

Authenticity

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After years of merely dreaming about it as a bucket list item, my friend Don announced that he was going to obtain his motorcycle license a few weeks ago. “I really want a big modern Vespa,” he declared, referring to the liquid-cooled 200-300 cc Granturismo models that debuted in the early 2000s. I immediately smiled, because they’re something I too can appreciate. I promised to mentor him in his quest to ride.

After getting his permit via the MSF beginner’s course and acquiring proper gear to wear, Don started seriously shopping for his first machine. By now, his neighbor had caught wind of Don’s newfound interest in motos and was attempting to sell him a 2002 Honda Shadow 750 at an incredible price. The old Honda was still in fine shape, but modified to appeal to the cruiser crowd with slammed suspension and obnoxiously loud straight pipes. As a newbie, Don was now torn between his initial desire for a Vespa and this Honda, which he called a “real” motorcycle.

Here we come to a very controversial issue, and one in which I am unabashedly biased. What is a “real” motorcycle? How would I explain this abstract concept to someone like Don, who hadn’t ever ridden anything? “Only one of those choices is a real motorcycle, and it ain’t the Honda,” I said. Don looked confused, and so began my purist influence campaign.

I tried to clarify what I meant in layman’s terms to Don, using a cooking analogy: “Let’s say you walk into a fine Italian restaurant, and you ask the chef to make you gefilte fish as a favor. The chef does it for you, but is his heart really into it?” The gears were starting to turn in Don’s head. I continued, driving the point home: “No, his heart is not into it! This hypothetical chef got into cooking fine Italian food because that’s what his passion is. His calling is bolliti misti e pearà and saltimbocca alla romana, not cold fish patties!”

Likewise, a motorcycle is either authentic, or it’s not! The idiosyncrasies of a given motorcycle are what define the intangible qualities we purists revere. When we utilize words like “character” and “soul” to convey a motorcycle’s personality, we’re honing in on those weird traits that tether

the flavor of a bike to its origin and brand. What are the motorcycles one desires if not a deeply individual expression of oneself? Aren’t they a rolling testament to one’s values and yearnings? If you accept this orthodox concept--and you should!--it logically follows that aligning oneself and the machine with its intended purpose is the closest thing to authentic truth a motorcyclist can experience.

For example, I have a Turmeric Yellow 2024 Honda Trail 125 which positively sings to me as soon as I turn off the pavement and start exploring the local forests. Off the beaten path, the diminutive Trail comes into its element and runs in a way that reflects how happy she is to be alive, exactly where she belongs. This is a uniquely Japanese flavor, and has been since 1961.

I also have a gorgeous “Coppertop” 2008 Harley Road King Classic 105th Anniversary model which feels like heaven just loafing along in 6th gear, so long as we’re traveling in a straight line. There is a lineage of heavyweight cruisers which birthed this King, tracing back over 122 years--a uniquely American flavor. My beloved R 1250 RT proudly descends from the very first sport-touring motorcycle ever made, over 45 years ago. These are all iconic motorcycles--those from which many imitations have tried (and failed) to capture the spirits of the originals. They’re authentic!

What isn’t authentic? When there is vast chasm between what that aforementioned Italian chef was born to cook, and what he’s sometimes forced into cooking. To wit, let’s imagine the conversation at Honda in the late 1990s / early 2000s, getting ready to manufacture a Shadow like Don was considering:

Honda Marketing: “Harley-Davidson is selling a ton of motorcycles. They even have a waiting list of customers! We need to make cruisers too!”

Honda Engineering: “OK sure, we can make one that looks sorta like that.”

Honda Marketing: “OK, but make sure that the transmission goes THWACK!! when you kick it into gear. Cruiser riders like that!”

Honda Engineering: “THWACK?! But our Honda

transmissions are slick! They snick into gear quietly. They most certainly don't THWACK agriculturally!"

Honda Marketing: "Well, make it go THWACK!! And make sure the bike vibrates, too. The more parts fall off during a ride, the better!"

Honda Engineering: "WHAT?! Hondas are glass smooth! Why the hell would you want added vibration?!"

Honda Marketing: "Just do it! Get with the times! People *want* the shakes now. I suppose it's too much to ask for you to design in some oil leaks here and there?"

Honda Engineering: "ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

We are authentic when we're doing what we genuinely want to do, not when we violate our own guiding principles to do what we sometimes have to do. All the stars align when the motorcycle, the motorcyclist, and a common shared intention are perfectly in tune with each other. I paused to let my ranting settle in Don's mind.

Then I asked him: "What is it that you really want to do with your first bike, Don? Why do you even want to ride a motorcycle in the first place?" He thought for a moment and replied, "I just want to cruise around town. I don't want to go too fast. I just want to enjoy the scenery, and the calming feeling of motion on two wheels."

And now, he does just that - authentically!

Don on his 2006 Vespa
Granturismo 200

