

The 1980s were dark times. Men came to believe that rolling up their jacket sleeves might make them attractive. Women depleted the ozone layer trying to make their hair stand on end. And enthusiastic drivers waited and prayed for the second coming of the MGB.

When it arrived in 1989 wearing a Mazda badge, it was received with joy, and some resentment. A number of classic car magazines tested the MX-5 against the Lotus Elan, admitting its obvious talent, but criticising its bland plastic interior and declaring that it simply didn't have the character of the 1960s original.

Memories rush back from the sheer delight of my first drive on the launch in Greece. The mellow exhaust note accompanied a roller-coaster drive, the little roadster clinging on to sweeping corners as if its wheels had slotted into grooves in the road. Snicking through the short, precise gate to get the most out of the keen twin-cam 1.6 was a joy in itself, and the quick, accurate steering flooded back information.

The MX-5 has now entered *The Guinness Book of Records* as the best-selling roadster ever, with a total of 600,000 and rising. Two facelifts later, it remains one of the best-handling small sports cars around, and the latest model is still winning *Autocar* group tests.

Thirteen years after its launch – even though its interior won't make any cows or walnut trees nervous – the Mk1, with its pop-up headlamps, pure shape and rear-wheel-drive character, has become a classic.

To help choose between them, we drove Pam Jobling's pristine 1991 1.6, Peter Taylor's 1996 Merlot 1.8, plus one of the rarest limited editions: Charlotte Nadin's 1991 Le Mans. This model celebrated the first victory of a Japanese car at the 24 hour race, with Johnny Herbert behind the wheel of a Mazdaspeed 787B. You need to be an extrovert to choose one of these, not only because of the less than subtle green and orange Battenburg paintwork, but also because it has the storming 150bhp BBR Turbo conversion (see panel).

The team that got this car so right was a mix of Americans and Japanese. American journalist Bob Hall suggested to MD Kenichi Yamamoto that Mazda build an inexpensive roadster in 1979 and this is probably why, when Mazda opened an American R&D centre in 1983, Hall was invited to join the team.

In those days of designer stubble and earrings the size of teapots, Mazda's research budget was bigger than Porsche, Mercedes and BMW put together and, as 70 per cent of its sales were in the US, the new Product Planning and Research department was set up in Irvine, California to develop vehicles with more appeal for US and European buyers. The team was bursting with talent and enthusiasm, and owned 76 different sports cars between them. The group included design manager Tsutomu 'Tom' Matano, senior designer Mark Jordan, and engineer Norman Garrett III who went on to create the Sebring supercharger.

The British can also take a small amount of credit, because the first full-sized prototype



# Keeper of

Liz Turner samples regular, spicy and the roadster market, and then outsold

PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES MANN



# the flame

hot flavours of the car that rekindled all its rivals – Mazda's brilliant MX-5



was produced by IAD in Worthing and, when Mazda's team was too busy working on other – apparently more important – projects, model-makers from IAD went to help out at Irvine.

The car might never have happened if so many of Mazda's managers hadn't ignored the project, thinking it was a waste of time. What was the point of a car that could only seat two? Much early work was done 'off-line': there were no focus groups, no strategy meetings and no committees poring over what it should be.

When he began to visualise the MX-5, chief engineer Toshihiko Hirai drove all the best sports cars, including the original Lotus Elan and Seven and the Fiat X1/9 and 124 Spider, and listened for hours to recordings of different cars' exhaust notes to try to find the perfect sound.

Then he drew a chart like a fish skeleton, putting a heading at the top of each spine, such as Touch, Seeing, or Handling with notes along the spine describing how it could be achieved (the chart and a translation are included in *You & Your Mazda*, Haynes, ISBN 1 85960 847 7).

The remarkable thing is that this chart perfectly describes the Mk1 MX-5, from 'short-stroked gearshift with notchy feel' to 'being able to enjoy audio sound up to 80kph'. Hirai had to fight hard with colleagues who wanted to make the car faster or more complex, but he rigidly stuck to every point on the original concept.

Bob Hall called it the KISS car, or 'keep it simple, stupid'. The MX-5 couldn't be faster, or more luxurious because it had to be cheap to buy, cheap to insure and cheap to run. Mazda certainly did not slavishly copy the Elan, or any other '60s sports car, but using proven, simple technology made a lot of sense.

Like an Elan, the Mazda has a solid spine or 'power plant frame' to prevent drivetrain wind-up, and the body is light and rigid to allow the suspension to get on with its job. For ultimate stability and grip, as much of each tyre's footprint had to be flat on the ground as possible, so Hirai opted for a traditional double-wishbone set-up with coil-over shock absorbers – which works pretty well for Ferraris.

The quick, direct steering is by straightforward rack and pinion and, to help the instant response to inputs, unsprung weight was kept down to a minimum by producing light wheels. These original pastiche Minilites were soundly criticised in this magazine for having the wrong number of spokes, but these are some of the lightest wheels fitted to a production car. A deal was even done with Dunlop to make super-light tyres for them.

The thoroughness of the engineering is obvious as soon you pull back the neat oval chromed doorhandle to Pam's J-reg Mk1 and clamber in. It may have six figures on its clock, but all the controls feel tight and eager to go. The only sign of wear is a little fluffiness on the outside edge of the driver's cloth seat.

The cockpit fits my 5ft 6in frame perfectly; the passenger door is easily within reach. Unusually, the cabin is perfectly original. Many owners have jazzed up the dash with chrome rings for the dials or wood or carbonfibre inlay kits. Sadly, however, the

previous owner had fitted Wolfrace alloys which will take a little edge off its handling, but MX-5 owners are an easy-going lot who like dressing up their cars, so this won't reduce its value. Those lightweight originals are bound to get collectible soon, though.

The twin-cam engine revs eagerly as you turn the key, and head for some open Dorset roads and, although the gearlever is a little stiff, it still snicks precisely through the gate like a knife through cake.

The development team's slogan for the MX-5 project was 'Oneness between horse and rider', and that's just how it is as the road sweeps into a series of bends. Everything is just where it needs to be and responds in an instant: you wear the car rather than sit in it. The joy of that drive in Greece floods back, and the Mazda has activated a control on my face marked 'smile'.

My modern Honda Civic Type-R is great fun, but the MX-5 reminds me how hard it makes me work. You have to keep the revs way up above 6000rpm, and you pay for its performance with a punishing ride and constant kickback from the steering wheel.

The Mazda makes it all feel so easy. It may not have the Civic's outright power – a modest 116bhp is delivered at 6500rpm – but it has the poise and balance of an Olympic gymnast on the parallel bars. Its almost perfect weight distribution and essence-of-sports car rear-wheel drive place it just where you want it on the road for bend after bend, and you can kick the tail out for some fun if the mood takes you.

During the MX-5's early years, the body was stiffened and given more cross-bracing to refine its handling but this increased its weight, so when the 1.8 replaced the 1.6 in 1994 it merely restored the earlier performance rather than increased it. A 1.6-litre car was returned to the range in 1995, but its power had been reduced to 88bhp to maintain a gap between the models.

Peter Taylor's '96 1.8 is a Merlot limited edition, popular for its wood dash trim, grey leather seats, decent kit and rich colour.

Mk1 limited editions were all locally created whenever the factory produced a batch of cars in a special colour. For example: the first green batch was imaginatively labelled the Limited Edition in the UK – in the States it was called the British Racing Green and marketed with pictures of red buses and men in flat 'ats.

Just 600 Merlots were sold between June and October '96, and they had Phantom five-spoke wheels and Vin Rouge mica paint. Apparently someone at MCL's PDI centre in Sheerness suggested that this colour was like a glass of Merlot, so the team made up the badges and shot its brochure in a vineyard.

The 128bhp 1.8 engine has a snarly tone, but retains the same sweet exhaust note as we blast through tunnels of trees and flowering rhododendrons. Peter's car feels more alert and urgent than Pam's: its gearing is higher and its power is fed to the rear wheels through a Gleason Torsen limited-slip differential, rather than the previous viscous unit.

The steering is just as pin-sharp and it clings to corners with equal tenacity, but its



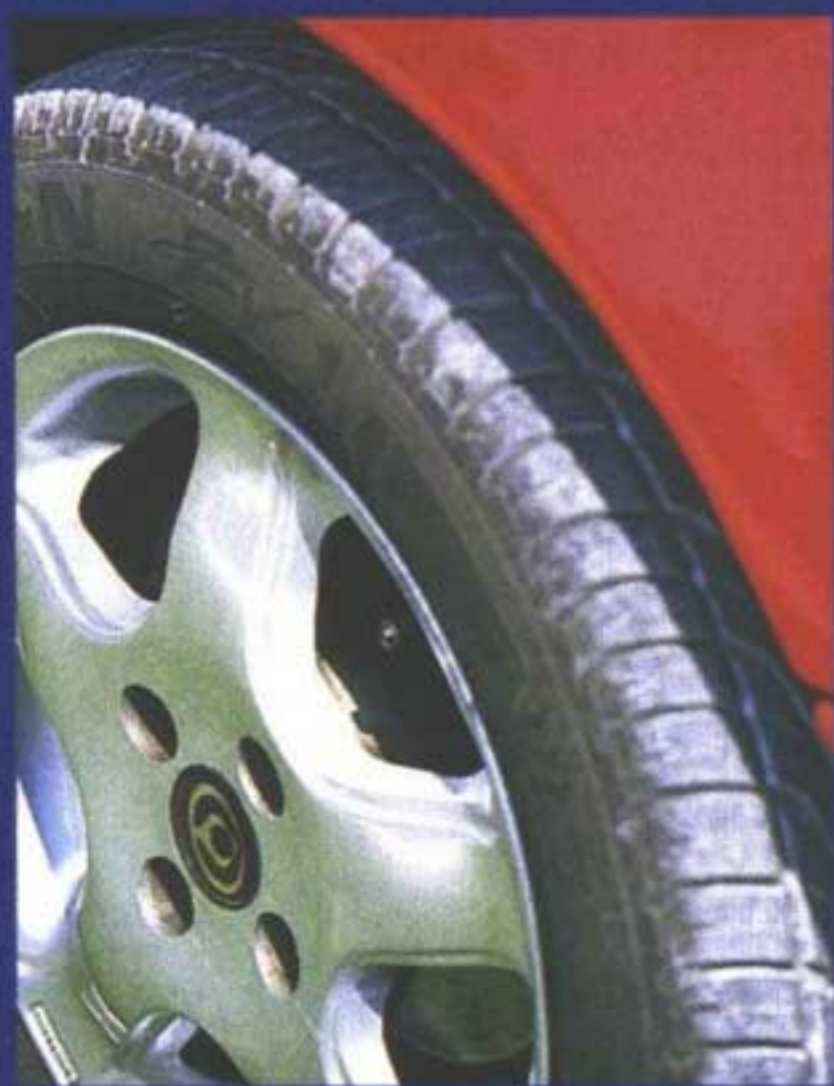
**'The engine has an addictive growl, punctuated with a James Brown-style 'Ow!' as you lift off the throttle. There's no turbo lag'**

Above: lurid two-tone paint scheme echoes the 1991 Le Mans-winning Mazdaspeed 787B. Right: many MX-5s are personalised, here with boot rack and Wolfrace alloy wheels. Below: MX-5 has massive following; colour-coded parking is all the rage at club meetings





'It may have six figures on its clock, but the controls feel tight and eager. It has the poise and balance of an gymnast on parallel bars'



#### FACTFILE

##### MAZDA MX-5 1.6 1990-'93

**Engine** iron block, alloy head dohc 16-valve 1598cc watercooled 'four', with multi-port efi, 114bhp @ 6500rpm, 100lb ft @ 5500rpm (from '95, 1.6 had 88bhp)

**Construction** all-steel monocoque

**Suspension** independent all round, by double wishbones, coil springs over telescopic dampers

**Suspension** power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** discs all round, with servo  
**0-62mph** 8.7 secs **Max speed** 121mph

**1.8** July 1993-'97  
1839cc, 128bhp  
@ 6500rpm, 110lb ft  
@ 5000rpm  
**0-62mph** 8.5 secs  
**Max speed** 120mph

**BBR Turbo/Le Mans**  
1993, 1598cc,  
150bhp @ 6500rpm,  
154lb ft @ 5500rpm  
**0-60mph** 7.8 secs  
**Max speed** 122mph



#### THE BBR TURBO

Rod Millen Motorsport in the US had a turbo conversion ready for the MX-5 almost as soon as it landed, and it looked as though these kits might be offered in the UK. Instead, Mazda's UK importer MCL decided to offer its own kit.

Three big hitters were approached: TWR, Turbo Technics and Brodie Brittain Racing with the brief to create an effective, affordable kit, simple enough to be fitted by technicians at Mazda dealerships after suitable training.

BBR won the contract, and its package, using a Garrett T25 turbocharger with integral wastegate and watercooling, was offered fitted for £3700. The kit had 68 parts including a new exhaust manifold of high temperature cast iron-alloy, a modified sump and competition-spec pipework for the power system, oil set-up and cooling.

The car was fitted with five-spoke OZ wheels and a rear spoiler, as seen on the Le Mans. Around 200 BBR Turbos were made, and this was the only turbo conversion to be covered by Mazda's warranty until the Australian MX-5 SP was launched in 2003.

#### EUNOS ROADSTER

In Japan, the MX-5 was known as the Eunos Roadster – Eunos being Mazda's prestige brand, like Lexus to Toyota. Because so many have been imported, there are plenty of specialists around who can provide parts, and many Mazda dealers are happy to work on them.

There's no sniffiness in the club about owning an import, either – Roadsters mingle happily with MX-5s at shows. But they are worth around £1500 less for an equivalent car, so it's important not to pay too much.

The most obvious difference between the two is that the number plate recess is square on a Eunos, but rectangular on an MX-5. Japanese market cars also tend to have more equipment, such as air-conditioning, speakers mounted in the headrests and a wooden steering wheel. Japanese owners have also often loaded them with accessories, including handling kits which can give an overly firm ride.

ride, although still firm, is more compliant.

Charlotte's turbocharged Le Mans is the scarcest limited edition, because the colour scheme had buyers flocking out of the dealerships. Only 22 of the planned 24 were built and several of these were resprayed. At least two have been written off.

The Le Mans' Garrett T25 turbocharger boosts power to 150bhp at 6500rpm, and it punches out 154lb ft of torque at 5500rpm. Setting off down the road, the greenery rapidly becomes a blur and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. This car is a spine-tingling, grin-making monster, but it has perfect manners.



'Someone at MCL suggested the colour was like a glass of Merlot, so the team made the badges and shot the brochure in a vineyard'



Top: only 22 Le Mans MX-5s were made. Above: understated Vin Rouge mica paint on Merlot; car had higher spec, with leather trim. Left: Le Mans' cabin and design manager 'Tom' Matano's signature on its bonnet underside

The engine has an addictive growl, punctuated with a James Brown-style 'Ow!' as you lift off the throttle. There's no turbo lag, so the generous power is smoothly doled out, with no kick in the head as it arrives.

The handling retains its intoxicating balance, so you thread through a series of bends with the smallest of inputs from the steering. Charlotte, however, points out that the grip has been much improved since she fitted Eagle F1 tyres.

Of the three cars here, it would have to be the Le Mans – if I could either find one or afford it, but preferably in a less eye-catching colour.

The only drawbacks are the Mk1's plastic rear window and the small boot which has to carry the spare wheel and the tonneau cover. The MX-5 has proved itself so tough and reliable, however, you wouldn't need room in the boot for a toolkit. ♦

Thanks to MX-5 Owners' Club, [www.mx5oc.co.uk](http://www.mx5oc.co.uk)

### ROADSTER CREW PAM JOBLING

Pam Jobling has owned a series of classic sports cars, and she was pleased to buy her '91 1.6 MX-5 from a member of the VSCC, because she knew he would have looked after it. He had fitted a luggage rack and Wolfrace wheels. This will have robbed the handling of some of its crispness, but non-original features are widely accepted by MX-5 owners. She says: "I hate it when people call it a woman's or a hairdresser's car. Now all the car magazines say it's the best-handling sports car." Typical price of a similar car: £5000



### PETER TAYLOR

The '96 Merlot is Peter's only car. It lives outside and he just "throws a bucket of water over it every now and then". He previously owned an MGB GT which he'd just rebuilt to concours standard for the second time when it was stolen: "I saw that I could get an MX-5 for the insurance money and fancied a soft-top. You can have great fun with it and hang the back out on zig-zag hills." Typical price: £9000



### CHARLOTTE NADIN

Charlotte previously had a California, but coveted her husband Doug's Le Mans. She couldn't believe her luck when she heard of a 1991 car for sale, unknown to the club: "It had been in a shed for nine years, but all I had to do was change the tyres which had cracks between the treads. I've put in a smaller steering wheel, too, so I've got more room for my knees." Typical price: £11,000

