



BMW M3

THE PUREST
DEFINITION
OF "SPORT
SEDAN"

by C. Van Tune

At top speed, I find little need for power-operated gloveboxes or dual reclining cupholders. And who cares about the lovely patina of burl wood trim when you're burning the tread off all four tires on a delicious stretch of twisty canyon road? At those times, it's a car's confidence that counts most. Confidence to respond instantly, in precisely the manner you expect, and with complete hardwired-to-your-senses control.

That's a sports car.

That's the BMW M3.

Ignore the fact that this Bavarian sports car has four doors instead of

two. Aside from that slight sheetmetal deviation, this sedan looks, acts, and performs exactly the same as the phenomenal M3 Coupe. Overlay the specs of the two siblings and you'll find identical length, wheelbase, track, front/rear weight distribution, and curb weight data. Both are powered by BMW's stunningly smooth and powerful 3.2-liter/240-horse inline six with dual overhead camshafts, 10.5:1 compression, and variable timing for its 24 valves. Although trailing the macho V-8-powered Mercedes C43 by two cylinders, 1.1 liters of displacement, and 62 horsepower, the M3 sedan flat kicks its cross-town rival's

ass in terms of acceleration, running 0-60 mph in 5.5 seconds (versus 5.8) and eating the quarter mile in 14.0 seconds at 98.6 mph (compared to the M-B's 14.4-sec/99.0-mph best effort.) It's only BMW's attorney-spec speed limiter (set at a woefully premature 137 mph) that keeps the M3 from showing its taillights to the Mercedes all the way to its true terminal velocity. That's closer to 150 mph.

Oh, yeah, the Bimmer also costs about 13 grand less than the Benz.

Inside, the M3 sedan delivers supportive 10-way-adjustable buckets, glove-soft leather upholstery, and dual-zone climate control as standard equipment, but the overall businesslike design of the cockpit took a few knocks from some of the more hedonistic members of our test crew. "Why aren't cruise control and power seats standard?" someone whined. "Where's the tilt wheel?" another bleated. Hey, how 'bout a little reality check yourselves, fellas? I'll take extra



MT Thumbs Up:

- Mouth-watering power
- Best-in-class handling
- Drives just like the M3 Coupe
- Excellent sport sedan value



MT Thumbs Down:

- Where's sixth gear?
- Tight rear-seat legroom
- Needs a tilt steering wheel
- What else is not to like?

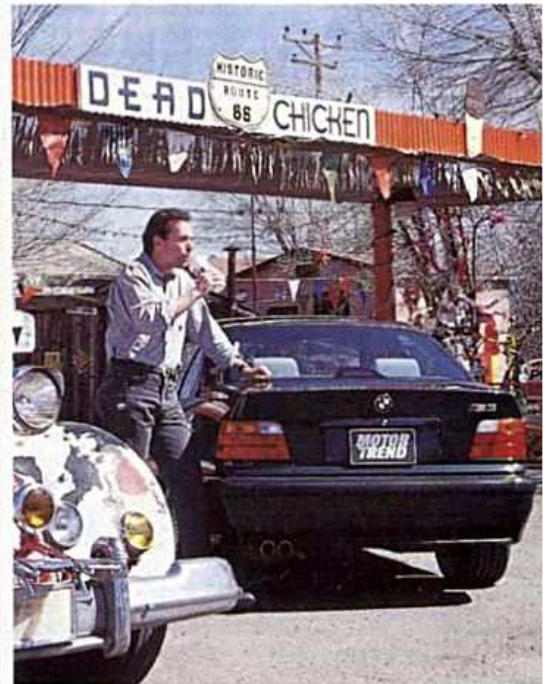
performance over extra posh any day of the week. If it comes at a lower price to boot, that's even better.

Aim the M3 at any piece of pavement, and you can feel it goading you on to drive fast. A big parking lot becomes an impromptu autocross course, a freeway on-ramp is a dragstrip, and a twisty road is...well, heaven. In pure handling feel, the rear-drive M3 sedan is immediately recognizable as a 3 Series, but with a sharper, more athletic edge than the rest (excepting the M3 Coupe and new M3 ragtop, of course). BMW's engineers continue to coax amazing levels of response, grip, and finesse out of the so-called low-tech MacPherson front struts, and augment their cause with anti squat/anti-dive suspension geometry that keeps the car's attitude flat even under hard braking. That's important because the husky four-wheel discs seemingly have enough decelerative force to delaminate paint from metal on hard stops. Tie in the

M3 four-door's heroic "go" and "whoa" power with its world-class steering feel, and you truly have the purest definition of the term "sport sedan."

My complaints about the M3 are limited to one: With the ZF manual five-speed's 1:1 ratio fifth gear and a relatively short 3.23:1 ratio ring-and-pinion, engine speeds were always about 1000 rpm higher than felt comfortable for cruising, regardless of the speed. The benefit of this design, of course, is that you rarely need to downshift out of top gear to make a swift pass. Everyone who drove the car, however, kept trying to find a way to put 'er into sixth. (For those who'd prefer it, a sporty ZF five-speed overdrive automatic is optional.)

An all-new 3 Series sedan is due in '99, but the entire M3 line will remain in its current design until at least 2000. In the meantime, you'll find me throttle-down and tail-out in every one I can get my hands on.





MERCEDES-BENZ C43

THIS BABY BENZ PACKS A REAL ATTITUDE/by Rik Paul

Take Mercedes' light C-Class sedan platform, stuff it with a tweaked, high-performance 4.3-liter V-8 engine exhaling a smoldering 302 horsepower, mix in some sports-car-style suspension tuning and sticky, low-profile rubber, and lightly spice with a few distinctive styling touches. Then prepare to feast on an awesome combination of billet-like stability and rocket-like go-power. The limited-edition C43 is the latest creation of AMG, Mercedes' performance-edition partner. And we like it.

Visually, the C43's surest giveaways are the 17-inch AMG monoblock alloy wheels and

aggressive Z-rated tires mounted in staggered sizes: 225/45 front and 245/40 rear. The car's identity is also cued by a deeper front air dam designed for the V-8 engine, plus the shape of the lower rear apron and door sill panels. The dynamic interior features two-tone leather covering special 10-way-adjustable sport seats, an AMG sport steering wheel and white-face instrumentation cluster.

Considerably more in your face is the C43's potent powerplant. More-aggressive camshafts and freer-breathing, larger-diameter intake and exhaust systems pump up the peak output by 27 horses over its stock 275-

horsepower counterpart used in larger E-Class sedans. To handle the extra thrust, a heavier-duty five-speed automatic transmission has been grafted from the SL500 and features one of the best driver-adaptive shift programs we've sampled.

As good as it looks on paper, we were a bit surprised when the C43's 0-60-mph time of 5.8 seconds played second fiddle to the inline-six-powered M3's 5.5-second blitz (despite the Benz enjoying a 62-horsepower advantage). Bragging rights aside, though, there's little else about this car's performance that doesn't live up to expectations. Give it some rein, and it'll gobble up a long



empty stretch of desert blacktop and goad you into visiting serious triple-digit velocities over and over again.

With its firmer springs, stiffer shock damping, and thicker anti-roll bars directing the show underneath, flogging the C43 over a twisty road brings on the same type of involuntary grin that used to stretch across your face as a kid riding the triple-loop Hellraiser roller-coaster in its first 500-foot drop. Carving through S-turns with the exacting precision of a laser eye surgeon and hitting straights with a shoulder-pinning thrust that would shame many musclecars, the C43 is like a bank vault welded to a smart missile. No mushy softness, no indecisive dynamics, no hesitation to input; just instant and unerring precision as it confidently threads its way through the landscape.

Heroic levels of stopping power comes courtesy of larger vented disc brakes at all four wheels adapted from AMG Mercedes race cars. Strong and responsive, they haul the 3461-pound car down from 60 mph in a mere 112 feet—the shortest of the group.

The flip side of this high dynamic performance is that the sport suspension and low-profile tires combine for an extra-firm ride quality that can approach harsh on rough roads or freeway undulations. Also in the debit column is an interior that doesn't meet expectations for a luxury sedan in this price range. The seats are unyieldingly firm, the rear seat area is very tight on legroom, the steering column doesn't tilt, and the climate control system is single-zone only; such compromises that are acceptable in a C-Class suddenly seem wholly out of place when the sticker price is boosted by about \$17,000.

Availability of the C43 will be limited to 1500 vehicles over a projected three-year lifespan. With a base tariff of \$52,750 and \$55,415 as-tested, the C43 was easily the priciest of our fivesome. For this, it's not the most liveable of the group, nor even the most comfortable. But performance enthusiasts won't be plunking down 50 Gs and change for cruising comfort; they'll be relishing its lofty exclusivity, the rocket power of its



ultrapotent 302-horsepower V-8, and monorail-like cornering abilities. For that, they won't be disappointed.

MT Thumbs Up:

Musclecar V-8

Excellent suspension delivers solid, pinned-down control

Ultra-supportive multi-adjustable front seats

Limited edition model makes for exclusive cachet



MT Thumbs Down:

Ultratight rear seat legroom

Should be quicker (given 302 horsepower)

No dual-zone climate controls

Exclusivity costs



GENERAL

BMW M3	Mercedes-Benz C43
Regensburg, Germany	Affalterbach, Germany
4-door, 5-pass.	4-door, 5-pass.
Compact	Compact
Front engine, rear drive	Front engine, rear drive
Dual front and side	Dual front and side

POWERTRAIN

I-6, aluminum block and head	90-degree V-8, aluminum block and heads
3.40x3.53/86.4x89.6	3.54x3.30/89.9x84.0
192/3152	260/4266
10.5:1	11.0:1
DOHC, 4 valves/cyl.	SOHC, 3 valves/cyl.
SEFI (multipoint)	SEFI (multipoint)
240 @ 6000	302 @ 5850
236 @ 3800	302 @ 3250-5000
75.0	70.8
6500	6000
5-speed manual	5-speed automatic
3.23:1	3.07:1
3.23:1	2.55:1
Premium unleaded	Premium unleaded

DIMENSIONS

106.3/2700	105.9/2690
56.0/56.6/1422/1438	62.6/58.4/1590/1483
174.5/4432	177.4/4507
66.9/1699	67.7/1720
53.7/1364	56.1/1424
3175	3461
50/50	57/43
10.3	12.9
16.4	16.4
13.2:1	11.5:1

CHASSIS

MacPherson struts, lower control arms anti-roll bar/multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Double wishbone, coil springs, anti-roll bar/ five-arm multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Rack and pinion, variable assist/15.6:1	Recirculating ball, power assist/15.4:1
3.3	3.0
38.1	35.2
Vented disc/vented disc, ABS	Vented disc/vented disc, ABS
17x7.5 front/17x8.5 rear	17x7.5 front/17x8.5 rear
Cast aluminum	Cast aluminum
225/45ZR17 front 245/40ZR17 rear Michelin Pilot SX	225/45ZR17 front 245/40ZR17 rear Michelin Pilot SX

PERFORMANCE

5.5	5.8
14.0/98.6	14.4/99.0
114	112
0.89	0.86
67.0	67.1
20/28	17/22
328/459	279/361

PRICE

\$39,700	\$52,750
\$40,270	\$55,415

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