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# SMOKE & MIRRORS

TOYOTA  
MEETS  
FERRARI  
AND  
PORSCHE

What makes an exotic car exotic?

BY KIM REYNOLDS

PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM

ALL FERRARI'S PRESS office. It's 9:00 a.m. and I'm hesitating at the first line of my penned daily do-list. "Good morning, Ferrari of North America." After a bit of chitchat, I make my pitch.

"We'd like to drive a 512TR, say, in two weeks?" I doodle lightly on the corner of the page.

"What are you planning to do with it?"

Just what I was afraid of. The circular doodles quickly acquire hard square corners.

"We're, aaah, going to compare it to a Toyota Supra Turbo."

My phone's earpiece is quiet.... It's a touchy job comparing icons with upstarts. And comparing a Supra Turbo to a full-pop 512TR and a Porsche 911 3.6 Turbo is outlandish.

But...well, is it?

Give an appreciative nod to the lovely Nissan 300ZX Turbo, a knowing wink at the all-weather-capable Mitsubishi 3000GT VR-4, and a tip of the hat to the hard-knuckled Mazda RX-7—then suspend your preconceptions, forget the legends, erase the tallies of ancient race wins from your frontal lobes. Empty your brain. Focus your eyes on the following simple chart:

	Ferrari 512TR	Porsche 911 Turbo	Toyota Supra Turbo
0-60 mph	4.7 sec.....	4.5 sec.....	5.0 sec
¼ mile	12.9 sec.....	12.9 sec.....	13.5 sec
Skidpad	0.94g.....	0.91g.....	0.98g
Slalom	na.....	61.6 mph.....	66.0 mph
Braking			
from 60 mph	125 ft.....	126 ft.....	120 ft
from 80 mph	220 ft.....	223 ft.....	225 ft
Price	\$189,500.....	\$99,000.....	\$38,000

Read it again. Rub your eyes if you must. The Supra performs at Testarossa and 911 Turbo levels. There is every reason to believe that Toyota's flagship, at about one-fifth the financial assault of a Testarossa, can match the legendary Ferrari's pace on just about any twisted piece of asphalt. Ditto the \$100K Porsche.

A blink or so slower in acceleration, the Supra easily outgrips the European pair, is more stable in abrupt maneuvers, and digs to a halt with near identical determination. According to our test equipment, it requires no excuses whatsoever.

But do numbers tell the whole story? Is the Supra a bargain exotic while Maranello and Stuttgart are committing highway robbery selling more smoke screen than tire smoke? Or do the Europeans possess quali-

ties the Supra lacks?

It's hardly a secret that there have been Everyman cars with exotic-level performance all along. Flip back 30-odd years and you'll find Cobras regularly barbecuing Ferraris down drag strips and Corvettes clawing around skidpads where Porsches skidded. But we're equally conscious that the pace of those Cobras and Corvettes was never quite matched by their mechanical precision or design panache.

This Supra just might be different.

Ultimately, we sidestepped Ferrari by calling our friend Harley Cluxton in Phoenix to secure a private 512TR, rented Firebird raceway's new west circuit (where the tire marks from Ayrton Senna's Penske IndyCar test had just faded), and diverted Phil Hill from a

cross-Arizona trek in his 1925 Locomobile to lend a hand in cracking this nut.

Assembled beneath a bright blue sky at Firebird, the Toyota, Porsche and Ferrari finally confronted one another. Parked side-strakes to whale-tail, Japanese high-wing to prancing-horse emblem, did I hear the German and Italian cars whispering?

"Of course I only wear classic Butzi Porsche sheet metal," sniffs the 911.

"Naturally," responds the Ferrari. "What do you think of my Sergio Pininfarina in midnight black? Daring, wouldn't you say?"

"Excuse us, um, Toyota—or, whatever you are—who's your designer?"

Maybe the Arizona sun is getting too bright. Phil offers me a Calistoga water, and I retreat to the Supra's cool air-conditioned cockpit to review this uneasy trio's specifications.

In democratically alphabetic order, I flip to the Ferrari 512TR stats.

Ah, the Testarossa. I remember first seeing it at the Paris auto show in 1984, when I was in a crowd held back by velvet ropes. Perhaps this was for our protection, I imagined, for the muscular Ferrari squatted within clawing range like a captured lion too closely surrounded.

Big, wild and flamboyant, the Testarossa was a superstar. It was everything a Ferrari was supposed to be: There was a gigantic aluminum



flat-12 engine nestled within inches of your butt, an ankle-high shovel nose to puncture a hole in the air, and huge side radiator grilles to purge enough excess engine Btus to propel several Fiats, no doubt. The TR's stern was a virtual ping-pong table tilted against the wind, theoretically to press the wide rear tires another millimeter into the asphalt at 181 mph. What a car.

When I finally drove it a few years later, I was disappointed. Sure it was fast, but this was a pussycat, not a man-eater. Docile almost to the point of ridiculousness, you could lug it down to loping speeds in top gear and accelerate away. It shifted easily; the clutch takeup was silky. It was a pushover. What kind of a cat doesn't bite you for being foolish?

The new 512TR, which we tested in the June 1992 issue, bites. It snaps and snarls, spins its rear tires into expensive Pirelli rubber puddles if you aren't attentive. Frankly, after driving the mind-blowing F40, I'd assumed that no Ferrari would ever make me quite as giddy again, but the fanged and clawed 512TR was good for a solid 30-minute silly grin.

Ferrari's engineers boosted the original's power from 380 bhp to 421 by drilling bigger valve holes and squeezing the compression ratio from 8.7:1 to an even 10. Handling improved

with 2-in.-larger wheel diameters (and slightly wider rubber), lighter suspension components and a stiffer chassis. Their efforts yielded a big performance payday: Acceleration times sank like

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*A blink or so slower in acceleration, the Supra easily outgrips the European pair, is more stable in abrupt maneuvers, and digs to a halt with near identical determination. According to our test equipment, it requires no excuses whatsoever.*

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IBM stock, dropping 1.5 seconds off the 0-60-mph tally (now a smoking 4.7 sec.), while grip surged like Microsoft shares from 0.87g to 0.94. Now we're talking.

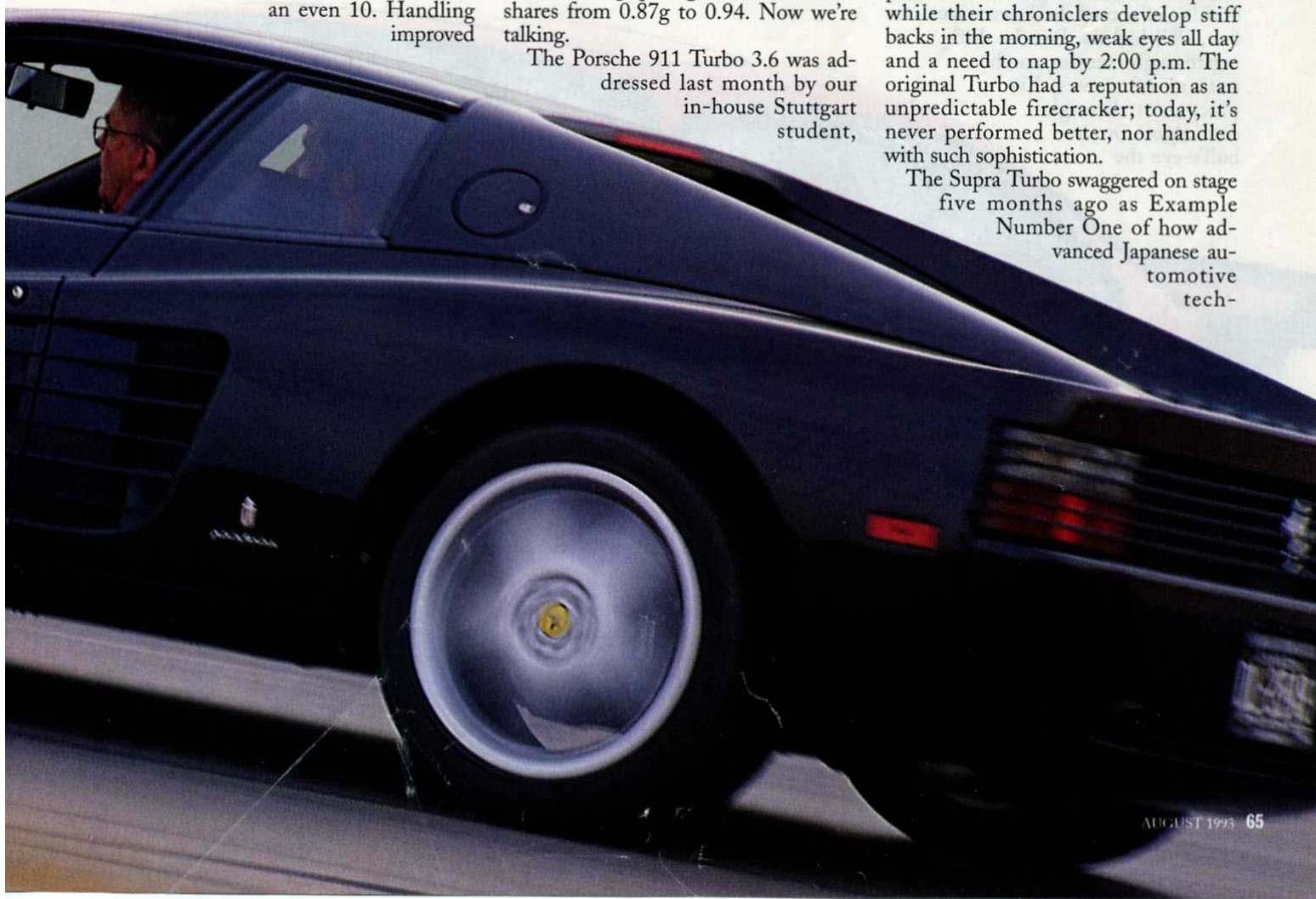
The Porsche 911 Turbo 3.6 was addressed last month by our in-house Stuttgart student,

Joe Rusz. He reports that the Turbo 3.6 boils down to a redesigned-in-1989 911 chassis fitted with a boosted version of the Carrera's 3.6-liter flat-6. To withstand a turbo's increased combustion pressures, the cylinder barrels are thicker, but the heads retain single spark-plugs (the normally aspirated engine employs pairs). Porsche says the reason is space limitation; lift a Turbo's engine lid, and you'll see the problem. Breathing life into all this plumbing is a lone, huge KKK turbocharger and companion intercooler, both carried over from the old 3.3-liter. Eighteen-inch wheels and beefier tires (up 20 mm in the front, 10 at the rear) add grip as well as more visual snap.

The mechanical enhancements don't cause quite as startling an improvement to the 911 Turbo as the Testarossa's did—at least in measured numbers—but the difference is eminently clear in the seat of your pants. While power is up 35 bhp (to 355)—only enough to clip a tenth of a second from its 0-60-mph hustle—the Turbo 3.6's muscular injection of torque (52 lb.-ft., to reach 384) pushes the 911 out of slower corners as no other ever has before.

The 911 Turbo is now approximately half my age, making the pressurized rear-engine Porsche a depressing example of how cars can mature and improve while their chroniclers develop stiff backs in the morning, weak eyes all day and a need to nap by 2:00 p.m. The original Turbo had a reputation as an unpredictable firecracker; today, it's never performed better, nor handled with such sophistication.

The Supra Turbo swaggered on stage five months ago as Example Number One of how advanced Japanese automotive tech-



nology now has the very icons of the Continent's automotive culture in its cross hairs.

The technology that accelerates the Supra to 60 mph in 5 sec. is a 3.0-liter (that's 2.0 liters less than the Ferrari, 0.6 smaller than the Porsche) straight-6 with double cams and four valves per cylinder (the 911 offers half as many of each). Its twin turbochargers are staged so that initially only one is spun for quick low-speed response, while the other subtly chimes in at about 3500 rpm. A peak power of 320 bhp results at 5800 rpm. Horsepower per liter? Ferrari (normally aspirated), 85.2; Porsche, 98.6; Toyota, 106.8. Mileage? EPA averages put the three at 13.5, 17.0, and 20.5 mpg, in the same respective order.

Shifting is via a Getrag/Toyota 6-speed (the Porsche and Ferrari have five cogs). On slippery surfaces, the Toyota offers a defeatable traction control. The other two don't.

### On the track

I SHUT THE 911 Turbo's passenger door with a thunk, cinched my belts, and glanced over at Phil Hill just as he transformed from a 66-year-old automotive historian, exhausted Locomobile pilot and mechanic into a former Drivers World Champion. On his second lap of a track he'd never seen before, Phil had the Porsche drifting through complex combinations of curves, his placement through each spot-on to bull's-eye the

next entrance.

But exiting the first bend in anger, both of us knew immediately that something big had happened to the beastly old Turbo. Understeer! Lift the throttle and it lessened. Slap the big throttles open, spool up the KKK, and the front tires just skitter farther away from the apex. Only bursting out a snail-pace kink and tramping the gas or clubbing the inside rear tire against a curb rotates the car back into its historic—and quite controllable—tail-out attitude.

Once settled on the straight, the Porsche gains speed at a geometric rate, like a shell building velocity in a cannon. The engine's whooshing sound seems quite appropriate.

The Ferrari was rolled out next. The terms of the privately owned black 512TR's appearance at Firebird (Harley Cluxton is a lawyer, after all) were that we wouldn't drive it very hard. Phil had previously piloted 512s and just needed a little reminder. We promised, just a few laps. Maximum.

We exited the pits near redline, hit the curb before the hard left, and flew several inches into the air. I'd hate to see Phil really press it. (Later, Harley inspected the tires, glanced at Phil and, after a pause, just smiled.)

The TR's rear

track is 6 in. wider than the 911's, but it seems like 6 feet through the tight twists. Clumsy, yes, like Pavarotti negotiating past furniture in a crowded dressing room. Fishtailing onto the long back straight, though, the great tenor struts on stage, clears his throat, soars into a gradually rising high note while the accelerative g-forces press you deeper into the rigid leather seats. When Phil upshifts with the thin chromed lever (chunk, chunk), the artificial gravity is momentarily broken, and I spring out against the belts with a laugh. You feel like applauding the car.

If there's something unexpected about the Porsche and Ferrari, it's their common quality of granite-like structural robustness. Both are stiffly sprung, but almost unnaturally fail to shudder or creak when you thump a curb.

Settling into the unknown Supra, Phil carefully surveyed the interloper. The brand name is irrelevant. Phil may be the world's most curious guy about how cars tick, but he considers things like prestige unwelcome baggage.

We jet onto the track. The Supra dives into corners just fine but exits with a stunning whimper—the traction control! Where's the damn button? Click, it's off.





It's quickly apparent that the Supra rolls considerably more; its steering effort is a tad light and its feedback relatively lacking. Nevertheless, the Toyota's handling is razor sharp.

I get out of the car to let Phil do some laps for photography, and when he finally pulls in, he's shaking his head: "Remarkable. Once or twice I was really going too fast, just lost it, and was headed straight for the

fences. I just stood on the brakes like a panic button. The car straightens itself out and goes right on around the corner like nothing happened. You sure can't do that with the other two."

When I sampled the cars, I sensed the same. While the 911 and TR give a better impression of race-carlike edginess, their handling composure is easily disrupted. Foul up your line, brake too late, accelerate too soon, and their mood blinks into ill-temper. Suddenly, you have a lot of explaining—and correcting—to do, buddy. The Supra is infinitely patient; screw up and it keeps smiling. Let me straighten this mess out, it reassures.

While all three cars circulated the track at about the same lap times, the Supra's grip and confident handling enabled it to make up for its 35 to 100 horsepower shortfall.

## Perspectives

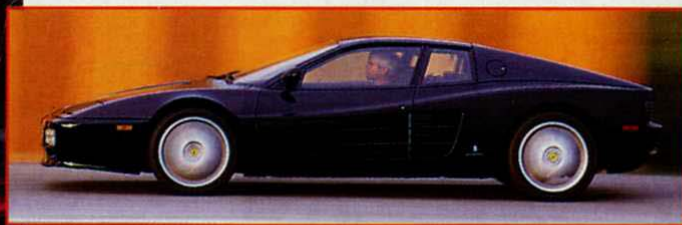
THE NEXT DAY, we converged at Harley's workshop (it's my kind of place where, before your name is requested, you're asked if you'd like an espresso). One by one, John Lamm photographed each car's interior amidst an ambiance of racing history. Glancing at us in quiet curiosity, a multicolored Benetton F1 car was being given a sprucing in one corner; while in another, a cluster of fading blue Le Mans contenders retold their tales once more. Over there, a GT-40 tried again to relax. But sadly, GT-40s can't.

The setting was perfect to consider our three guests, to ponder our conclusions.

John Lamm, Phil Hill and I all know in our guts that the Supra Turbo, though technically replete and very fast, really isn't an exotic. But why? Clearly it narrows the definition of what exotic cars are. Whereas once they were alone in offering art, speed and sophistication, two of those three attributes can now be yours for \$38,000. Which begs the question: Are the Porsche's and Ferrari's intangibles worth a \$60,000-to-\$150,000 premium? Adam Smith would quickly answer yes—if people buy them.

Sure, the exotics demand more time to build: for instance, eight days to create a 911 Turbo versus two and a half days to produce a Supra. But is the Porsche several times better than the Toyota? Well...





■ Cockpits of performance: Top, the 512TR's interior is expansive and leather-wrapped. Middle, the Supra's driver-oriented dash dominates. Bottom, the 911 Turbo's control center is cozy and purposeful.

Several months ago I happened to walk into a local Ferrari dealer just as a man (wearing an old T-shirt, no less) shook hands with a salesman. He'd just bought a \$400,000 F40. I shook his hand as well, if only out of awe for anyone who could part with that much money with a brisk signature. His eyes sparkled as he looked at the car. Never did it occur to him that Ferrari hadn't invested \$400,000 in building it.

What are the forces at work here that can part someone from that much money for a car? Hypnotism? A nearby high-intensity electromagnetic field?

All of us (though some more than others) desire—or admire—the unique. During the next 12 months, our test Supra will be duplicated 2,000 times, the Porsche 270 times, the 512TR about 700. Exclusivity, thy name is not Supra.

Another ingredient is style. Like choosing Hugo Boss jackets or Birkenstock sandals, our automotive choices are often emotional responses and cannot be expressed with words. Personally, I regard the Ferrari's looks as almost bigger than life; you have to step back, like trying to take in a 20-foot-wide David painting of the French Revolu-

tion at the Louvre. In contrast, the Porsche is a quietly brooding car; an automotive Stonehenge, though smooth like a river rock. In either case, the car's design stops me cold, grabbing hold of a primitive part of the brain. The Supra's styling only slows my pace; it briefly caresses my passion and then passes by. And it's difficult to pin down why.

I took a slow walk around each car looking—no, *searching*—for clues. Almost as a joke, I counted the number of vents and slots (the Ferrari has 46, the Porsche 36, and the Supra just four). Then the width of their rear fender flares (the 512TR's protrude 11 in., the 911's 9 and the Supra's barely 7.) Of course, this misses the point, but I was getting warm.

It's when I stepped back that I could finally see it—the builder's courage to express his work uncompromisingly.

You may or may not love the Testarossa's shape, but I can guarantee that it doesn't blink when you look at it. Glance at the Porsche, and it glares straight back: "Sure my engine is air-cooled and overhangs the rear wheels. So what?" Right or wrong, the strength of these statements registers like a hard finger poke in the chest.

Somehow I think we all sense the courage in these cars' designs. Wild or outrageous, every line is where Porsche and Pininfarina put it because that's where they wanted it. Period. Don't like it? Buy something else.

Granted, the Supra's shape is interesting, but I can see the blinks. Moments where the designers argued and compromised. Curves that were relaxed because one person's brow was raised. Lines that don't quite blend, but no one said anything. I sense these quiet crossroads in the Supra's styling, and they make me uncomfortable.

The Porsche's and Ferrari's mechanicals are just as extreme; sometimes brilliant, sometimes absurd, always gutsy. A rear engine, 12 cylinders, mammoth tires, side radiators, a whale tail, a pencil-thin shifter. These elements, these "words," come from a vocabulary of confidence.

And a Porsche or Ferrari at \$60,000 to \$150,000 over the price of an equal-performing Supra is precisely what we would pay for an uncompromised car. Adam Smith knew the general principle a long time ago, leaving the mechanically gifted Enzo Ferrari and Ferry Porsche to work it out right to the penny. □