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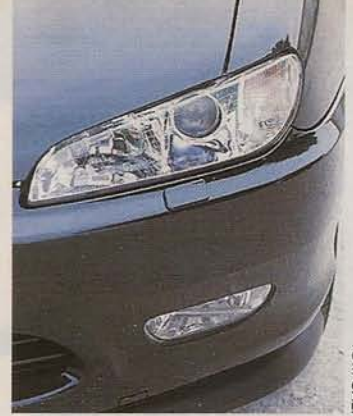
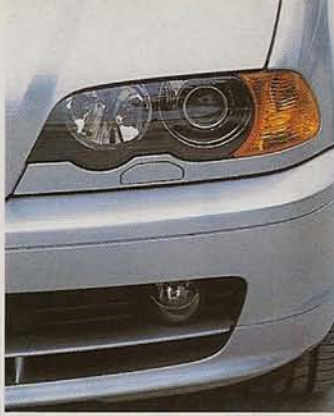




COUPE THERAPY

SHOOTOUT BMW 328Ci vs RIVALS Coupes are meant to make you feel good. But is the svelte new BMW 3-series satisfying enough to beat rivals from Alfa Romeo, Mercedes and Peugeot? Stephen Sutcliffe decides





TOM SALT

From left: 328Ci's nose subtly different from saloon; GTV has distinctive twin lights; CLK has E-class-style front end; Peugeot's slim lights curve with body

There's one thing you ought to know about the BMW 3-series coupe: last year it accounted for one in every four of all coupes sold in this country. Next year BMW GB hopes to make that one in every three and a half, if such a thing is possible. By any standards the two-door 3-series has been a runaway success since its introduction in 1992.

Which is hardly surprising considering its excellent basic recipe. Take one astonishingly competent saloon that may have gone a little soft of late

but which is still very much the right side of middle-aged, remove the rear doors and make the back end sleeker without taking away too much interior space. Keep the fundamental appearance as similar as possible to the saloon's, while at the same time providing the car

with a personality all of its own (change all the body panels if you must, but keep the family genes clear because people must be able to pick it as a 3-series from 100 paces).

Slot in the same near-faultless drivetrain that powers the saloon, throw in some big 17in

wheels and tune the suspension to give it a crisper, but still familiar 3-series feel. Then stand back and smile as the punters flock to your showrooms.

It's such a simple recipe that other car makers have also followed it. Which is why the all-new £28,995 328Ci you see



BMW retains most of saloon's practicality; Alfa rear only good for excess luggage; twin armchairs in back of CLK

"In a road test we awarded the 406 five



BMW cabin roomier than before, but feels relatively compact compared with Merc and 406; Alfa driving position cramped, interior sports Momo leather



Merc feels the most welcoming and upmarket inside; Peugeot 406 feels significantly cheaper, but 406 SE offers leather trim, electric seats as standard

here could well have its work cut out against the products from Peugeot, Alfa and Mercedes.

When Peugeot chopped the back doors out of the already good-looking 406 shell and got Pininfarina to lend a hand with the styling, the result was one of the most sensuous shapes on the road, and the fact that it was available with a lusty 3.0-litre V6 engine and a sub-£28k price were almost side issues in any overall reckoning. In a road test we awarded the car a rare five-star verdict and asked the intriguing question: "Do you still want that Ferrari?"

Then Mercedes followed suit with the less naturally gorgeous C-class and the result was a handsome prince morphing from the frog. The CLK was



Sporty bucket-style seats for 406

stars"

butch but undeniably beautiful, and with a 2.3-litre 190bhp supercharged four doing the talking it was quick, too, even though the price was the wrong side of £30,000.

What the CLK had in abundance was image, an intangible depth of toughness and pedigree that not even the all-conquering 406 could level with in the showroom. For the 3-series it was a deadly threat.

It still is. You can tell from the briefest of peeks at the muscular new 3-series that the CLK is the car it would most like to emulate. There's something about the Benz that effortlessly asks of anyone who cares to look at it: "Are you *sure* you can afford me?" It's a remarkable achievement by Mercedes' designers considering the CLK is, in many eyes, less beautiful than the 406, less well made than the BMW, and less dramatic than the GTV.

Ah yes, the GTV. In more ways than one you're looking at the freak of this group, despite the fact that, like the 406, it has a 3.0-litre V6 driving its front wheels and owes its rakish good looks to the pen of Pininfarina.

The GTV, though blessed with a semblance of rear



New BMW is more refined and dynamic



As a bespoke coupe GTV is most sporting



CLK coupe has enviable pedigree



Pininfarina styled the sensuous 406

◆ seating and luggage space, is easily the least practical car here, just as you'd expect bearing in mind that it is the only bespoke design. There was no saloon donor for the Alfa, so although it may lack practicality in this company it should compensate by being more focused and more sporting on the road. The knowledge that it is now available with a six-speed manual gearbox and a somewhat dubious bodykit for an all-up price of £30,001 should provide it with a dynamic edge over the others, too.

Which is precisely how it proves when it comes to straight-line speed. The 220bhp Alfa has more power and one extra gear ratio over the others, and it uses these advantages to great effect. Alfa claims a 0-60mph time of 6.5sec, whereas the Peugeot and BMW are back in the low sevens with the CLK at around 8.0sec, yet in reality the performance gap feels wider.

The GTV is the only car here that feels genuinely rapid. Even in the 328Ci you get the impression that were you to encounter a Porsche or some

compromised by the narrow footwell, and its general lack of mechanical refinement well wide of the mark in this company.

It takes no more than 10



Faithful 2.8-litre straight six lacks poke of Alfa's V6, but BMW is much slicker in terms of drivetrain refinement

minutes at the wheel of the BMW to highlight how flawed the GTV really is. The old 3-series coupe was a masterpiece of subtle engineering, a deceptively appealing amalgam of saloon and sports car values. This new car goes one better in



Alfa's engine looks and sound gorgeous, its power delivers instant thrills, but mechanical refinement is poor



"The Alfa is for hard-core enthusiasts"

other exotic over your favourite road, you'd have a hard time keeping up if the other driver was committed. In the Alfa you feel as if you could stay with anything, such is the extra ferocity of response from its engine and the speed with which you can slice between ratios. And that's before you mention the music emanating from its V6 at full chat, which is about as sweet as it gets this side of a full-blown supercar.

The lazier, less frenetic 406, BMW and Mercedes are all aimed at a different sort of customer, you suspect, the sort of driver who only occasionally wants to uncork their car's full dynamic potential. They are all quite subtle in their appeal.

The Alfa is the opposite. It's for the hard-core enthusiast who wants instant thrills and who doesn't mind so much that there's more wind and road noise, or that the fuel consumption is, frankly, pretty dreadful beside the others.

Trouble is, the Alfa can quickly become quite a tiring car to drive once the novelty of thrashing it has worn off. Its cabin is seriously cramped compared with the others, its driving position badly

just about every direction. It's more refined, more spacious, more dynamic and even more resolved overall.

The 2.8-litre straight-six engine you'll have read about on many occasions in the past, but in this instance it seems



Addition of a supercharger can't make up for lack of cylinders; automatic 'box is slick, but robs Merc of urgency

especially well applied, providing the 3-series with a range and depth of performance that is unique in this comparison. It may not have quite the ultimate poke of the Alfa, but it's so much slicker in terms of drivetrain refinement ◆



The 3.0-litre V6 Peugeot gives 328Ci a run for its money in terms of performance, but gearchange feels vague





“The CLK hasn’t got enough cylinders”

◆ that you can’t help but be over-awed by it initially.

The way the gear ratios seem to melt into one another when you palm the lever through the gate, and the way your right foot feels to be connected directly to the crank when you blip the throttle – these things take decades to hone, and separate the nature and quality of the BMW’s performance from that of its peers.

None more so than the Mercedes. The idea of supercharging may seem like a good method of squeezing big power out of a small-ish engine on paper, but in practice the CLK can’t hide its lack of

cylinders next to the others. This wouldn’t be such a hindrance were it fitted with a truly high-quality four-cylinder engine, but it isn’t. In this company the CLK sounds wheezy, and plain noisy beyond 4000rpm. It also fails comprehensively to deliver either the same outright performance or the serene mid-range acceleration as its six-cylinder opponents. The test car was also fitted with Mercedes’ optional five-speed automatic which, though slick enough in operation, robbed it of some urgency.

The only thing going for the Mercedes’ engine is its

comparative lack of thirst: back-to-back over 200 miles of varied driving it managed 20.2mpg against 17.1 for the 406, 16.2 for the Alfa and 19.9 for the BMW.

You may be surprised to discover that the Peugeot is the quietest car here at 80-90mph. This isn’t simply because its tyres generate less roar or that its sleek shape makes less noise as it slips through the air, it’s also because it has the least audible, and possibly the most refined engine of them all. The Peugeot’s only real weakness on the performance front is its long-winded and rather vague gearchange, otherwise it gives the BMW a surprisingly close

run for its money.

It’s quick, too, make no mistake about that. The long-legged intermediate gearing often masks how briskly you’re travelling in the 406, but when push comes to shove it’s at least as sprightly as the 328 past 50mph, and arguably even better to listen to.

Which makes the fact that it also rides, handles, steers and stops very nearly as ably as the BMW something of an eye-opener.

The CLK suffers from a fidgety low-speed ride and a slight lack of enthusiasm to change direction crisply beside the BMW and 406, while the



From left: surprisingly messy BMW lighting arrangement; Alfa boasts about its power, Merc CLK has enduring image, sleek rear corner of Peugeot 406

FACTFILE

ALFA GTV 3.0 V6 6-SPEED

BMW 328Ci **OUR CHOICE**

MERCEDES-BENZ CLK 230

PEUGEOT 406 V6 COUPE SE

HOW MUCH?

On-the-road price	£30,001	£28,995	£31,595	£27,275
Insurance group/quote	19/£484	16/£336	15/£312	18/£415

HOW FAST?

0-60mph	6.6sec	7.0sec (claimed 0-62mph)	8.1sec	7.4sec
0-100mph	15.6sec	n/a	22.4sec	19.3sec
30-70mph	5.8sec	n/a	7.8sec	7.1sec
30-50mph in 4th	6.4sec	n/a	3.1sec (in kickdown)	6.9sec
50-70mph in top	9.0sec	n/a	4.7sec (in kickdown)	9.1sec
Standing quarter mile	14.9sec/97mph	n/a	16.2sec/88mph	15.9sec/91mph
Standing kilometre	26.2sec/125mph	27.0sec (claimed)	29.1sec/112mph	28.0sec/117mph
Top speed	148mph	150mph (claimed)	140mph	141mph

HOW THIRSTY?

Official govt combined cycle	24.1mpg	31.0mpg	28.8mpg	25.9mpg
Test/touring mpg	16.2/21.3mpg	19.9/28.1mpg	20.2/28.2mpg	17.1/23.4mpg

HOW BIG?

Length	4285mm	4488mm	4567mm	4615mm
Width (with mirrors)	2210mm	1947mm	1960mm	1960mm
Height	1318mm	1369mm	1345mm	1354mm
Wheelbase	2540mm	2725mm	2690mm	2700mm
Weight	1404kg	1470kg	1440kg	1464kg

ENGINE

Layout	6 cyls in a vee, 2959cc	6 cyls in line, 2793cc	4 cyls in line, 2295cc	6 cyls in a vee, 2946cc
Max power	220bhp at 6300rpm	193bhp at 5500rpm	190bhp at 5300rpm	194bhp at 5500rpm
Max torque	199lb ft at 5000rpm	206lb ft at 3500rpm	206lb ft at 2500-4800rpm	197lb ft at 4000rpm
Specific output	74bhp per litre	69bhp per litre	83bhp per litre	66bhp per litre
Power to weight	157bhp per tonne	131bhp per tonne	132bhp per tonne	132bhp per tonne
Installation	Transverse, front, front-wheel drive	Longitudinal, front, rear-wheel drive	Longitudinal, front, rear-wheel drive	Transverse, front, front-wheel drive
Made of	Alloy heads and block	Alloy heads and block	Alloy head, iron block	Alloy heads and block
Bore/stroke	93.0/72.6mm	84.0/84.0mm	90.9/88.4mm	87.0/83.0mm
Valve gear	4 per cyl, dohc	4 per cyl, dohc	4 per cyl, dohc	4 per cyl, dohc
Ignition and fuel	Motronic M3.7.1 management, sequential fuel injection	MS 42.0 ignition, sequential fuel injection	Bosch Motronic ignition, sequential injection, supercharged	Bosch 7.0 ignition, sequential fuel injection

GEARBOX

Ratios/mpg per 1000rpm	1st 3.50/5.7 2nd 2.24/9.0 3rd 1.52/13.2 4th 1.16/17.3 5th 0.97/20.7 6th 0.82/24.5	1st 4.21/6.0 2nd 2.49/10.2 3rd 1.66/15.2 4th 1.24/20.4 5th 1.00/25.3	1st 3.93/5.8 2nd 2.41/9.4 3rd 1.49/15.2 4th 1.00/22.6 5th 0.83/27.2 (automatic)	1st 3.07/5.5 2nd 1.78/9.5 3rd 1.19/14.2 4th 0.90/18.8 5th 0.73/23.1
Final drive	3.56	2.93	3.27	3.15

SUSPENSION

Front	MacPherson struts, coil springs and dampers, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, coil springs over dampers, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs over dampers, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, coil springs and dampers, anti-roll bar
Rear	Multi-link, coil springs and dampers, anti-roll bar	Z-arm axle, coil springs over dampers, anti-roll bar	Multi-link, coil springs over dampers, anti-roll bar	Multi-link, coil springs and dampers, anti-roll bar

STEERING

Type	Rack and pinion, power assisted	Rack and pinion, power assisted	Recirculating ball, power assisted	Rack and pinion, power assisted
Lock to lock	2.2 turns	3.2 turns	3.4 turns	3.0 turns

BRAKES

Front	305mm ventilated discs	300mm ventilated discs	296mm ventilated discs	305mm ventilated discs
Rear	240mm plain discs	294mm ventilated discs	278mm plain discs	290mm plain discs

WHEELS AND TYRES

Wheels	6.5Jx16in cast alloy	8.0Jx17in cast alloy	8.0Jx17in cast alloy (optional)	7.0Jx16in cast alloy
Tyres	205/50 ZR16 Pirelli P-Zero	225/45 ZR17 Bridgestone Turanza	225/45 ZR17 (optional) Michelin Pilot SX	215/55 VR16 Michelin Pilot HX

EQUIPMENT

Airbag driver/passenger/side	●/●/-	●/●/●	●/●/●	●/●/£175
Anti-lock brakes	●	●	●	●
RDS radio/CD player	●/-	●/-	●/£60	●/●
Air conditioning/sunroof	●/£662	●/£895	●/£1255	●/£410
Metallic paint	£327	£495	£651	£250
Satellite navigation system	-	£1400	£2370	-
Automatic gearbox	-	£1170	£1450	£1300
Electric windows front/rear	●/-	●/●	●/-	●/-
Leather seats	● (Momo leather £1217)	£1450	£1791	●

VERDICT

Great to look at and quick with 6-speed gearbox, but too cramped.	Thoroughly convincing mix of saloon and sports car values.	Handsome and well made, but pricey and slow in this company.	As good to drive as it is to look at. Only narrowly beaten by the BMW.
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Agile 3-series benefits from excellent suspension control; Alfa feels flawed in comparison, particularly as driven front wheels tug at the steering wheel



CLK suffers from fidgety ride at low speed, but steering is surprisingly communicative; Peugeot's ride, handling and steering all challenge the BMW's

"The 328 is so complete and desirable"

◆ GTV has neither the ride control nor the high-speed damping composure of the others. The Mercedes counters with communicative steering and fine brakes, the Alfa with its almost hyperactive helm responses, but in truth they're nowhere beside the other two.

What distinguishes the BMW's ride and handling above even that of the Peugeot's is its incredible suspension control over rough surfaces, and the near-total absence of corruption through the steering. In the 406 you can occasionally experience an unwanted tug through the rim as the front wheels drop into a rut. This simply never happens in the BMW. Like the TV advert says, in BMWs the front wheels were only ever meant to do the steering – and it shows. The 328Ci also has the best brakes to feel as well as stopping ability, followed closely

by the Alfa, the Peugeot, then the CLK.

BMW claims that the cabin of the new 3-series coupe is significantly roomier than its predecessor's, but it still feels like a smaller, more compact car than the CLK and 406, even though the tape measure says otherwise. Fact is, they're all pukka four-seaters apart from the GTV, whose rear seats are really only useful as an extension of the pathetically proportioned boot.

The more important difference inside is the deeper impression of quality that hits you in the CLK, BMW and Alfa after you've spent time on board the 406. The Peugeot is the cheapest car here and feels it, despite the most comprehensive array of standard equipment.

Its leather looks and even smells a grade below that of the albeit optional hide that

adorned the Alfa and Mercedes test cars, while the quality of plastic on its dash and door inserts is not up to the BMW's. In terms of how special they make you feel, we'd say the order goes Mercedes, BMW, Alfa, with the Peugeot a distant fourth. Stir in the GTV's awful driving position and cramped cabin, however, and the better organised 406 starts to take on more appeal. The BMW and Merc have typically faultless driving positions, though the BMW's new italic instruments aren't as easy to read as those of the saloon.

So what do we think? Is the new BMW good enough to fulfil its brief to account for nearly a third of all coupe sales in the UK next year? Or is Peugeot's 406 still king of the affordable two doors?

One thing's for sure: the CLK and GTV are well beaten in this

company. The Merc has one very obvious attraction: the fact that it's a good-looking coupe with a three-pointed star on its bonnet. But it's too slow, too stodgy and too expensive to make it to the short list.

The GTV was a misfit from the start, to be honest, and although its performance is addictive in bursts, it lacks composure and is too cramped and too impractical to keep its head up beside these opponents.

Which means it's between the Peugeot and BMW, and right down to the wire it goes, too. The 406 is arguably more beautiful and unquestionably better value. But the BMW is so complete and so desirable as a package that it can't help but draw you in more. In the end it wins, just, but only because it's difficult to think of a better car on the planet that costs less than £30,000. ☉



BMW alloy wheels are most stylish; Alfa's distinctive "telephone dials"; Merc test car fitted with optional 17in wheels; 406 has fussy wheel nut covers