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Cosmos Cool

Greg Tessier needed a car to drive to 8-Fest, so he picked up this '95 850CSI in a pinch. Two years later, it has evolved into one of the finest 8s in North America.

By Zachary Mayne Photography by Zachary Mayne

Sometimes it's all a matter of timing: If Greg Tessier's first 850CSi hadn't been sent east for a turbocharger installation back in 2003, he probably wouldn't have ended up with the Cosmos Black 850 CSi you see here.

"After I had it shipped away, I realized the West Coast 8-Fest was coming up and I didn't have a car to take to it," explains Tessier. "At first I was just going to drive my X5, but then I heard about this CSi that was for sale. Everyone on the message boards was raving about it."

Tessier contacted the seller of the 1995 coupe only to discover that another potential buyer was already very interested. Not one to give up, Tessier made a quick cash offer and the car was his.

With 8-Fest just over a month away, Tessier freshened up the car to make it more presentable. On went a set of Hartge Classic alloys in 8 x 19-inch front and 10 x 19-inch rear, shod with Pirelli P-Zero tires sized 245/35ZR-19 and 275/30ZR-19 front and rear. The coupe also received a set of European M-Technic mirrors to replace the larger U.S.-spec units.

The 850 had also arrived with an aftermarket exhaust that was not to Tessier's liking, so he replaced it with an Eisenhaus "Race" cat-back system while also removing the center resonator and replacing it with an X-Pipe from Magnaflow.

After that, Tessier was off to 8-Fest with his new ride.

Inspiration gained

Seeing all the cool 8s at the event gave Tessier some ideas, and after he returned from 8-Fest he decided to make his new car into one of the best 8 Series around, "possibly the best North American exam-

ple of a CSi." A lofty goal to be sure, but if that definition includes a combination of serious power and nimble handling wrapped in near-factory cosmetics, Tessier may have created it.

His first step was to address some appearance issues, namely the well-worn front and rear bumpers. While the bumpers were being repainted at Newport Automotive Group in Costa Mesa, California, Tessier had the car delivered to Bullet Performance, also in Costa Mesa, where the mechanical improvements were entrusted to Chad Weltzien. "Chad sees more E31s on a weekly basis—and probably knows the cars better—than anyone in the country," claims Tessier.

With the car in Weltzien's knowledgeable hands, the V12 motor was removed and stripped to its short block. The heads, intake manifolds and throttle bodies were sent to Henry Lawrence at Power Plant Racing in Reidsville, North Carolina. "Henry extrude-honed the intakes, bored the throttle bodies by three millimeters and ported the heads," Tessier explains.

While the heads were off, it was only logical to install hotter cams, so a set of Schrick high-lift cams were bolted in. Freer-breathing Racing Dynamics headers were also installed before the motor was returned to the engine bay.

With the car back in running order, it was taken to yet another BMW expert, Claudio Pecora at Pecora German Cars in Costa Mesa, for final tuning and dyno testing. "A Split Second engine management system was piggy-backed onto the factory DME to add more fuel where the car needed it and to allow the car to be tuned properly after the modifications," says Tessier.

Though a stock 850CSi motor is no

shrinking violet in the horsepower department—380 hp at the crank is stock—Tessier's V12 had now surpassed it significantly, pumping out over 430 hp at the rear wheels.

To cope with the additional power, Jim Blanton in Kansas City, Missouri modified and rebuilt the limited slip differential. "The CSi came with a 2.93:1 final drive ratio from the factory," says Tessier. "Jim and I agreed that going to 3.45:1 would be the ticket, especially considering the motor work that was going to bring in more top-end power and broaden the power band."

Banish the body roll

As well as speed and elegance, the 8 Series is also known for excessive body roll and chronic understeer. To eliminate those handling traits, Tessier installed a set of anti-roll bars manufactured by Berkeley, California-based BMW suspension guru Greg Kovecses. Kovecses' "K-Bars" are mandrel bent and CNC-machined from 4130 chrome-moly steel and measure 28.5mm front and 19mm rear.

"As luck would have it, I actually won a set of his famous K-Bars in a drawing at West Coast 8-Fest," says Tessier. "I added the adjustable end links so the suspension could be dialed in for a completely neutral setup."

After the K-Bars were installed, Tessier noted an instant improvement. "The suspension has no roll," he says. "The vagueness in the steering wheel is gone, and it seems to have far less play than before."

The factory shocks were swapped for a stiffer set of Bilstein Sports that work with shorter H&R springs. All-new factory suspension bushings were installed, and a set of Bullet Performance camber plates helps everything align properly.





When it came to stopping the much more rapid coupe, Tessier looked at several options before going with a Euro CSi brake setup. "I had considered a couple of the four-piston front-only upgrades that were on the market and even considered the fabrication of a six-piston front and four-piston rear setup," recalls Tessier. "But when all was said and done, I relied on the homework the BMW engineers had already done."

Tessier acquired a set of Euro CSi 345mm floating front rotors and 328mm vented rears, but he didn't leave them

stock. Instead, he sent them to Porterfield Racing in Costa Mesa to be cross-drilled and cryo-treated. Tessier then had the four-piston front and single-piston rear ATE calipers painted black and the embossed "M" logo hand-painted. Porterfield Carbon Kevlar pads clamp the rotors and Motul silicone brake fluid pumps through braided steel lines.

Driving the big coupe

"It feels a thousand pounds lighter," Tessier promises as I prepare for my test drive. That's a strong statement considering

the 850's reputation as something of an overweight, technology-laden boulevard cruiser.

Twist the key and the starter whirs for a couple of seconds while enough fuel to get all 12 cylinders going is fed to the motor. The engine fires with a muted, aggressive burble—it's a hollow, resonant sound that has a hint of large-displacement V8 at idle.

Getting the car into gear takes a healthy shove since Tessier installed one of Kovescses' typically notchy short-shift kits. It feels fine once I'm accustomed to the effort required, and the throw itself is wonderfully short and direct. The whole expe-



From the outside and even from within the Lotus White cockpit, this 850CSi looks relatively stock. Under the hood, however, lurks a V12 that's been pumped up to deliver over 430 horsepower at the rear wheels. The rest of the car has been modified to cope, with stiffer anti-roll bars and Bilstein/H&R suspension as well as Euro-spec CSi brakes.





rience of shifting is certainly in keeping with the general gravitas of the car.

On an open stretch of road, the massive engine delivers a huge amount of power, hustling the coupe down the road with serious forward momentum. Power delivery is totally linear across the powerband, with no surges or sudden hikes in power. Instead, the velvety V12 provides an ever-increasing wall of torque that pushes you back in the seat as the scenery blurs.

The shorter final drive helps the V12 revs quickly, a good thing since the Schrick cams encourage you to send the tach nee-

dle sailing past 4,000 rpm, all the way to the top, over and over. And from idle to redline, the sound it makes is a cultured roar, despite the free-flowing headers and race exhaust. It's never obtrusive or obnoxious, even at full-bore acceleration.

But as impressive as the engine and its seamless power may be, it's the suspension setup that truly rewards enthusiastic driving. Those 430+ hp could be quite a handful even in a 4,100-lb. car, yet Tessier's 850 is surprisingly nimble. As he claimed, it feels relatively light on its feet. Turn-in is instantaneous and smooth,

while body roll is practically non-existent, even when pressing hard.

Pass the apex of a turn, feed the throttle in progressively and chassis behavior is for the most part neutral. Switch the traction control off and it's very easy to get the rear end to step out by a few degrees. A twitch of opposite lock snaps the rear tires back into line while the limited slip diff keeps things tidy. And when it's time to haul down from speed, the Euro-spec CSi brakes feel strong, with a linear and progressive pedal feel.

Clean and civilized

Tessier's coupe truly shines like no stock 8 Series can on a twisty road, yet it sacrifices none of the civility of a stocker. The 8 Series' interior has always been a fine place to spend time, and the design and layout have aged quite well. The Lotus White interior of Tessier's car was treated to a thorough cleaning when he got it, and it remains stock apart from a Euro E34 M5 illuminated shift knob and boot.

The outside of the car is similarly clean and stock, though Tessier did add one of Racing Dynamics' bumper filler pieces to eliminate the long license plate mount on the stock bumper. He also treated the paint to an extra-special treatment that improved its appearance subtly but significantly.

"While the car was apart, we had discovered that it was starting to show signs of the dreaded 'E31 sunroof rot,' where the edges of the sunroof begin to rust," Tessier says. He ordered a new sunroof panel, but discovered upon installation that the sunroof's finish was smoother than that of the roof around it. Tessier then had the rest of the roof color-sanded to match.

"I ended up liking it so much I had the remainder of the car color-sanded and polished so that the factory orange-peel texture was replaced by a deep, smooth, glossy finish." The result is certainly striking, and it gives the appearance of a high-end custom paint job.

Is this the ultimate 850CSi, as its owner claims? It very well may be, and Tessier can thank an accident of timing that he has it. Of course, we're reserving final judgement until his twin-turbo coupe is done... 🚗

Note: Since this story was written, Tessier sold the Cosmos Black 850CSi to BMW enthusiast Glenn Mueller, who added it to a stable that includes a 1970 2800CS, a '72 3.0 CSL, '74 2002tii, '93 535i, '95 M3 and 1997 850Ci.

"It won't be locked up in the garage," Mueller says. "I plan on driving her as I do all my cars."

Naturally, Tessier retains visiting rights.



Every detail of this 850CSi's appearance has been tweaked to perfection. 19-inch Hartge Classic alloys add style and allow use of high-performance Pirelli P-Zero tires.

