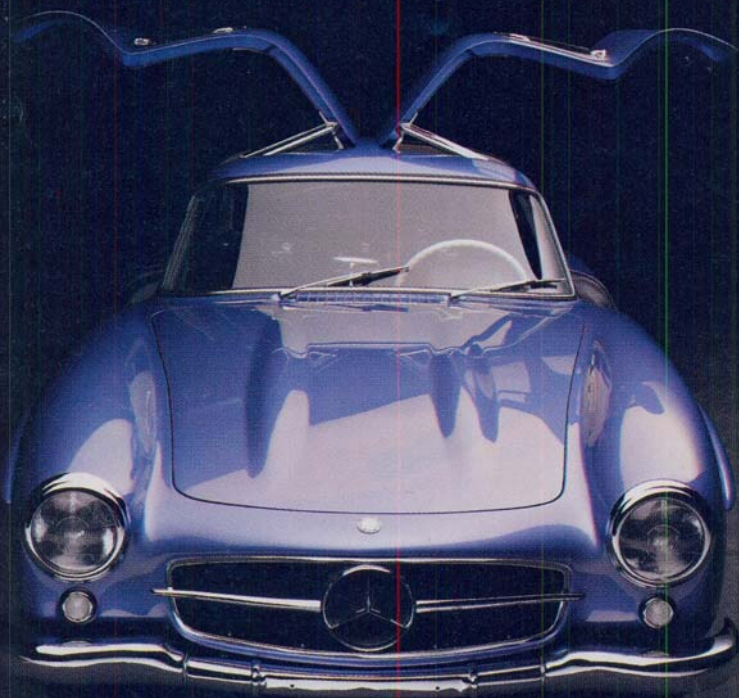




MERCEDES-BENZ 300SL

The accidental sports car.

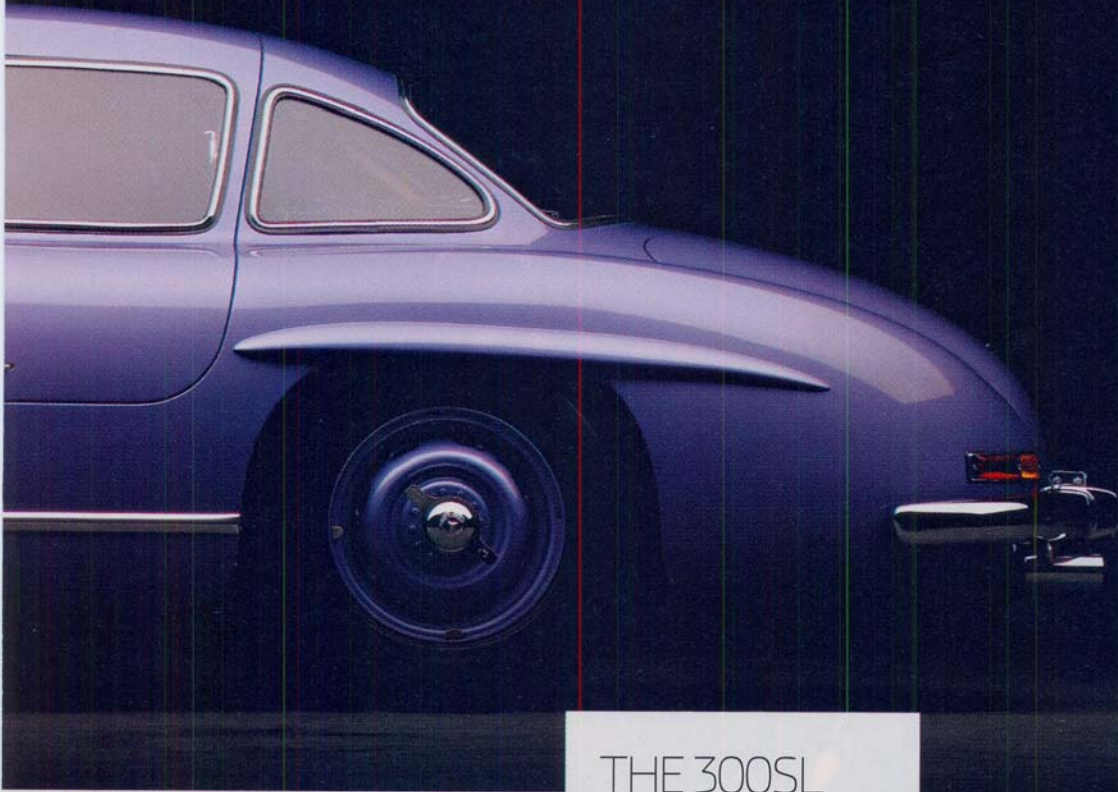


The famous Mercedes Gullwing was never intended to be a road car. Initially, it was built purely for the company's reentry into motorsports after World War II. In its 1952 debut racing season, the car proved almost unstoppable, claiming second and fourth in the Mille Miglia; finishing one-two-three at a Swiss sports car race in Bern; taking first and second place at Le Mans; ringing up an incredible one-two-three-four finish at the Nürburgring; and achieving a dramatic one-two finish at the Carrera Panamericana.

The remarkable racing successes caused a sensation, and U.S. importer Max Hoffman convinced the company that the car could be sold to the public, personally guaranteeing Daimler-Benz management that he'd take 500 for the U.S. market. A mildly revised, roadgoing 300SL entered production in 1954. The 300SL (along with its little brother, the 190SL) was revealed to the public in New York City in February 1954. It was the first Mercedes-Benz automobile to have its public debut in America—entirely appropriate, because it never would have been built had it not been for the urging of the American distributor and his conviction that American buyers would respond to the car. Respond they did, buying up some 80 percent of the 1400 Gullwing coupes and a similar lion's share of the 300SL roadsters that followed.

The production 300SL marked the company's postwar return to building sports cars, picking up where the awesome, prewar Mercedes SSK left off. As was the case with the SSK, the 300SL borrowed

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THE 300SL MARKED MERCEDES' POSTWAR RETURN TO BUILDING SPORTS CARS.

heavily from the company's top-spec sedan (the 300), adopting its front suspension (control arms with coil springs), its rear suspension (swing-axle with coil springs), its gearbox, and its six-cylinder engine (although to clear the low hoodline, it had to be laid over at a 50-degree angle).

But the 300SL also was a pioneer. Seeking light weight and rigidity, Mercedes' head of research and development, Rudolf Uhlenhaut, rejected a platform frame in favor of a web of welded steel tubes. The tubular spaceframe required considerable depth through the center of the car. This precluded cutting out a deep section for conventional doors, so for the original racing car, Mercedes cut an entry out of the roof and side windows, giving birth to the signature gullwing doors (they later were extended below the window line). Although the racing cars had an aluminum body, the production coupe—with the exception of twenty-nine aluminum-bodied cars—used the lightweight metal only on the hood, the doors, and the deck lid; the rest was steel.

The production car was more advanced than the competition cars in one area—its fuel delivery system. In place of the racers' triple carburetors, the 300SL used mechanical fuel injection, the first series-production, gasoline-powered car to do so. With it, the 3.0-liter six made 215 hp and 202 lb-ft of torque. The transmission was a four-speed manual. Several rear axle ratios were offered; alloy-bodied cars with the highest axle ratio could achieve 161 mph, an astounding figure for 1954.

A fantastically successful racer adapted for the street, the 300SL was a tour de force for a resurgent Mercedes-Benz and is truly one of the great performance cars of all time.



“ WHY I LOVE THE... ”

1990 PORSCHE 911 CARRERA

My mind filled with visions of true love: Aston Martin DBR2, Bertone-bodied Alfa Romeo Giulia SS, Ferrari 250GT, Facel-Vega HK500, D-type Jag, E-type Jag, Jag SS100. I contemplated the young Natalie Wood of cars, the Sophia Loren, the Lauren Bacall, the Audrey Hepburn, the Grace Kelly ...



'What's got you smiling?' asked my wife. Then it struck me. For seventeen years, she's been with me through thick and thin. She's vivacious and exciting. She's a little unpredictable, but she has a core of solid common sense. She's glamorous but not flashy, powerful but not pushy about it. I can rely on her absolutely. And she's more beautiful than ever. My own 1990 Porsche 911 Carrera is—of course—my favorite car of all time. (And my wife is great, too.)

P. J. O'Rourke
Writer and humorist

