



Meat Fetish

The fourth-generation M3 is bolder, brainier and ballsier, yet barely any heavier. That must make it better, right?

Few car releases provide a level of buzz and anticipation quite like the reinvention of a much-worshipped icon. And – getting a steer of BMW's all-new E92 M3 finally answers some Big Questions. Can it possibly live up to its heroic heritage? Does more in the specifics – cylinders, power, size – add up to a finer M3 experience? Does the purity remain, or does it suffocate under BMW's penchant for contemporary techno-overkill?

Of course, some essential iconic familiarity remains. Based on arguably the best-looking current BMW, the 3 Series coupe, this car's M treatment is undoubtedly distinctive. It has a real extrovert character, with its black carbon-inlay roof, anthracite wheels and pipe-laden rear-bumper arrangement once again marking the bullish M3 as an acquired taste.

Inside, it welcomes you with convenient, if kitschy, motorised belt feeders, with beautiful instruments and with a clearly defined centre stack. Unfortunately, the seats are not as accommodating as they were; the non-perforated leather trim managing to be both sticky and slippery at the same time. The backrest, too, is narrower and less supportive, and the seating position is, almost inexplicably, too high.

But the view from behind the fat-rimmed three-spoke steering wheel presents its pilot with a characteristic field of vision, featuring a slightly distorted power dome and one of two black air-intake apertures, reminiscent of the sort of asymmetric panorama familiar to 911 drivers.

That the 911 is in the M crosshairs comes as little surprise, given the new M3's price has risen roughly 15 percent over the old E46. Figure on paying something like \$160,000 for one locally, though the Aussie M3 is expected to include niceties the Europeans have to pay extra for, including the M

STORY GEORG KACHER



Drive function and M5-style EDC-equipped dampers. A sunroof is a no-cost option, but you must sacrifice the very cool carbon-fibre-reinforced-plastic (CFRP) roof to get it.

But at that price point, with its new 309kW/400Nm 4.0-litre V8, the E92 M3 sits eyeball-to-eyeball with Audi's 309kW/430Nm RS4 and Mercedes' more-powerful 336kW/600Nm C63 AMG in terms of both appeal and performance potential. Indeed, on a dry, grippy surface, BMW claims this 1,780kg four-seater can accelerate from 0-100km/h in 4.8sec, nearly half a second quicker than the old car. But on paper, the RS4 can equal it, and the C63 AMG can beat it (by 0.3sec).

While BMW could've created an overtly sporty, no-frills, no-compromise replacement for the hardcore E46 CSL, the E92 M3 is a more obliging interpretation of a theme – definitely spicy, but not quite jalapeno-hot. Klaus Dräger, the board member in charge of R&D, explains why: "About 50 percent of the production will be sold in North America," he says. "US customers like the classic manual gearbox, and they don't accept an overly firm ride. That's why the new M3 is a sporty GT, not a track racer in disguise."

But the real sign of the times that M3 is a response to – and, perhaps, a victim of – German carmakers' spiralling one-upmanship war is its engine. Boasting eight individual throttle bodies and four adjustable camshafts, this normally aspirated, high-revving V8 *kraftwerk* redlines at a hornet-buzzing 8400rpm and develops

85 percent of its maximum 400Nm of torque upwards. It lacks modernity like direct-injection, dry-sump lub, multi-route intake plenum, but it's nonetheless an imp of kit, undoubtedly cut from big-brother M5's V10 cloth operating in the most aggressive of its three different engines. The new V8 remains unexpectedly civilised, flexible and

Over 60 percent of the components used in the E92 M3 are new or redesigned. Among them are the lightweight (complete with an aluminium sub-frame), a cast-aluminium rear suspension arrangement, the six-speed manual gearbox (incorporated oil cooler) and the hydraulic Servotronic steering.

But the new M3 is contaminated by the same function as the current M5. If you want full power – and who would need to hit the M button to activate M Dynamic Mode? – dig into the optional M Drive sub-menus to allow speed, engine, stability-control, and even steering calibration, complicated, and is complicated. At least the system has favourite settings.

Even steering feel is within M Drive's clutches. Servotronic mapping from 'almost ready to here we go'. And even in full attack mode, it's a little disappointing in instant sharpness and total clarity we remember from the model. It's the first hint that the world has indeed moved

COMPOUND FRACTIONS

Making sense of a rather sticky situation

All the electronic chassis trickery in the world means jack if the first and last point of contact with terra firma isn't up to snuff. Michelin and BMW worked together to produce a lighter, grippier, longer-lasting version of the outstanding Pilot Sport tyre – but there's a twist in the tale. Not only are the tyres different sizes front-to-rear (245/40ZR18 front, 265/40ZR18 rear), but they're different

compounds, too. The rear treads are made entirely of a silica-based compound, known for its outstanding grip in wet and dry conditions. The inside half of the front tread face is also constructed from silica, but the outside half is made from plain old carbon black; a very effective way of taking the edge off a grippy front end. Is this where the trademark, sharp-steering M3 is really hiding? – TR



All-new front seats less generous than before, but there's still room for four

To satisfy Americans, the new M3 is a sporty GT, not a track racer in disguise





M3's revised chassis set-up was designed for improved control and response

FUNCTION, NOT FORM

M3 workstation a little sombre

■ The E92 M3 shares most of its cabin with the standard 3 Series coupe, meaning neatly functional design, but little in the way of outright flair. The new M3 does feature metal-rimmed, M5-style

dials (with variable warning zones in the tach), a chunky M steering wheel, a carbon-fibre-look woven leather dash insert (like the Z4 M), and a brushed-metal left footrest, but it all does little to brighten

the interior. Three switches near the gearshift – 'Power', 'EDC' and 'DSC' – control the M3's engine mapping, three-setting electronic controlled dampers, and three-stage stability control.





TECHNO BENT

Power up, but weight down

■ M3's 4.0-litre V8 is closely related to M5's 5.0-litre V10. It runs individual throttle butterflies and variable double-VANOS camshaft control to achieve a superb 77.3kW/litre

specific output (M5's is 74.6kW/litre). Despite a 753cc capacity increase and two extra cylinders, at 202kg, the M3's V8 weighs 15 kilos less than the old straight-six. The engine

block comes from same the light-alloy foundry as the BMW-Sauber F1 engine, while the crankcase is aluminium/silicon alloy, eliminating the need for conventional cylinder liners.



92 M3 styling more elegant than E46's, despite stiffer shell, it weighs just 55kg more

Another M3 first is Electronic Damper Control (EDC) – arguably a solution to a problem M3 didn't really have. The EDC's Sport mode variants optimum, piano-string-taut body control, with very little roll and even less initial compliance. Yet on freshly laid and less-curved roads, 'Normal' mode is perfectly fine – automatically tightening the reins whenever your Inner Heidelberg grabs the helm. Realistically, if the damping and springing package is well-enough resolved, one should not have to press buttons to alter any characteristics: to wit, the E46 M3 and Audi RS4. In my opinion, EDC is more marketing-than-function-oriented, but when your rivals have it...

On the modern roads skirting Spain's Malaga coast, the new M3 rarely puts a boot wrong. Its engine is gruffly melodious and torquey enough to rumble along at 2000rpm in fifth without running the risk of being caught short. The six-speed box is well-stacked and slick enough to palm-read even the absent-minded, though the ratio leap between second and third is overly tall.

However, as soon as we head inland and uphill, the M3's equilibrium is shaken, not stirred, by sub-standard surfaces that are glue-like one moment and soapy-glass slippery the next. And in the mountains near Lons, the M3 is clearly bumping into its limits. Despite its perfect

50:50 weight distribution, and despite the fact the V8 weighs 15 kilos less than the old straight-six, the M3 struggles to get its power down without constantly pitching and hollering for electronic intervention.

The M engineers must have experienced these grip, stability and traction problems early on in the game as the new M3 has two additional, diagonal rear-axle links. Together with the redesigned aluminium suspension, the upgraded springs and dampers, and the hollow anti-roll bars, the revised chassis set-up was designed for improved control and response. Yet, as soon as you let the hammer drop on the back roads built before the Spanish Inquisition, its rump starts shaking and pawing like an ill-tempered bronco.

Even with traction control fully active, there is a lot going on inside those flared wheel arches. In the sportier MDM mode, the tugging turns into temporary oversteer, which is not especially progressive, but quite entertaining nonetheless. Via the electronic brain, the rear axle does, in fact, set the car up for the corner, so all you need to do to sail through the apex like a master is to unwind some lock as soon as the M3's tail wiggles.

On better-quality blacktop, the M3 demonstrates why it does so well on fast roads and on racetracks such as the Nürburgring. No longer



ALUMINIUM SUSPENSION

And most of it
is M3-specific

■ Many suspension parts are unique to the M3. Up front, the spring struts, swivel bearings, central subframe and an additional thrust plate (that enhances stability) are all aluminium, while at the rear, the five-arm axle is entirely new (with the exception of a single track-control arm). All rear suspension arms are forged aluminium and work alongside aluminium dampers. M3 also gets the Variable M Differential Lock, that can transfer up to 100 percent of drive to either rear wheel.

Irritated by ripples, bumps and crests, it feels transformed – tracking with total accuracy and carving through corners like a champion snowboarder. The G-force-defying chassis permits mind-boggling entry speeds, while the clever M differential diverts up to 100 percent of the oomph to the wheel that can best cope with it. On A-grade roads, body roll is rarely an issue and the M3's handling is obviously oversteer-biased at the limit. Although the bespoke 18-inch Michelin Pilot Sports score high marks in the ride and roadholding stakes, we would love to try the fatter (245/35 and 265/45) 19-inchers that should warrant even better grip and traction marks. We can't help but wonder what a matched set of tyres would feel like, either (see p.45).

One element thankfully not driver-adjustable via MDM is the M3's superb brake package. An all-new, all-metal set-up using massive 360mm front and 350mm cast-iron discs, it is powerful and responsive, with infallible stamina. Carbon-ceramic brakes won't be made available and, frankly, there's no need for them. Our press hack's pads became grumbly and squeaky after a time, but a few 38-degree days hot-lapping an empty racetrack will do that to anyone.

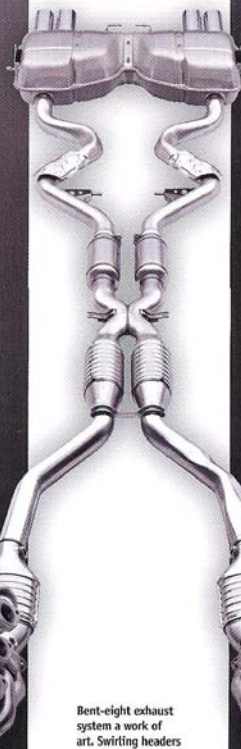
There are a few new braking tricks, too. In combination with DSC, the system will, for instance, compensate brake fade and prepare for emergency stops by increasing pedal pressure. Another first is the integrated Brake Energy Regeneration device, which basically serves to charge the battery only under deceleration, thus removing the alternator's power-robbing effect while the engine is under load.

So, the all-new M3 is smarter, but not necessarily better. After two days and three soaked shirts, I have come to the conclusion that this car would be better off without some of the clever-dick stuff, such as the dampers and the tricky steering. I want, and I expected, my M3 to be raw and intuitive, with minimum filtration.

The V8 M3 might grunt out an extra 35Nm and feel more mature than its raspler straight-six predecessor, but that's not necessarily a good thing. It may take more kays on different roads to form a final verdict, but we already miss the sharp edges, the explosive character and the somewhat uncouth behaviour of the old engine. And, indeed, the old car.

The Munich grapevine suggests that a new zero-loss twin-clutch transmission will arrive in about a year from now. Hopefully it will be offered in conjunction with the sort of extra-agility sports pack that would move this M3 closer to the more-sinewy and more-inspired CSL.

"As far as more-aggressive vehicle dynamics are concerned, there is indeed still room to move along the lines of the emphatically sporty CSL," admits Dräger. The E92 CSL can't be too far away, but until it arrives, the regular M3 looks to be a case of moving two steps forward, one step back. **M**



Bent-eight exhaust system a work of art. Swirling headers feed directly into two high-flow cats, then through a series of bends to four menacing outlets



FAST FACTS

BMW M3

BODY 2-door, 4-seat coupe
DRIVE rear wheels
ENGINE 3999cc V8, DOHC, 32v
BORE/STROKE 92.6 x 75.2mm
POWER 309kW @ 5300rpm
TORQUE 400Nm @ 3900rpm
KERO WEIGHT 1550kg
POWER-TO-WEIGHT 196kW/tonne
TRANSMISSION 6-speed manual
0-100km/h 4.8sec (claimed)
TOP SPEED 250km/h (limited)
SUSPENSION struts, A-arms, electronic dampers, anti-roll bar (f), multi-links, coil springs, electronic dampers, anti-roll bar (r)
LENGTH/WIDTH/HEIGHT 4615/1817/1418mm
WHEELBASE 2761mm
TRACKS 1538mm (f), 1539mm (r)
BRAKES 360mm ventilated and drilled discs, single-piston caliper (f), 350mm ventilated and drilled disc, single-piston caliper, ABS, DSC
WHEELS 18 x 8.5-inch (f), 18 x 9.5-inch (r), forged alloy
TYRES Michelin Pilot Sport, 245/40ZR18 (f), 265/40ZR18 (r)
PRICE \$165,000 (estimated)

➕ Better-riding and more effortless, but still manic and melodious
➖ M5-style techno overkill, lacks E46 M3's sharpness at the helm

RATING 1 2 3 4

