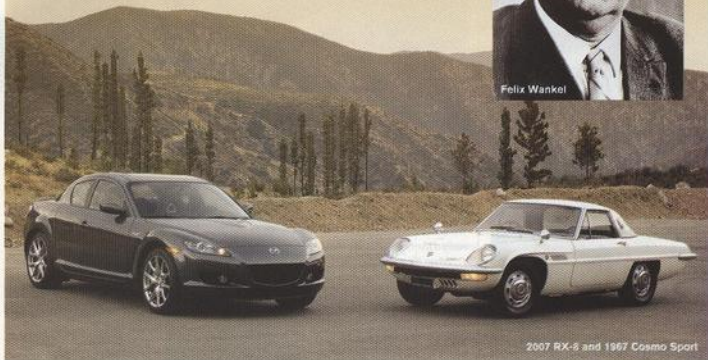


# 40 YEARS OF HMMMMMMM

MAZDA CELEBRATES ITS  
FOUR DECADES OF ROTARY POWER



2007 RX-8 and 1967 Cosmo Sport

» FELIX WANKEL WAS a dreamer.

Specifically, in 1919, at age 17, he dreamed that he invented an engine. While it took him 38 more years to produce a working rotary powerplant and still more to perfect it for production, the Mazda faithful are still living the dream today.

Wankel's first working rotary went into an NSU 50-cc motorcycle. It worked so well NSU claimed a world speed record of almost 120 mph with it.

An agreement in 1961 allowed Mazda to develop a rotary based on Wankel's ideas. After working out technical problems in the early prototypes, including unusual wearing on the rotor walls and rough performance at low engine speeds, Mazda launched

its first rotary-powered car, the Cosmo Sport, in 1967. That makes this year the 40th anniversary of the Mazda rotary engine.

To celebrate, we first got a 2007 RX-8 and drove it from Los Angeles to Carmel and back. With the RX-8 in 2003, Mazda introduced the Renesis rotary, with intake and exhaust ports moved to the side for better combustion and cleaner exhaust. Ours had 232 hp and 159 lb-ft of torque. The best part of the whole car was its perfect 50/50 weight balance in a superbly tuned chassis, making it perfect for hundreds of miles of curvy roads. While naysayers claim the rotary has no torque, we never really wanted for more the whole time, staying in third gear through many a turn that would have had a last-

generation RX-7 looking for second. It did get appalling gas mileage, somewhere around 15 mpg or so, but one does pay a price for power.

Once in Carmel, we got to drive a 1967 Cosmo Sport, one of two that Mazda owns. The perfect balance from the RX-8 felt as if it were already in place 40 years before. While the engine didn't launch with the same authority, it did rev freely up to 7000 rpm. Likewise, brakes in 1967 were nowhere near what we're used to now, and the steering did wander just a bit, but it would be hard to name a competitor of the age that was more fun to drive.

Next for the 40th celebration was a 10th-annual gathering of the rotary faithful called SevenStock. This year, there were 5000 people and 525

rotary-powered cars, running the gamut from Cosmos to RX-8s to rotary-powered pickup trucks and motorcycles.

Who can explain the attraction? Is it just that the piston engine goes *boing, boing, boing*, while the Wankel goes *hmmmmmm!*

"There are no words for this, but Mazda got it right when the little kid, who looked like one of the Munsters, whispered, 'Zoom zoom,'" explained rotary enthusiast David Hall. "It's that quality in a car that makes you want to take the long way home. It's what makes you look at a twisty road and wonder what would happen if you tried it just a little bit differently this time."

It's all of the above. And it's only been 40 years.

—MARK VAUGHN