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The Mercury News

Scooter Fever

THEIR POPULARITY HAS ZOOMED IN RECENT YEARS

By Matt Nauman
Mercury News

Scooters are everywhere these days.

You'll find them in movies like ``The Talented Mr. Ripley'' and ``American Pie.'' They're in advertisements for Target, Mentos and Washington apples.

Scooters are on the streets of San Francisco, where new Vespas are sold in two stores. And they're in the pages of Scoot, a San Francisco-based quarterly magazine devoted to ``the North American vintage motor scooter scene.''

This weekend you'll find vintage scooters in San Jose as Vespa Club Los Gatos stages Classic Moto Italio 6. The centerpiece of the sixth annual celebration of Italian scooters is a free Saturday event in downtown San Jose.

Long popular in Europe, with its small, crowded streets, scooters haven't really had a buzz in America in decades. But U.S. scooter sales have grown from about 12,000 a year in 1997 to about 50,000 last year, according to the Motorcycle Industry Council. (The group won't have final 2001 sales figures until later this month.)

The council's research shows the mean age of scooter riders is 38.5, and riders have a median household income of \$42,500. About a quarter of scooter riders are students. And one in five are women.

``I always thought it would be totally cool to have a scooter boyfriend -- kind of like `Leader of the Pack' without the dying at the end,''

said April Whitney, a 31-year old publicist. But, when she was in high school in Soquel, Whitney's parents wouldn't let her get a scooter. So, in 1995, when she had ``a big girl job, and got my first bonus,''

Whitney bought a vintage Vespa P200 for \$1,000. Now, Whitney's in two scooter clubs -- Vespa Club Los Gatos and the Dana Scully Scooter Club, an all-girls group named for the

Market Information table with DJIA, NASDAQ, S&P 500 and a line graph showing trends.

University of Phoenix ONLINE Earn Your Degree Online advertisement with a photo of a student and a dropdown menu for degrees.

female FBI agent in ``The X-Files."

Whitney embraces all things that scoot. Her home in San Jose's Willow Glen neighborhood is decorated with scooter toys and scooter art. Behind a glass-walled cabinet in the living room, there are hundreds of figurines, such as Mickey Mouse and Droopy Dog riding on scooters. That's where you'll also find a Count Basie album cover with, naturally, the Count aboard a scooter.

The design theme continues into the kitchen where old Vespa ads are tacked to the wall. And in the bathroom there's a Scooter Girl shower curtain that Whitney picked up while on a business trip to New York.

Whitney talks about an ad campaign touting Washington State apples in which the main character rides on a scooter. ``He's kind of nerdy, but kind of cool," she said. That's also an apt description of the scooter scene.

While Whitney and her friends rejoice over vintage Vespas, Lambrettas and the like, there's a new scooter sensibility emerging in San Francisco. Italian scooter maker Vespa has returned to the city -- and America -- and has become trendy all over again.

``There's a rebirth of scootering," said Justin Serna, who sells Vespas to corporate customers who use them as employee perks.

Vespa San Francisco has two locations -- 1450 Franklin St. and 3108 Fillmore St. -- and will likely open stores in San Jose and Sacramento if the current sales boom continues, Serna said.

Scooters are popular in places like San Francisco because they're lighter to ride and easier to park than motorcycles, and ``they're a lot more fun than taking a bus," he said.

Nostalgia gets some credit for the growing popularity of scooters. They first gained fame in the '50s when they played a role in movies like ``Roman Holiday" with Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn. By the next decade, they were part of the British Mod scene later captured in music on the Who's ``Quadrophenia" album (1973) and then on film (1979).

Today, scooters are a perfect fit in a transportation scene populated with heritage-drenched vehicles like the VW New Beetle, Ford Thunderbird, Chrysler PT Cruiser and Mini Cooper. And retro-styled motorcycles remain strong sellers.

Vespa, which left America 20 years ago when it couldn't meet this country's emissions regulations, has returned with two models. The ET2 is a 50-cc scooter with a top speed of 45 mph and a price of \$2,980. The ET4 is a 150-cc model with a 65-mph top speed and a sales price of \$3,980.

These new scooters are popular with lots of people, Serna said, ``not just a young, trend-oriented, urban person." Buyers include commuters, dot-commers and older people who use them at their vacation homes, he said.

The Motorcycle Industry Council defines a motor scooter as ``an on-highway vehicle, generally with a small-displacement engine, full bodywork and a step-through design." And, in California, a scooter is considered a motorcycle, which means riders have to wear a helmet and have motorcycle licenses.

Josh Rogers, a 27-year-old event planner, became a ``wild scooter guy" when he was a student at San Jose State. He's been through 10 scooters in recent years. His three-wheeled, 1956 Piaggio Ape

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(pronounced ah-pay), is his ``dream bike," one he hopes to have fully restored in time for a national scooter rally next month in Portland.

``For me, a couple of years ago, scootering just turned into my life," Rogers said. ``I have no social graces. I'm just a social misfit who likes to ride around on these toys."

Jeff Biafore, a 30-year-old disc jockey at KCNL (FM 104.9), owns eight scooters. He bought his first one while a student at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. It was in pieces and he walked the bike and the parts home 2 1/2 miles.

Hard-core scooter lovers are ``a little different than just Joe Average on the street," he said. For Biafore, that means listening to Bad Manners at the DNA club instead of Limp Bizkit on the Warped Tour.

Yet, scootering is ``one of the few hobbies that's mom-approved," he said. His mother hated his motorcycle phase and his hot-rod VW phase, but she grew up with scooters in her native Italy and ``she's cool with it."

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