“The Make is like a bulldog. It’s not very practical, but it makes up for it in personality.”

– Villency Design Group CEO and vintage-car enthusiast Eric Villency, on his rebuilt 1968 Austin Make
DRIVEN TO THRILL

Eric Villency may be grand poobah of his family's iconic furniture-design firm (villency.com), but ask the entrepreneur, gadgeteer and car enthusiast which seat he most enjoys sitting in, and he'll tell you it's the one that burns rubber.

by Harry Hurt III  photography by Sascha Mazzucco

Eric Villency is driving his 1968 vintage Austin Moke with the glee of a man indulging in a hard-earned treat.

It's a luminous afternoon in Bridgehampton, and Villency has the canopy down, the pedal to the metal and a two-lane-wide grin on his face. The design and branding guru has restored the Moke's original fuel-efficient engine, but repainted the body in a minimalist black matte counterpointed by ruby-red shoulder harnesses. The result is a customized buggy that combines environmental sensitivity with the Villency Design Group CEO's fun-loving flair.

"The fun thing about the Moke is that it's like my own version of a sand castle, and I can shape it any way I want," Villency says. "At work, I have to take care of my clients and what they want. So if I get a chance to do something that's just for me, I want to make it myself."

The 39-year-old Villency's been successful at making a spectacularly diverse range of products. He’s designed and/or manufactured items ranging from indoor stationary bikes (for SoulCycle) and commercial LED signs to ergonomic glass bottles and customized hair dryers.

A former model who attended the University of Wisconsin, Villency traces his passion for design back to his Scottish immigrant grandfather, Maurice Villency, who founded the iconic NYC family furniture company in 1932. "What was so cool about my grandfather was that his style was effortless, never contrived," he says.

Villency is currently branching into commercial projects that share a wryly whimsical approach to wellness.

At Bloomingdale's this month, he's debuting a line of performance apparel called Fearless of Strength, branded with a vintage 19th century strongman on the logo. And he recently opened Down Dog Alimentari, a health-food cafe in Roslyn.

Villency's interest in restoring cars is simultaneously playful and serious. He started on the Moke last year, after refurbishing a 1995 Land Rover Defender and a 1977 Ford Bronco. With the help of Ryan Pilli, owner of The Car Doctor in Bridgehampton, he installed LED lights, Bluetooth connectivity and waterproof speakers. He brags that the Moke isn’t a gas-guzzler like most vintage cars—the 8.6-gallon tank is still nearly half full after 115 miles of test driving—but it isn’t as happy that, at only 7 inches off the ground, the chassis is too low-slung to actually be driven on the beach.

"The Moke is like a bulldog," he says. "It's not very practical, but it makes up for it with personality."

And, heads up, established car companies like GM and BMW: Villency's creative auto restorations are likely a harbinger of bigger things to come.

"I'd love to do more vintage body frames with eco-engines and high-tech accessories," he says. "I like the notion of a Villency Motor Company. It has a ring to it."