MY wake, I'm ready for bigger prey. The Honda FireBlade pilot tying himself in knots in the bends ahead is a prime candidate. I shift down a couple of gears, set up my line and take him on the inside. "Sunday drivers," I think, relishing the prospect of the next set of S-bends in which to surprise unwary sports bike riders.

Up ahead the 'Blade rider's mate sneaks nervous glances in the mirrors of his Ducati 916. Resistance is futile, my friend. He puts up a brave fight but I've got him. I outbrake my adversary, confident that I have the handling to take the bend in my stride. Safely through, I head off in search of further victims.

And then I woke up, right? Surely you can't embarrass the cream of modern superbikes on an air-cooled twin, or can you?

The classic rider's ultimate bar-room fantasy could become reality if he equips himself with a Palmelli 878 SFC. Combining classic character with modern performance was the aim of the London-based firm. The character comes courtesy of a bored-out Laverda SF750 lump with a 90-degree crank and SFC race profile cam. Laverda specialists Phil Todd and Stuart Clark have both worked their magic on the motor, and in its current state of tune it kicks out 80bhp.

Modern conveniences abound on the rolling chassis. Marchesini magnesium wheels wear sticky Pirelli Dragon Corsa tyres, a favourite choice of the modern sports rider. Front suspension is by the celebrated WP and the TIG-welded stainless steel SFC-derived frame runs a monoshock rear end.

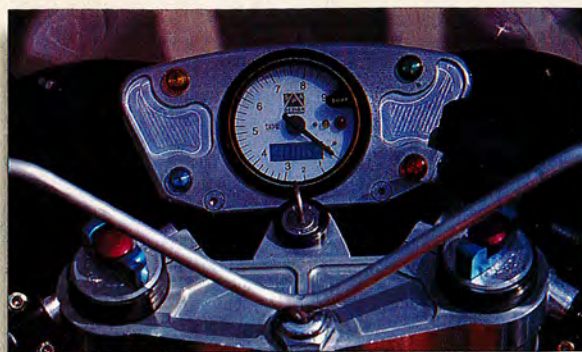
It's a tempting package, and one that intrigued and excited visitors to last year's NEC show where the bike made its public debut. The Palmelli is a mix of old and new that might have sat uneasily together, but even this prototype's elements flow together beautifully. That fairing is one of the best examples of the 878 SFC's synergy. The top half is from a Honda NC30 and the lowers are SFC derived.

Enough of all this idle contemplation. Palmelli's Steve Elliot built the 878 as a serious road tool, so let's see if this Italian heavy metal can prove its mettle.

Riding position is very SFC – a cramped racing crouch. Production models will offer a variety of seating arrangements, but I'm not ▶

▶ A classic that can carve up a modern sportster? In the right hands, you'd better believe it





▲ Green, amber and red shift lights on the white-faced clock warn the rider when it's time to change gear

“Give me an old bevel drive Ducati 900SS over a 916 any day of the week”

than standard Laverda fare.

Elliot yells at me over the pleasing mechanical thrashing: “Listen to that. Modern manufacturers have to build sanitised sounding bikes because of noise and pollution regulations. These old motors have fantastic character because they come from a bygone age when these things didn't matter.”

◁ ambling up to Tesco for the week's shop – clip-ons, rearsets and a single seat all call for road burning.

A hint of choke and a casual thumb of the starter button and the 878 bellows its intent through twin silencers fed by twin crossover pipes. Switchgear is culled from a Yamaha Thunderace, making the controls more reliable and user friendly

Character, indeed. But how many classic twins of your acquaintance make 80 brake and handle like the latest sports bike? Precious few.

Steve was worried about what he per-

ceived as a vibration problem on the 878 at around 6000rpm. Blame my diet of rattly old Brit twins, but I was completely oblivious to excessive vibes on the Palmelli, try as I might to find them.

Another distraction was the bike's scintillating performance, making me permanently hungry for miles of tarmac. No time to think about something as mundane as the odd bit of vibration.

Blast along a straight, a squeeze of brake before a bend then tear down the next straight — the Palmelli demands to be ridden hard. Five grand in top takes the

bike past 90mph so there's no real need to get into the vibration zone unless you're a manic acceleration junkie.

And don't worry about uneven road surfaces, the Palmelli soaks up bumps as effectively as a bar towel mops up spilt beer. I have a favourite stretch of road near home that represents most riding conditions, and all inside a five-mile stretch — the perfect encapsulated road test. Roundabouts, dual carriageway and country lanes that have been in need of repair since the Romans can all be covered inside 10 minutes. The Palmelli balks at none of it and excels on all of it.

Gadget freaks will love the white-faced SPA rev counter with its LCD speedometer. Neatest bit about it is the three LEDs that warn the rider when it's time to change gear. At 6500rpm a small green light blinks on, at 7000 a slightly larger



▲ Flush aircraft style fuel cap sits on SFC-style tank. The Palmelli's bespoke parts won't fit a standard Laverda SFC

amber light starts to flicker, and at 7500 it's full red alert as the largest diode screams “change now”. The Palmelli will happily rev to eight, but the lights are set lower because by the time you notice the light at 7500, you're a long way towards the redline.

That 90 degree crank lends the parallel twin a vee's character. You notice it first in the exhaust note, and the impression is confirmed by the power delivery. Nothing happens below 2500rpm, and this is underlined by the flatslide carbs which will not be hurried by an impatient throttle hand. So the answer is to ride the Palmelli like a favourite Ducati vee-twin, keeping the motor spinning and short-shifting up the box.

It's two and a half years since Elliot's business partner Chris Palmer did his first back-of-a-fag-packet sketch for this very bike. Those early drawings are very close to the actual prototype, proving how right Chris's instincts were.

Palmelli's main business is Laverda repair and restoration, and of course they built the new Jota featured in July's issue.

Steve Elliot had noticed a pattern emerging among his customers. “A lot of our clients are a little bit older and remember the superbikes of the Seventies. Many of them have recently scared themselves silly on the latest rocketships and have decided to return to the classics they rode new in their youth. But having got used to modern suspension and brakes, they've found older bikes wanting. We aimed to create a bike that encapsulated the best of all worlds.”

That's exactly what Palmelli has done. Of course there's a catch. A price tag of £14,950 will rule out the 878 SFC for most riders. That's modern bike cash for a bike which, when all's said and done, is powered by an air-cooled twin. But Steve hopes it will appeal to those with Ducati 916 levels of disposable income burning a hole in their designer leathers and who want an individual machine.

“We're talking character here, Alan,” says Elliot. “Modern bikes, compared to older namesakes and predecessors, just haven't got it. Excellent though modern bikes are, give me an old bevel drive Ducati 900SS over a 916, or a Triumph T150 triple instead of a new Trident any day of the week.”

And I can't disagree. In the SFC Elliot has put his money where his mouth is and built the ultimate expression of where his motorcycling passion lies.

The big question now is how many of us will tear along the dotted line of a loan application form before tearing along the white lines on our favourite roads in search of unwary sports rocket riders? ■

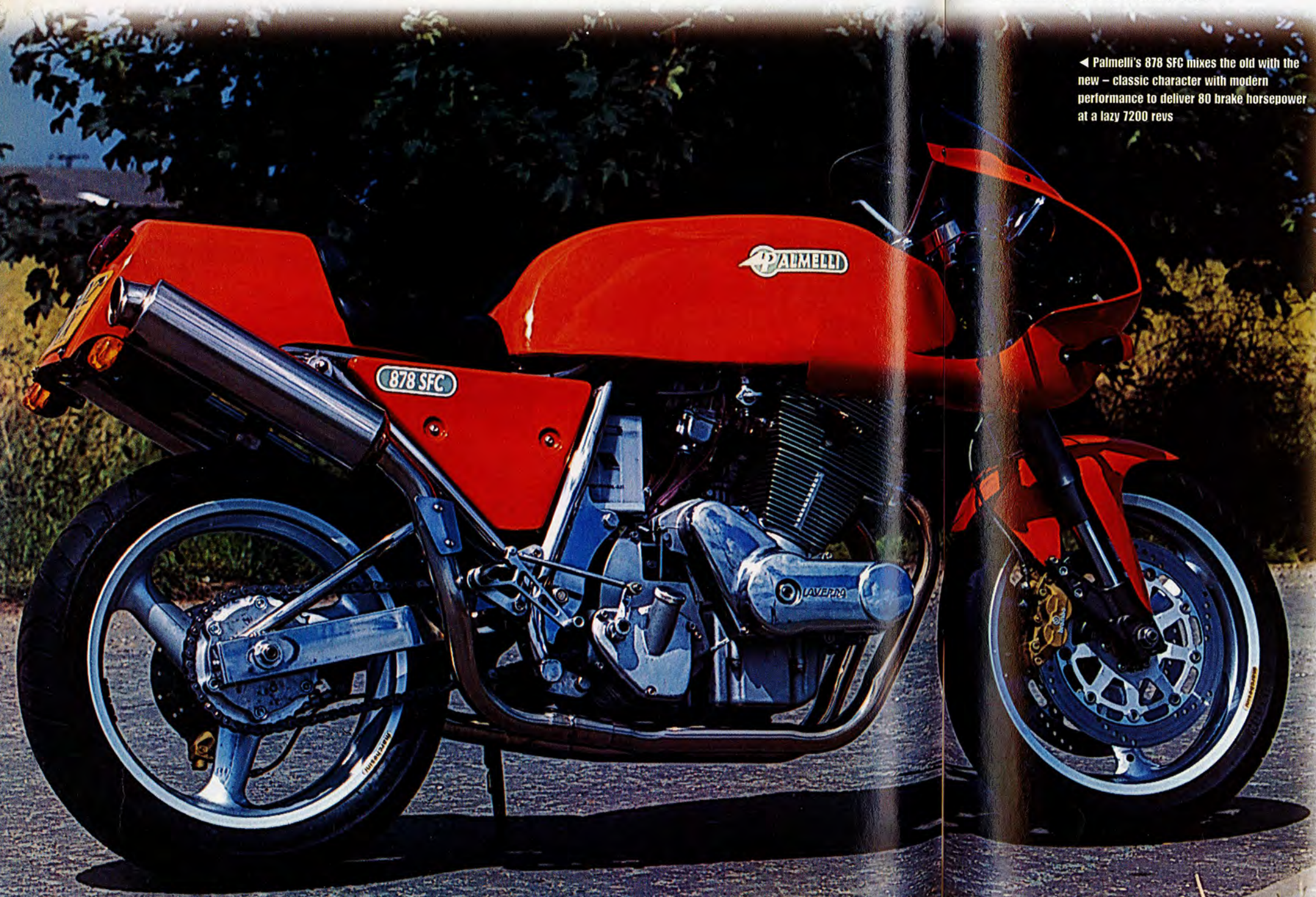


▲ Mikuni flatsides won't be hurried by an impatient throttle hand. Keep it wound on



▲ Ride the Palmelli right and this is the view other motorcyclists will have to put up with

◀ Palmelli's 878 SFC mixes the old with the new — classic character with modern performance to deliver 80 brake horsepower at a lazy 7200 revs



1998 Palmelli 878 SFC

Engine	ohc air-cooled parallel twin
Capacity	878cc
Bore x stroke	87 x 74mm
Compression	9.5:1
Carburation	two 38mm Mikuni flatslide
Output	80bhp @ 7200rpm (current)
Electrical	12v, Todd Laverda electronic ignition
Clutch	wet multiplate
Primary drive	two simplex chains
Gearbox	five-speed
Frame	stainless steel spine
Tyres	Pirelli Dragon Corsa 120/70 x 17in front, 150/60 x 17in rear
Brakes	front two 320mm floating discs with four-piston Brembo Goldline calipers, rear 210mm disc with two-piston caliper
Fuel capacity	4.8 gallons (22 litres)
Kerb weight	426lb (193kg)
Wheelbase	55 1/2in (1410mm)
Price	£14,950
Contact	0181 341 1014 Fax: 0181 348 1436