

# **Urs Gretener**

## **Porsche 356 Registry**

### **39-5 1-2/2016**





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Cover: At Reutter, circa 1960.  
Reutter archivis, courtesy Frank Jung.

This page: Drive Your 356 Day  
with the Hawaii 356 Owners Group.  
Photo by Jerry Chong, courtesy Rick Woltz.



# Urs Gretener

A Swiss transplant makes his mark on the SoCal racing scene.

Watching Urs Gretener as he prepares Tommy Trabue's 550 Spyder for a race during the Rolex Motorsports Reunion last August, you would never know that he'd grown up on a small dairy farm outside Zurich, Switzerland. As a kid he had no idea he'd eventually live in Southern California, restoring and maintaining rare Porsche vintage racing cars. According to Gretener, "My parents weren't into cars at all, not at all." But he did have a dream. He really liked working with metal, fixing things and creating shapes. Like many kids, he and his friends pretended to be racers while buzzing around on their mopeds or at a local carting track for a day here and there. And you know what they say about dreams...

## The Beginning

In 1983, when Gretener was 16, he was the only one of his peers who didn't have an apprenticeship lined up. One day a friend of his dad's came to the farm and mentioned a metal guy who did body and restoration work. Hesitant at first, Gretener eventually shifted his attitude and accepted a four year automotive trade-school apprenticeship. By his fourth year he was he working on Ferraris, Alfa Romeos, Zagatos and Lancias, and eventually his real passion: Porsches. At first he worked with steel, but eventually developed his talent with aluminum.

He would do one day a week in class at the trade-school in Zurich, learning a variety of disciplines such as drafting, metallurgy and related scientific and technical skills. The rest of the week would be in the shop for learning the practical skills of welding or lathe and mill work. Sometimes it would be coachwork—forming metal over bucks—and sometimes it would be collision repair work. He says the more he learned and the more experience he gained, the more he enjoyed it.

Gretener also learned auto painting. "My boss wanted us to understand how well you have to finish the metalwork so the paint guy doesn't have to use a ton of filler." He really enjoyed getting a complete understanding of the process. "The equipment we had on hand—including a down-draft spray booth—made it much easier than what we're used to here. That was fun to do."

Working with classic Ferraris and Alfas, it would be natural to wonder what led him to Porsches. If you were Swiss, you were a Jo Siffert fan. If you were a Siffert fan, you were a Porsche fan. Though Gretener's dad could only dream about motor-racing, he was a huge fan of the Swiss sports car and F1 driver. Though Urs was only about four years old when Siffert died at the 1971 non-championship F1 Race of Champions, he clearly remembers how it upset his dad. When Gretener finished his trade schooling, he did his mandatory military service and then bought his first 911; a pre-owned white 1980 Targa.

It was a car he knew well, one that his painting skills led him to. The previous owner had frequently tracked the car, so it had rubber bits all over. The guy had taken it to a local shop to be cleaned and they scuffed the paint badly by using a scotch pad. Later, at a different shop, Gretener disassembled and repainted the whole car. Upon completion, he spoke to the owner. "Hey, if you're ever going to sell the car, let me know." Three weeks later he got the call and soon afterward, got the car. Almost immediately, he sent the car off to be inspected by a local Porsche expert, who was also very good at suspension set-ups. He suggested that Gretener start coming to track days at Dijon or Hockenheim. That, as they say, was that. Gretener remembers it as "...love at first sight. It was amazing... just to be on the racetrack for the first time. It was an old car, a street car, not a race car, but that was the opening for me to be on the track in the 911 and really get into it."

## Coming to America

Like many a twenty-something, when he was 22, the wanderlust hit. He and a buddy came to the U.S. for a four month trip, buying a van in Florida, zigzagging around the country through about half of the states, then selling it in Los Angeles to return home. Upon his return to Switzerland he did an almost immediate u-turn back to LA. His parents had met a guy with a restoration shop in Los Angeles who was looking for someone to work on Ferraris; a natural fit. Within three months Urs was back in the United States on the start of a life-long adventure. Soon, he met someone who wanted him to fabricate panels for vintage aircraft and that led to Gretener starting his own business. He worked in Los Angeles for a couple decades doing aircraft panels, as well as continuing work on exotic cars. But eventually he found his way out of the city and to his current location in Paso Robles, only a few miles from the famous James Dean crash site. Ironically, it would be working with Spyders.

## Racing

One of Gretener's first clients was Warren Eads, who would bring him a panel or a fabrication job. Eads was a racer and Gretener did some race prep for some of his cars. Gretener remembers suggesting some suspension set up ideas for the Spyders to a skeptical Eads. "He was always kind of like, 'Well, I don't know... what do you know about racing?'"

Gretener realized he needed to get deeper into the racing world to build his credibility and improve that side of his business. He sold the Targa to get a 930 and started racing it at Porsche Owners Club events. "We stripped it down, literally down to the bolts, sand blasted it, caged it, did a whole bunch of modifications. We powder coated the car and built it back up. We took it out to POC and over the next few years developed the car." Gretener did well with the 930, gaining a reputation for fast driving and meticulous preparation. "All these modifications that I'd learned with that vehicle I started to implement in the old vintage race cars. From shock systems to stiffer springs and all that, it started to work well for us." He raced the car in that form for several years, until he got the chance to drive a 993 GT2. Then the 930 was completely torn down again to be re-imagined as a 993 GT2. A very fast 993 GT2.

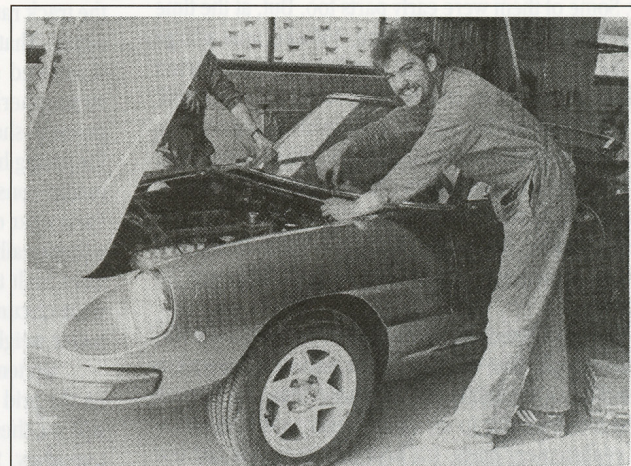
It paid off. Eventually Gretener gained Eads' respect. But, he points out, "I had to be careful not to get too far into it. I didn't want to hide it from them. But I didn't want them to say 'Oh, he's spending so much money on racing, he must make too much money.' But yeah, it got some traction there and people started seeing that we got results. So it got to the point where I realized this is what we should do and we started to develop racing parts, even for the 356s and Spyders." Gretener now produces suspension components, body parts, exhaust systems or anything else that he can do with the fabrication side of the business to make gains in horsepower or handling.

Still, he credits Eads as a strong supporter and a faithful client. "That's really how I got the foothold in the Spyder world. He gave me the chance to make some parts. In the beginning, it was just small brackets and other parts, then it evolved into a big full-on frame restoration of a Spyder."

## Developing the Business

Gretener's aircraft work kept him stable in the early years, but he continued to do work on several Ferraris, including a 250 short wheel base, a 212, and a 275. Eventually, his business morphed from Ferraris into Porsches. From his 356 and 911 work, he gradually moved into working on Spyders.

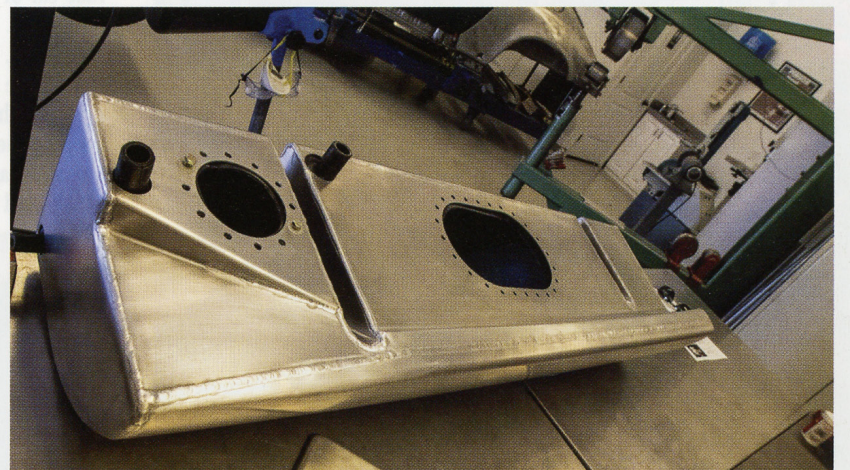
Like many a restoration guy, he freely admits he didn't really see the 356 phenomenon coming. Thinking back to working for his first boss in Los Angeles, he remembers there were a bunch of new old stock (NOS) parts for 356s; body panels, doors, hoods, headlights. One day the boss said "get rid of that stuff" and it all got pitched into dumpsters. It was the late 1980s and no one really thought that stuff would be useful or worth anything. People were looking ahead at slant-nose 930s, 928s, 944s and so on... It was the pre-internet, pre-eBay era. "Now that I think back, golly, the money we threw away. There was a whole bunch of stuff upstairs, bumpers, overrider tubes, a lot more. I remember that as if it was yesterday and now I'm thinking back and, oh my god! (laughs). People would give anything



Der Beste im Kanton: Urs Gretener (Mönchaltorf)

Als Bestar von 92 Carrosserie-Prüfungen abgeschlossen hat im Kanton Zürich dieses Frühjahr Urs Gretener (Mönchaltorf) mit der Note 5,4. Der frischgebackene Kantonsmeister lernte vier Jahre bei Carrossier Baumann in Hinteregg. Alle Details, die zum Beruf des Carrosserie-Spenglers gehören, sind ihm heute geläufig: Ausbeulen, Richten, Instandstellen von Carrosserien, Restaurationen und Neuanfertigungen. Berufsbezogen hat er an der Prüfung keinerlei Lampenfieber gehabt. Nur die unvermeidlichen schulischen Accessoires, die es als «Nebenfächer» zu belegen galt, haben ihm zeitweiliges Examen-Bauchweh bereitet. Zu Unrecht indes, wie die Abschlussnote beweist. Was er denn jetzt in unmittelbarer Zukunft vorhatte, fragten wir Urs Gretener. Nun ja, die RS... Bonne chance! (jest)

Head of the class. Young Urs made the local news as the highest-scoring apprentice in his Swiss Kanton (state). In four years with Carrosserie Baumann he learned panel beating, body maintenance, restoration and new construction.



A fuel cell for a Porsche 908 takes shape. Urs blends the skills of a panel craftsman with the technical abilities of a mechanic and engineer. Below: In his ultra-clean shop a 911 Carrera RS and Bob Campbell's hillclimb special from the 1950s are undergoing restoration.



By Sean Cridland



to have NOS parts now. Some of them were early parts too. But, at the time nobody cared about the 356s.” Of course, over time, 356s became a large portion of his business and he’s done a lot of 356 panel and part fabrication work for some notable shops, and done several body restorations himself.

Like many of us who think of the missed investment opportunities, he’s not nostalgic. “I’ve always invested in my equipment. I like equipment; I like to be able to do the things I’ve learned, to create.” He often gets calls to inspect cars for clients, but is often disappointed by some of the work he sees. “It’s actually sad. It takes just as much work to cut a floor panel out and weld it back in the wrong way as it does to do it the right way. So why not do it the right way?”

Gretener admits, “I always loved the Spyders, the 718s and the 550s. But we don’t have many people that work on them anymore.” Because many of the original mechanics are aging or have passed away, it’s opened the door for a specialist like Gretener to do maintenance and restoration work and to fabricate replacement parts. It’s kept him busy. His last few



Sometimes a battle-scarred “experienced” racer can be just as fast as a shiny, restored model. It may be wrinkled but Urs makes sure all systems are safe and track-ready. Same goes for the guy behind the wheel, Tommy Trabue.

years have been mainly occupied with Spyder work; keeping them on the road, doing body work where needed, but also working with suspension settings, etc. He works alongside some of the best 4-cam engine builders so he can understand them better, though he’ll quickly tell you he doesn’t do the engine work. “I pull the engines and transmissions out and put them back in.” Living and working in Southern California means there is a community of 4-cam experts like Bill Doyle of Rennwagon Motor Company and Adrian Gang of Edelweiss Porschaus readily available.

### The Spyder Dilemma: Race Car or Collector Car?

His work has led to a personal campaign to keep Porsche Spyders on

the track rather than disappearing into private collections, never to be seen again. That can be a difficult sell, however. A market dictated by high demand and a very limited supply means Spyder values have climbed to stratospheric levels. The types of collectors who buy them now are more prone to shelter them privately, not wanting to bring attention to themselves for paying high prices, or expose them to potential damage or theft. Racing means constant maintenance, which also raises questions of “originality.” Parts wear out, engines get developed, and that means change. Racing cars occasionally go off-track. Damage happens. As we love to say, Porsches were built to be driven. But the questions arise, for how long and under what circumstances? And if a race car isn’t racing, is it just an oversized paper weight?

Gretener sees it like this. “Since 1998, you see fewer and fewer cars on the grid at Monterey. I’m trying very hard to turn it around so we can still see them and people can experience how great they are, why they’re legendary. So, the last few years I’ve been taking care of about six Spyders together with a good friend of mine, Jim Ansite. He’s doing the mechanical, I help to do the track set up and all that: suspension, modification, whatever it takes. We farm out the engines. I’d like to see them all on the track.”

Like any other race car, Gretener thinks you have to keep Spyders in perspective. They were designed and built to be racers, not showroom queens. “I always treat a race car as a piece of machinery. Whether it’s a race car or an airplane, you gotta thoroughly check it, every nut and bolt on the car. If you don’t, how would you find if there is a problem? Most guys don’t. They just change the oil, maybe not even that. They wipe the dirt off the car and that’s it. I get cars in here from collections and start prepping them and fuel hoses are leaking. That’s one of the advantages of keeping them on the track. You go through the cars more often. Maybe I’m older and more analytical, but I just treat it as if it were mine, so to speak. And I think that’s how you have to go about it in racing. Otherwise,



Connections are important and Urs works with the top tier of Porsche vintage talent, like Adrian Gang, who did a lot of the work on 550A-0144.



Rather than restore it to perfection, Tom Trabue and Jim Watson plan to keep the racing scars that were put there by Jim when he campaigned it in the 1950s and early ‘60s. **Below:** Once the cars are away it’s out of the mechanic’s hands, but Urs keeps an eye on the track - and on the future.



you court disaster. If something breaks in a car like that, then what? First of all the car is worth millions. Then there’s the guy who owns it, what if he gets hurt? Those are things to consider.”

Another dilemma is one common to the vintage racing world, regardless of marque: the age of the competitors versus the age of the collectors. Many of those who still see the Spyders as viable racing cars are older. They raced the cars or were fans of the cars when they originally raced, putting their ages, at best, in the 70s. As youthful as 70 or even 80 is now compared to generations past, eventually the years become a limiting factor. The guys who love racing them are less able to get around and they’re disappearing. The younger collectors love the Spyders, but see them from a different perspective.

Any variation of a 550 can be a solid investment. If it’s one with documented race history, it could be the centerpiece of a portfolio. If it was a winning car in one of the big races or driven by a factory driver or celebrity on the order of James Dean or Steve McQueen, values double, triple or more. The younger collectors don’t have the emotional ties nor actual experience with the cars in their original settings. Sans passion, it’s not an easy decision to track a historic racing car. We know what our hearts tell us. But our heads enter the debate when values go into the realm of seven and – yes it’s coming – eight figure sale prices. Like the classic Ferrari and Ford race cars of the 1950s and ‘60s, you don’t see them out much anymore. Says Gretener, “Last year we only had three Spyders on the Monterey grid. I remember back in the ‘90s when we had 12 to 15 of them.”

### Driving

Gretener is a member of a very special group of people who have driven several types of Spyders on the track: 550A, RS 60, RS 61, RSK and some center-steer models, as part of his maintenance and race-prep program. Thinking back to the first time he says, “I remember telling a friend of mine, ‘Ah, this is scaring me.’ It was my first test day by myself with a Spyder and I was nervous. My friend said, ‘Urs, think about this: you go Mach 2 in your race car and now you’re stepping into old technology which goes a lot slower and you’ll have a lot more time to react.’ And it’s true. The Spyder actually is a very easy car to drive. They’re nimble; they’re very responsive to the driver. They’re really fun to drive and that’s another aspect that I really like about them.”

Rating them, he says the early ones—because they were built on ladder frames—are very flexible, hence harder to drive. But with the 550A, Porsche went with a full tube-frame chassis, strengthening and stiffening the car considerably, all through the rest of the Spyder line to the 718. He considers the RS61 to be the best handling because of the double A-arm rear suspension.

Now that he’s more comfortable with them, he treats them like any other race car. “Should we go to this tire, that tire, what gear ratio? That’s the fun. I like to be behind the pit wall to figure out what we can do to optimize its performance and how the driver can get more from the car. Now that I’ve worked with so many Spyders over the years, I have a lot of data to pull from.”

### Into the Future

Says Gretener, “I like to be at the track. I like to coach people on how to use the cars. What to go after. How to use the gear charts. Collecting and using data. It’s fun. It’s not just a stopwatch necessarily, but at the end of the day you see the guy coming out of the car, fully excited and having a good time. I know that’s how I would want to be after a day of racing.”

In recent years, Gretener has enjoyed the CAD design process and has even done drawings for his own Gretener Porsche-based super car. And he enjoys the process of tool and die making. He loves research and development. As much respect as he has for the metal-shaping craft he learned in trade school back in Zurich, he likes to keep his horizons expanding. Like that kid growing up on the dairy farm outside Zurich, he still dreams. 🏎️