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Comments & Curiosities: It's 'not your grandfather's Cinquecento'

March 19, 2011 | By Peter Buffa

They're back.

No, not poltergeists. It's hard enough to know when they're here, let alone when they're back.

We're talking about the Fiat 500, or as it's called in my family, the Cinquecento — the tiny little Italian car that changed the world. Well, Europe, anyway.

There hasn't been a Fiat dealer in this corner of the universe for many years, but now there is, which is a good thing. Orange Coast Fiat on Harbor Boulevard in Costa Mesa, formerly Orange Coast Jeep, is up and running and reintroducing the sassy little Italian import to a new generation of car lovers.

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FEATURED ARTICLES

Fiat opening dealership in Costa Mesa on Tuesday

March 11, 2011

Made in Italy, coming to a driveway near you

March 15, 2011

If you're looking for a small, safe and totally cool car, Orange Coast Fiat is where you go. It's part of the Orange Coast Auto Group, with Jon Gray at the helm.

Moment please, full disclosure notice: Jon Gray and my daughter, Lisa, were classmates and childhood pals. That's one reason I'm hoping Orange Coast Fiat takes off like a Roman candle. Get it? An Italian car? A Roman candle? It's like a joke. Another reason is that I have a soft spot in my heart for Fiats.

It has to do in part with my grandson, Vince, who aside from being a 2-year-old superstar, is crazy, bonkers, gaga over Pixar's animated film "Cars." One of Vince's faves is the 1959 Cinquecento named Luigi who owns the town's tire store, Casa Della Tires.

My other connection to the Cinquecento was long ago and far away, on my first jaunt to Italy to visit family in 1964, as a fully obnoxious teenager. My uncle had a Cinquecento, which was just about the smallest, coolest thing I had ever seen.

One of my cousins took me for a spin, and when she asked me if I wanted to try it, I said, "Assolutamente!" which is Italian for "Booyah!" There were a number of pertinent details I probably, possibly — OK, definitely — should have told her, but did not.

First, the extent of my driving experience up to that point was talking my brother into letting me drive about 14 feet in an empty parking lot. Second, and somewhat more important, I had no idea how to drive a stick. It did not go well.

My cousin was shouting lots of Italian words I didn't know, but I was totally pumped. Even though she was hitting me, really hard, I fell in love with the Cinquecento then and there. Of course, that was no small club.

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Comments & Curiosities: It's 'not your grandfather's Cinquecento'

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Fiat had introduced the Cinquecento seven years earlier and it took Italy, then Europe, then one country after another by storm. Like the Volkswagen Beetle in Germany, the Fiat 500 was a ginormous player in Italy's economic recovery after World War II.

The Cinquecento was tiny, stripped down and sounded like a lawn mower gone berserk with its two-cylinder, air-cooled, rear-mounted engine. If it huffed and puffed, it could reach 60 mph (sometimes) but it had a nasty habit of breaking down, thus the joke that Fiat stands for "Fix it again, Tony."

But like the Beetle, its genius was its simplicity. It had about six moving parts and if anything did happen, you could fix it with a stick and a hairpin.

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Fiat opening dealership in Costa

Mesa on Tuesday

March 11, 2011

Made in Italy, coming to a

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But let no one be confused, the new Fiat 500 at Orange Coast Fiat is not your grandfather's Cinquecento. It is a state-of-the-art, solid and dependable car that sips gas like it was a Pio Cesare Barolo from Piemonte.

Speaking of the Piedmont region, that's where Fiat began — in Torino, in 1899. And that is what Fiat really stands for — "Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino," or Italian Automobile Factory of Turin.

Is it the smallest mass-produced car ever? No, Vittorio, it is not.

That would be the Isetta, an impossibly tiny car also produced in Italy after World War II and later acquired by BMW.

Small? I'll give you small. Compared to the Isetta, the Cinquecento is a '59 Cadillac.

There are a few of us left who remember the Isetta, which only had one door, which was actually the front of the car. The whole thing swung open, steering wheel attached, and you just stepped out of it like you were getting up from a couch. A really tiny couch.

In the greatest example of positive thinking in recorded history, the owner's manual advised that if the front, and only, door was disabled in a crash, no problem — just climb out through the sunroof.

Oh, OK. That's a relief.

Will the Fiat 500 be the next big thing — again? I hope so, although it'll be small as big things go.

There is a lesson in all this: Never throw out a tie or an Italian import. If you last long enough, you'll be back in style.

Vroom, vroom. I gotta go.

PETER BUFFA is a former Costa Mesa mayor. His column runs Sundays. He may be reached at ptrb4@aol.com.