

More Fun Than Is L

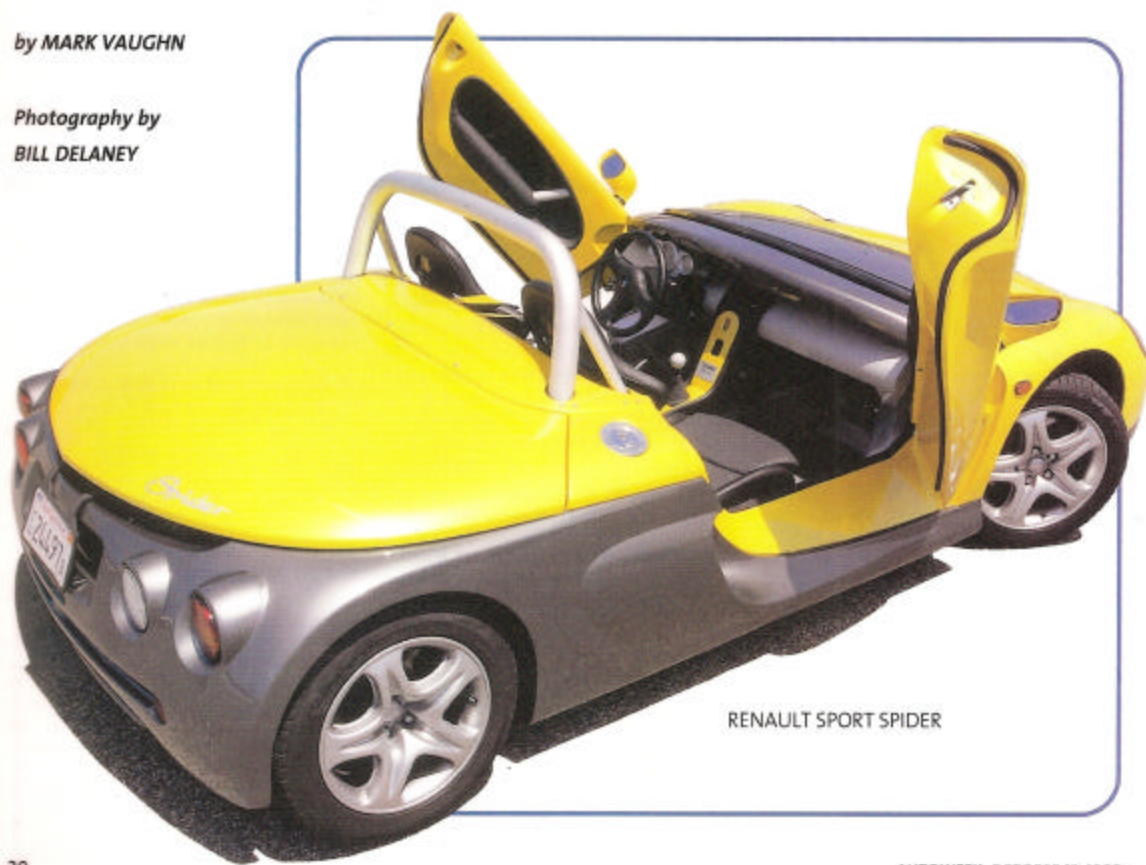
Or used to be legal—a private importer plans to bring the Elise

THE FIRST THOUGHT THAT COMES TO MIND driving the Lotus Elise or Renault Sport Spider is, "Sell the house, sell the kids, sell everything, and buy one of these."

Impetuous, of course. The second thought occurs much later, after you've used up Mulholland Drive and Yerba Buena Road and Deer Creek Canyon and every other squiggly little two-lane you can remember. The second thought is, "Hey, I don't have any kids, or a house."

by MARK VAUGHN

Photography by
BILL DELANEY



RENAULT SPORT SPIDER

egal for U.S. Roads

and Spider to America



LOTUS ELISE

THERE ARE FEW CARS AVAILABLE IN THE UNITED STATES that are as light-pedaled, quick-shifting and tossable as these two. The Dodge Viper comes close, but it's much larger, heavier and less refined. The Acura NSX is similar but it, too, is bigger, and far more comfortable. The Ferrari 355 is more comfortable, and, like the NSX and Viper, lacks the amazingly tactile road feedback of the Spider and Elise. These two Europeans are simply fun, unlike anything you've ever driven (unless you live in Europe).

Yet, as different as they are from other sports cars sold in America, the Spider and Elise are distinct from one another, as easy to tell apart from behind the wheel as from the outside. The Renault Sport Spider is the flat yellow screamer that weighs only 2000 pounds and looks like an automotive Frisbee. It's the one with the power and the grip, the one with its own racing series in Europe, the one so pure in its sports car essence that it has *no windshield!* The Lotus Elise is the lighter (only 1500 pounds), more tossable, more delicate car, like a big, silver skateboard with a seatbelt (and a windshield).

The big news is not so much that these cars exist (they've been available in Europe for two years), but that an importer is working to bring them here for us to drive, own and register. Tom Cahalane, who owns Sun International Racing Inc. in Manhattan Beach, Calif., plans to certify these cars through DOT, EPA and CARB. Cahalane says the process should be complete soon (see sidebar on page 22). If we are to believe him, and his track record suggests we should, he is truly Santa Claus.

WE DROVE THE ELISE AND SPIDER in Southern California before the first cars had been certified. We started with the Renault.

"*Conçu pour le plaisir*," it says in the book *Spider Story* (Wake-Up Editions, 1996), "Conceived for pleasure." This Spider is a very simple thing. Pop the forward-hinged door that swings up, climb inside and all around you, and you see the welded extruded aluminum frame that makes this car weigh so little, and keeps it so tight. The frame is the work of Danish company Hydro Aluminum, which also made the Lotus Elise frame and the rear subframe on the previous-generation Corvette.

The Sport Spider is a product of Renault's in-house racing division, Renault Sport. It is built in the same small production plant in Dieppe that made the Alpine A610, previous heir to the Renault screamer title. Production is only four Spiders a day, each lovingly assembled by hand.

Fire up the 2.0-liter, 16-valve four-cylinder engine and there is a satisfying if muffled, high-tech roar. The Renault F7R engine is shared with the Clio Williams (yes, *that* Williams, a product of the Renault F1 collaboration). The engine is rated at 150 horsepower, but Cahalane says he boosted the output while tweaking the car for our market—he says he just doesn't know how high.

The transverse engine is bolted to the frame and sits right behind the occupants. For the occupants there is plenty of room, even foot-room. The five-speed-manual shifter works fine, and the three-point belts unreel from the center, as on the Viper (if the French make a



IF THE FRENCH MAKE A VIPER...

The tight, responsive Renault Sport Spider has its own racing series in Europe.

Viper, this is it). Clutch pedal travel is short, but not so short that you grind gears with any frequency. Unfortunately, the nylon bushings in the pedal assembly catch and don't allow really smooth clutch engagement. *C'est la vie*.

You forget that, of course, as soon as the Spider stretches its legs and you start shifting quicker. More than 150 horsepower pushing just over 2000 pounds of *anything* is going to be sporty. But this arachnid has unusually responsive legs. The rear end is held up by pivot-mounted coil springs that lean diagonally forward from the top of the uppermost of two A-arms. The front end is held off the pavement by another pair of coil springs, these pivot-mounted and leaning horizontally across the front end of the car.

Tires are wide and grippy Michelin Pilot SX-GTs, 205/50s in front and 225/50s in the rear, all mounted on 16-inch wheels.

Neither the ventilated brakes nor the steering are power-assisted, which creates a real race-car feel. There is very little in the car that muffles feedback between you and the road. But at speed, the thing that keeps hitting you in the face is the fact that there is *no wind-shield*. Even though one is available, most of the road-going Spiders are ordered without them. The wind-in-the-teeth feeling is certainly something new, sort of like being a human hood ornament. After a day at the wheel we took to wearing ski goggles, which worked perfectly on the freeway but looked a little geeky at stop lights ("Nice shades, man").

Renault says the Spider gets to 62 mph in 6.5 seconds, but it feels a lot quicker. Everything feels a lot quicker without a windshield. There is a wind deflector that is supposed to channel air over your head, but it pretty much stops doing that at more than 30 mph. Which is kind of cool. With no sound insulation, no windows and no roof, you can hear every noise from the engine and the tires to the sound that bugs make bouncing off your forehead ("Sproiiiiing!").

Because there is much more grip from the tires than there is power from the engine, it's hard to get in trouble with the Spider. The 2.0-liter Renault four has a nice, wide powerband and plenty of torque starting down low, but it never puts out so much torque that the car gets seriously out of line. There's very little fishtailing or power sliding in this vehicle, just grip, and plenty of it.

The short 92.2-inch wheelbase makes for great maneuverability on short, tight turns, and even on longer sweepers the Spider slots around apexes so solidly that you wind up adding throttle when you thought you'd just have to hang on. The direct steering provides all the feedback the road offers but not so much that bump-steer is a problem. Around long, wide turns, throttle inputs don't upset the

The federalizer

Who is this automotive Santa Claus?

Tom Cahalane says he's been bringing great cars to America for more than 25 years. A 1983 *AutoWeek* article said of his company, "Sun has an unblemished reputation as a federalizer, which is rare in that murky cottage industry."

Cahalane says he started importing cars in the early 1970s, bringing in "10 to 15" Ferrari Boxers, a handful of Dinos and several 400s before the factory did. Then came Lamborghini Countaches. In 1982 he moved to Renault Turbos, importing 200 before production stopped in May 1986. Drives of two Cahalane Turbos appear in *AutoWeek* in the Aug. 8, 1983 issue. "We can attest to the fact that the Turbo 2 as it leaves Sun International is fast," we said 15 years ago. After the Renaults it was the Ford Cosworth RS.

Now Cahalane says he's going to bring in the Lotus Elise and the Renault Sport Spider. Exactly how is something of a black art. "The simplest explanation is that we have to certify that these cars are in compliance with all of the same standards that the OEM would have to do," says Cahalane. "It's a matter of starting from the beginning and certifying everything on our own. People think all you have to do is hang a catalyst on the car and you're in. It's a nightmare."

So how does he do it? Cahalane cites as an example the DOT requirement for a bumper on the Ferrari 512 BBs.

"A U.S. bumper solution would have been sacrilegious," Cahalane says. "So we designed a solution that passed the U.S. standard beautifully but looked ugly."

Using existing holes in the bodywork, Cahalane threaded bosses on the front and rear frame and attached big metal plates that matched the standard exactly.

"The beauty to this solution was that the bumpers could be removed in 30 minutes," says Cahalane. "Our solutions follow this philosophy."

Cahalane has a petition in to the DOT to be exempt from airbags, but says retrofit airbags from the aftermarket are available.

To meet EPA and CARB standards, Cahalane hires a specialist to access the engine management computer. Some extra components are necessary, such as pre-catalysts or a second catalytic converter. Then everything has to be verified with mileage and durability testing.

It's a lot of work, Cahalane says. And he still has a long way to go before the Elise and Spider are U.S.-legal, according to the bureaucrats we spoke with at EPA, DOT and CARB. For instance, Cahalane has not been a registered importer in the eyes of NHTSA since October 1997. So he's got to work out a few things, but that's what he does—work things out. Government officials know Cahalane and his track record, so if past performance is any indicator, he will eventually deliver.

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car's attitude—the weight transfer front to rear results in no noticeable directional changes.

At the end of that day, it was still fresh and exciting—no, make that thrilling—to drive. Somewhere down the line a windshieldless car might get to be uncomfortable. But we can't imagine where that line would end. And we certainly hope it's not a straight line.

THE ONLY CONSOLATION UPON HANDING IN THE SPIDER was that we picked up the Elise. If the Spider drove like a French Viper, the Elise was like a traditional European sports car brought into the new millennium. It's tight and precisely controlled. All the controls have a light touch—steering, braking, throttle and even the clutch takeup are more like playing an instrument than driving. While its Rover 1.8-liter four makes only 118 horsepower, its lighter weight makes it quicker to 62 mph (5.9 seconds). The balance and handling of the Elise are so light and responsive that you think you don't need the Spider's power.

Elise also has a Hydro Aluminum frame, but Lotus saves weight by gluing and riveting the frame together, which allowed thinner frame walls, helping keep the weight to 1518 pounds. Elise is among the lightest road-going vehicles made—you could make a pretty good argument that it's the most responsive, too.

With relatively skinny 185/55R-15 Pirelli PZeros in front and 205/55R-16s in the back, the Elise is far more tossable than the Spider. If the Spider hangs on through any curve that gets in its way, the Elise can be throttle-steered like an old MG. Compared to the Spider, in fast corners you have to pay a little more attention behind the wheel of the Lotus, but you don't mind.

The Elise debuted at the 1995 Frankfurt show, its cover pulled back by Romano Artioli. At the time Artioli's Bugatti SpA owned Lotus. The chairman named the car after his granddaughter, who played in the front seat at the Frankfurt show stand, perhaps anticipating getting her license in another 13 years or so.

Elise (the car) is far more like an original Elan than it is like an Esprit. It feels and looks almost like a Type 23.

Lotus is wrestling with the question of whether to bring the car into the United States itself. The company thinks that federalizing the car won't push the sticker past the \$40,000 mark. That's lower than Caballero's estimate of the "mid-40s," but even if Lotus goes ahead with a U.S. version, it wouldn't make it here until 2000, and two years is a long time to wait for this kind of gratification.



WHILE IT MAKES ONLY 118 HORSEPOWER, the Elise weighs a mere 1518 pounds, which gives it tremendous response. Light weight has been a Lotus trademark from the marque's early days.

