

CLASSIC DRIVER

Living in the Red - Ferrari F430 Spider



What better way to celebrate Ferrari's World Drivers' Championship than a story about one of the most seductive cars in its range? A tale of mile-after-mile trans-European, open-top motoring in the world's most desirable convertible, and a rendezvous with an aristocratic French Champagne producer. Who also has a passion for classic cars...

Do you *really* need a reason to drive a car like this across Europe? Of course not, but if you really push me, the occasion was the *'Leggenda e Passione'* auction at Maranello earlier this year. This was a chance to join the world's collectors in a car that had been lovingly manufactured almost 'across the road', and one that had been developed, honed and polished on the - surprisingly narrow - *Pista di Fiorano* that was the location for the sale.

Make no mistake about this convertible, after just a short drive you'll soon realise it has all the dynamics of the coupé which, in this author's estimation, is the benchmark for **all** fast cars. It is just so, so quick, with the F1 gearbox producing changes only bettered by the company's own **599 GTB** and recently announced **430 Scuderia**.



150 milliseconds is all it takes to engage another gear, and with its 4,308cc V8 producing 490hp at 8,500rpm, the car has devastating performance that feels even faster than the more 'long-legged' and (on paper) more powerful V12s. Cut the roof off the super-successful coupé and you lose nothing in dynamics apart from a few slivers of seconds to 100km/h and a touch in outright maximum speed.

Hood up, it's a civilised machine for doing the really big-kilometre distances across northern France to the Swiss border, with a loping stride that blitzes the superb French motorway network and makes waypoints come and go in a flash. Once among the Alpine airs of Switzerland, the electric hood can be lowered to produce a stunningly 'clean' side-profile, the clear air-deflector neatly incorporated between the two leather-covered roll bars.



Ferrari has used all its aerodynamic expertise not only to manage the airflow underneath the two-seater, but also to ensure the occupants' comfort when the top is down. Up to 'hold-on-a-minute-I-think-this-is-getting-a-bit-fast' speeds the car is extraordinarily comfortable when open, allowing reasonable conversation without buffeting and all to the mad, bad, and dangerous to know V8 soundtrack.

I loved it.



But 'Switzerland?!' you cry, what about Reims and its great tradition of Champagne - not to mention the famous race track of the 50s and 60s, with its fading advertising hoardings and original pits? Well you've got a point, but the thing about the F430 is that it's very difficult to step out of the driving seat and take a break; it does tend to demand your wholehearted attention.

But take a break we did, for tea and photographs with that most charming of men, Comte Audoin de Dampierre, and his son Guillaume, near to the headquarters of Champagne Dampierre just outside Reims. Audoin is a great car enthusiast, and met us at his office in a bright red Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider. The dark metallic red Ferrari was greatly appreciated, although the Comte's preferences are more for British and French *Grand Routières*. In fact, in addition to the Alfa, his garage houses other classic cars including an **Aston Martin DB4**, and (*naturellement!*) a **Facel Vega**.

Photography attended to, politeness demanded a return favour and in turn both Comte Audoin and his son were treated to an early evening tour by Ferrari of its supplying vineyards. Roof down and with pleasant springtime weather making the drive in this sublime car even more enjoyable, the F430 ripped along the gentle curving roads, the exhaust note bouncing off the stone walls of the outlying villages, raising appreciative glances from the workers tending this year's harvest.



A glass of water for me, and the customary glasses of *Brut Grande Cuvée* for my hosts and travelling companion, we bid farewell to this larger-than-life character, promising to return again in something equally exotic.

It was then a quick stopover at the old circuit of Reims, the scene of many a Ferrari victory at the 12 Hours - and a stage on the original Tour de France. The next day was a straightforward trip into Switzerland via Basle and a downhill run to Maranello.



It doesn't matter how many times you do these sorts of runs, every one is special when you have a car as awesomely capable as the F430 Spider. It's comfortable on a long trip, and its front luggage compartment will swallow two overhead-locker bags with ease, while there's room inside for bits and pieces and more soft luggage behind the seats.

The Ferrari F430 Spider F1 is available in the UK at a starting price of £142,852.00, which places it firmly in the *Prestige Cuvée Grand Cru* category. This special vintage Champagne is known for the cork in each bottle that is tied by hand with strands of hemp - in place of the more normal wire - a tradition revived by Comte de Dampierre, with each bottle having a gold-plated pair of scissors with which to cut the twine in style.

A fabulously stylish and luxurious solution to one of life's luxuries. Like driving an F430 Spider over a springtime weekend.

Expensive, sure, but as Comte Audoin says of his best grapes, "I always pay the price, after all, it's their sweat, not mine. And I am known always to pay the price, which means I am always offered the best."

With grateful thanks to Comte Audoin de Dampierre. For further information on the the magnificent Champagnes produced at Champagne Dampierre please visit www.dampierre.com.

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