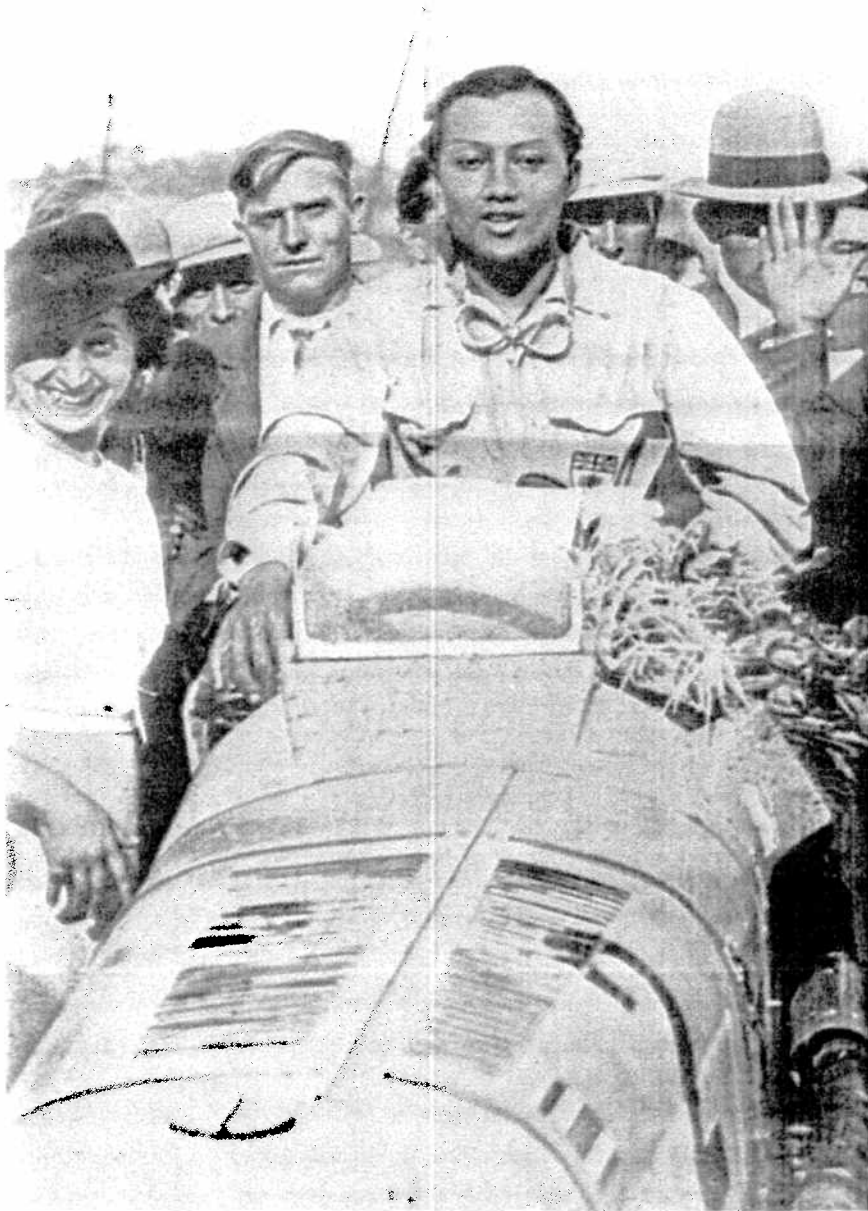


6 COVER STORY



Restaurateur Xavier Bruzaud-Grille has hosted many guests at his Bonjour restaurant on Sukhumvit Road, but there is one man who he would love to entertain more than anyone — Prince Birabongse Bhanudej Bhanubandh, one of the most enigmatic and largely unknown royal family members to have ever represented the Kingdom.

Sadly, the prince died in 1985, so Mr Bruzaud-Grille's dream will never be realised. However, he nostalgically displays a photo of the prince on one of the restaurant's walls, only one of his impressive Prince Bira items of memorabilia, which he collects with zest.

"It would be an honour to host him at my restaurant. I feel a strong passion for his story," says Mr Bruzaud-Grille, who has spent much of his free time over the past five years researching the prince and looking for items of memorabilia. "He was very brave . . . was a great ambassador for Thailand . . . but his story is sad too."

Mr Bruzaud-Grille's initial interest in the prince developed naturally through his own love of classic cars, particularly racing models. Early in his six years of racing in Thailand he started to hear of a Thai prince who had racing in his blood. Although largely an unknown historical figure, mention the prince's name around the racing tracks of the Kingdom and you are sure to get a response.

Prince Bira, or B Bira as he entered himself in racing competitions, was sent to Europe at an early age to study at Eton and then Cambridge in the UK, where he fell under the care of his charismatic cousin, HRH Prince Chula Chakrabongse, who officially became his guardian with the King's approval.

With some cash to spare and some hereditary flair, the pair formed the White Mouse Racing team, of which Prince Bira was the driver. They went on to claim many titles in the UK and competed at the World Championship level after World War Two, the only Thai team to ever do so.

In 1985 the prince was found dead in a London tube station, an unknown man who died of a heart attack at the age of 71. "He is like James Dean," Mr Bruzaud-Grille says of the prince. "A tragic [figure] . . . who died a lonely man." >>>

RACETRACK RIVALS: A rare photo of Prince Bira, below, sharing a piece of fruit with one of his great rivals, Luigi Villorelli of Italy, at the Albi Grand Prix on Aug 29, 1948. This photo is Mr Bruzaud-Grille's favourite item in his collection of the Prince's memorabilia.

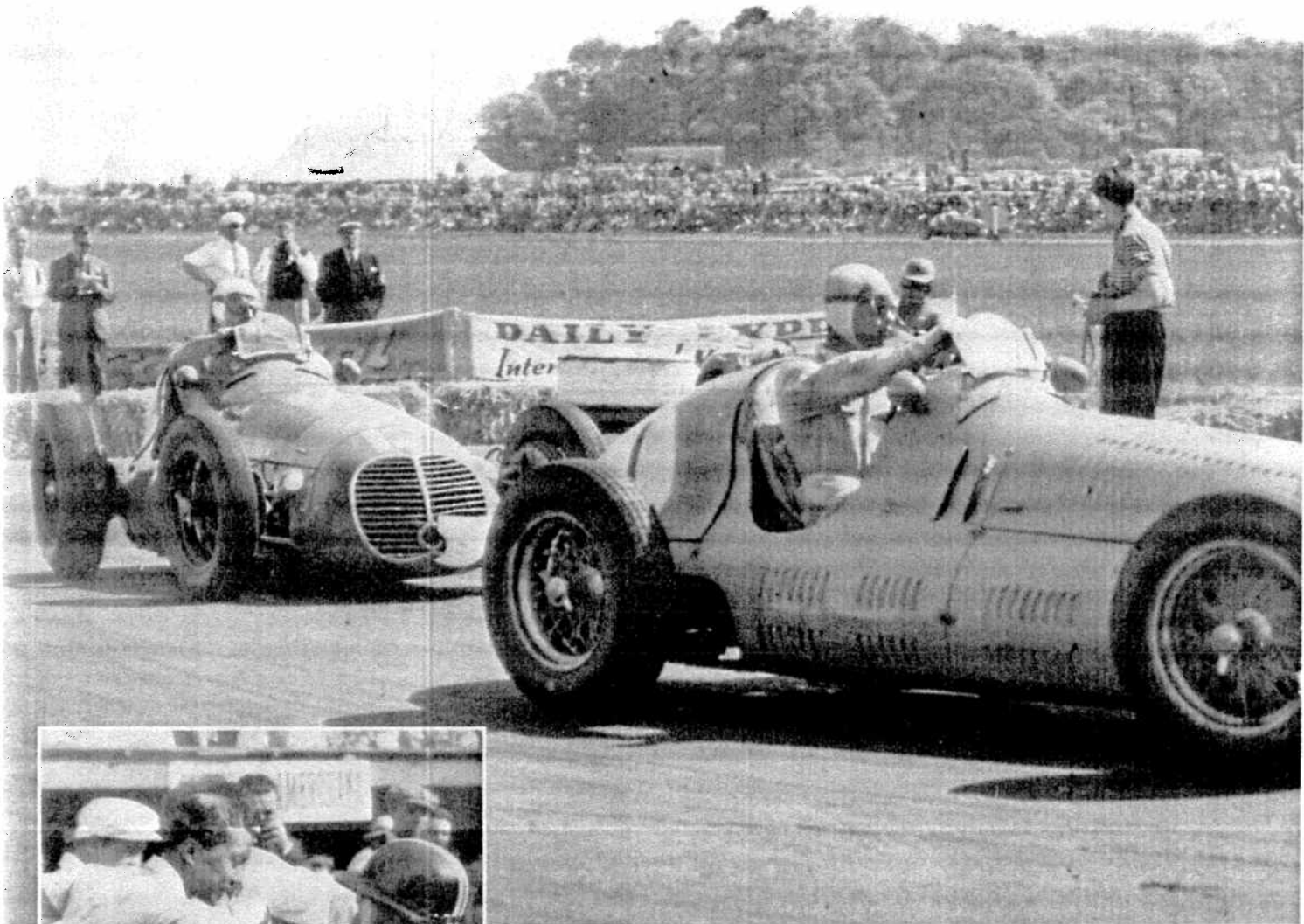
fit for a **A** collection **PRINCE**

Restaurateur Xavier Bruzaud-Grille shares his memorabilia of the enigmatic Prince Bira, Thailand's forgotten royal **By Richard Mcleish**



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF XAVIER BRUZAUD-GRILLE

8 COVER STORY



PAST THE CHEQUERED FLAG: Above and top right, Prince Bira after winning various events on his way to claiming three consecutive British Racing Drivers' Club Gold Star awards, from 1936 to 1939, the only driver to have ever done so. The 2008 recipient of the award was Lewis Hamilton. Below, some of his trophies.



»As Mr Bruzaud-Grille continued researching the life of the prince, he found more similarities between himself and the forgotten royal.

Mr Bruzaud-Grille's father is a painter; similarly Prince Bira sported a creative and sensitive side, studying sculpture under celebrated UK artist Charles Wheeler in the mid-1930s. Both men also shared an interest in building model highways, perhaps aligning the two men subconsciously, albeit 80 years apart.

Mr Bruzaud-Grille started his collection almost by accident four or five years ago, when his interest was pricked when he stumbled across the arcane historical figure's Wikipedia listing. With a 25-year background in IT, self-proclaimed "professional internet researcher" Mr Bruzaud-Grille says he was well-equipped to do some cyber digging and find out more about his point of interest.

After gathering information, he acquired the Prince's autobiography, titled *Road Racing*, from eBay for 45 euros. Since then he has been rummaging around private collections of photos, coins, memorabilia, both in real life and virtually, to amass a collection of more than 100 items.

One of his greatest finds, he says, is an original photo that he came across at a collector's fair in Paris





RACING RARITY: This original photo shows Prince Bira, behind the wheel of a Maserati, leading Italian rival Villoresi in the 1948 British Grand Prix at Silverstone on Oct 2. Villoresi would go on to win the event, with the Prince finishing fifth. Mr Bruzaud-Grille believes his photo is the only copy in existence.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF XAVIER BRUZAUD-GRILLE



named Retromobile in 2006. The photo depicts the prince driving a Maserati, leading one of his great rivals, Luigi Villoresi, at the Swiss Grand Prix in 1946. It is the only copy of the picture in the world, says Mr Bruzaud-Grille with pride.

His favourite piece in the collection is a press photo taken at the French racetrack in Albi, at the 1948 Albi Grand Prix. The photo features the prince sharing a piece of fruit with his rival, the Italian driver Villoresi. The prince comes across as generous, kind, humble — “very Thai”, says Mr Bruzaud-Grille as he warmly reflects on the photo, obviously not for the first time.

The eyes of the prince show a young and eager man, ready for any challenges and dangers the world could offer. Mr Bruzaud-Grille confesses with a smile that the photo was taken at the circuit where he also drove his first race, leaving an indelible bond between the two, making the photo the centrepiece and largest print of the collection.

In 2007, Mr Bruzaud-Grille collaborated with the Classic Car Association of Thailand to present some items of Prince Bira memorabilia to the public in a classic motor show held at Seacon Square. Titled “Prince Bira”, the event celebrated the prince as Thailand’s only Formula One racing driver. Mr Bruzaud-Grille contributed five framed photos to the event that were sold for up to 60,000 baht each, with the profits going to help buy wheelchairs for the disabled.

One of the treasures of Prince Bira memorabilia is the rebuilt “Remus” car, which he won the Albi Grand Prix with in 1936. The King’s interest in the car perhaps lies in the fact that he was famously pictured standing on one of its wheels when he was a boy. It now resides within the grounds of the royal palace.

When asked if he will share his collection with the public again, Mr Bruzaud-Grille says he would be more than willing to show it to anyone who matches his passion for the story of Prince Bira.

And when asked if the collection is for sale, without a pause Mr Bruzaud-Grille stated: “Absolutely not... the collection is worth much more than monetary value.”

But the collection “is not finished”, says Mr Bruzaud-Grille. “I will go on collecting.” ■

Xavier Bruzaud-Grille is the owner and director of French restaurant Bonjour, on Sukhumvit Road between Soi 59 and Soi 61, where he displays items from his Prince Bira collection.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Restaurateur Xavier Bruzaud-Grille with his Prince Bira collection at his home in Bangkok, left. Far left, Mr Bruzaud-Grille in front of a rare photo of Prince Bira at Bonjour, his French restaurant. He says he would love to have had the opportunity to host the prince at the restaurant.



PHOTO: RICHARD MOLTISH



PRINCE BIRA (left) was the first Thai-born driver to compete in the 1948 British Grand Prix at Silverstone. He finished fifth, behind winner Luigi Villoresi. **STERLING MOSS** (middle) won the 1957 24 Hours of Le Mans. **JIMMY CLARK** (right) won the 1963 British Grand Prix. **PRINCE BIRA** (left) was the first Thai-born driver to compete in the 1948 British Grand Prix at Silverstone. He finished fifth, behind winner Luigi Villoresi. **STERLING MOSS** (middle) won the 1957 24 Hours of Le Mans. **JIMMY CLARK** (right) won the 1963 British Grand Prix.



IN GOOD COMPANY: A race-day programme featuring Prince Bira and one of the most famous names in motor racing history, Sterling Moss.

BANGSEAN THAILAND SPEED FESTIVAL 2009 AT BIRA CIRCUIT

The legend of racing car driver Prince Bira continues in Pattaya at the Bira Circuit, a racetrack named and established in his honour in 1965, the year of the Prince's death. The track is the home of a bronze statue of the prince, which has become a shrine for drivers who are known to place flowers at its foot to grant them good luck before a race. This weekend, drivers will cover the statue of the Thai racing great in flowers once again as they converge on the racetrack for the climax of the Bangsean Thailand Speed Festival 2009.



RARE: A Prince Bira commemorative medal, issued in Bangkok — one of three in Mr Bruzaud-Grille's collection.