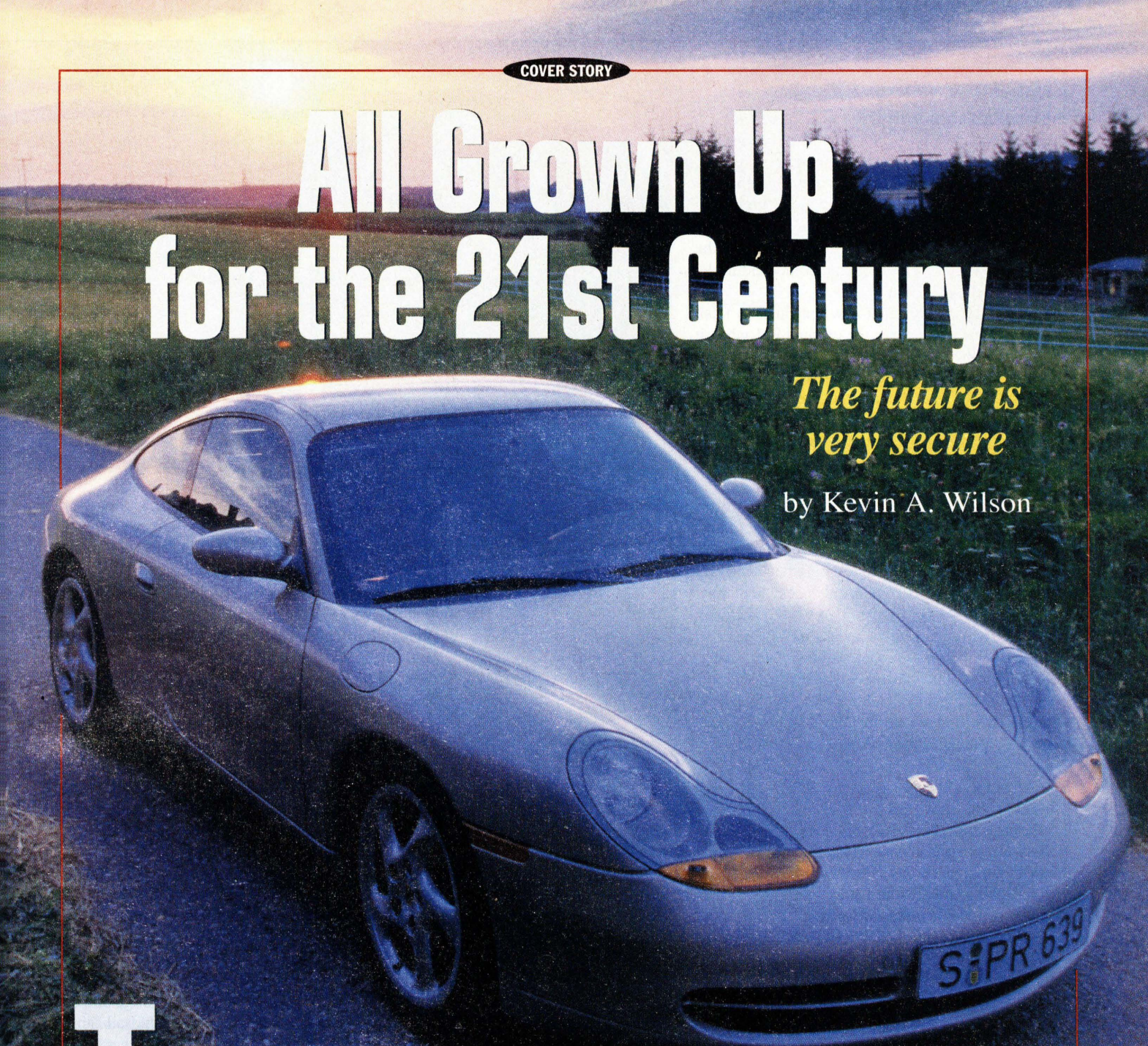
All Grown Up for the 21st Century

The future is very secure

by Kevin A. Wilson



ANDY CHRISTODOLO

Try as we might, we could *not* get the tail to come around for the photographer. Full throttle in first gear, most of 300 horsepower working for us, traction control turned off, wet pavement, lots of steering, abruptly lift off the gas. We were waiting for a big, lurid spin. We even anticipated embarrassment. But the tail made a little sidestep and the car settled into a new arc, firmly planted on the asphalt again.

What we had here was a thoroughly predictable, high-powered, rear-drive and rear-engined sports car. It was enough to make us wonder. But, yes, the ignition key is still there on the left of the column, the small plus-two seats are still there behind us, the Porsche crest resides on the steering wheel hub. This is a 911, all right.

Overall, when the 1999 model arrives, the handling may seem more familiar to those who have owned 968s or even 928s than earlier 911s—predictable, unflappable and extremely secure, with a standard limited-slip differential and traction control. What's more, Porsche is planning a stability-control system, which, like those on Mercedes and Cadillacs and BMWs, will prevent even the bone-headed from spinning out.

The new 911 will become more overtly sporting in some versions, especially Turbos, but an element of its new mission is to compete as much with Jaguar's XK8 and Ferrari's 456 as it does with Corvettes and F355s. But is that what 911 owners want in the new car? Security and stability? The words "grand touring car" even appear in the preliminary press kit. That role, once occupied by the 928 in Porsche's lineup, would seem to describe the new model's destiny as the top of a two-car range. Originally, the 911 was a sports car from a company that made only sports cars. The new one comes from a company that finds it necessary to contemplate an SUV to generate enough cash flow to survive as an independent.

The 911 is all grown up now. It's a bit bigger than before, quite a bit more comfortable, a lot more precise, and faster—certainly faster. Porsche says it will run to 62 mph in 5.2 seconds; we saw an honest 240 km/h (not quite 150 mph) on the autobahn, and there was enough room left under the throttle pedal to readily believe

Porsche's claim of a top speed of 175 mph.

This 150-mph speed, not so long ago reserved for Turbos and even aftermarket versions of Turbos, is now easily achieved in the basic model, your bone-simple Carrera 2. The car's inability to induce oversteer for the camera is a "problem" that will no doubt be solved when the engineers come up with more powerful iterations in the future, as Porsche engineers are compelled to do, as if by the laws of nature.

This, after all, is an all-new machine, as fresh from its gestation as was the original 911 when it debuted at the Frankfurt show in 1963. If that 356-like zygote evolved into the fat-fendered, whale-tailed Turbos and thence into the first C4 and ultimately the 993, what wonders can be in store for this, the first truly new generation of the rear-engined Porsche idea in the ensuing 34 years?

Say goodbye to the 911 dash of the '60s. Porsche has modernized the interior for the new car, although the nearly useless rear seats remain.

THE CARS THAT WE DROVE WERE THE FIRST TWO made available to the press prior to this year's Frankfurt show in early September. There was one six-speed and one Tiptronic (now with five gears) for our sneak peek, and they lacked many of the features that will be optional in Europe but might be standard in America. At Frankfurt, the new model, dubbed 996 during development but badged 911 Carrera, will be shown to the public for the first time. The new coupe should show up in U.S. dealerships next spring. March? June? Whenever the cars are ready, says Porsche.

After the existing orders for 993s are filled, Porsche will be building the new 996 alongside the Boxster, realizing the full benefits of the parallel development of the Boxster and 996. They share a lot of pieces, especially from the A-pillar forward, which is very obvious on the "face" of the car. The 996 has some additional paint and textured highlights around the headlamps that give it a richer look, but it's subtle.

From beside or behind the car, though, the new 911 makes its own statement. There is, almost surprisingly, a bit of the Panorama show car from Frankfurt 1995, to be seen in the profile, and from other angles you can spy aspects of the 928 and even the 956/962, as in how the roof peaks over the driver's head rather than at the top of the windshield as in previous 911s.

Yes, the new 911 is bigger than the old. It had to be, to allow the crush space necessary to meet increasingly strict crash-test requirements. Its wheelbase is up 3.2 inches, to 92.6. It is precisely 7.3 inches longer, 6.7 inches of which turns up in interior legroom. And though it's only 1.2 inches wider than before, it looks a lot wider than the old car, because the wide wheel arches of the Turbo have been extended forward, and the cabin has been widened accordingly. Modern engineering techniques and materials allow this bigger platform to weigh about 110 pounds less than the previous model.

The expanded cabin provides a lot more elbow room, and better results in side-impact collision tests. The new model also benefits from an advanced side-airbag system.

The new dashboard, with five main gauges and Boxster-like redundant speedometers (both analog and digital) is clearly that of a 1999 model; all traces of the 1960s are gone, and the cabin offers a sensation that is different from any previous 911. This is the first time that Porsche has retooled the roof and the doors in the car's 34 years. Gone is the familiar drip rail along the top of the door, which was a means of concealing a weld line. The modern weld lines are under a new roof-rack rail atop each side of the roof (little plastic caps open to reveal the rack anchors), and there's a subtly indented scallop between the top of the door and this rail that channels water rearward.

The line also helps accent the inward taper of the roof itself. Porsche design chief Harm Lagaay says the studio was careful to emphasize this aspect, a signature 911 feature. The 996's rear fenders bulge out over the wheels in a much softer way than in the 993, because of the extra width farther forward. "The 911 is the only car in the world today shaped anything like that," Lagaay says. Similarly, Porsche paid attention to many details for the modern design that were not considered much in the original design, such as the shape of the wheel openings and the smart accent lines cut into the lower edge of the front fender, rocker sill and rear quarter-panel.

The tail, with its traditional grille-cum-wing, is higher than before, to clear the mechanical business underneath and to provide the necessary rear crush space. A curve in the vertical face of the decklid creates a highlight/shadow line that visually brings the tail down. Also helping to lower the look is the way the tail lamp wraps onto the upper surface of the fender.

The overall drag is down despite increased frontal area, thanks to a Cd of 0.30 compared with the old car's 0.34. Porsche says it could have taken drag lower, but this would have come at the cost of lift, which is minimal and certainly not evident to the driver at 150 mph. The wing raises when the car exceeds 70 mph, but there's a button to raise the wing at any speed. When elevated, the wing hides the high-mounted stop light, so there's a second such light on the trailing edge of the wing.

That raised wing and the grille atop still serve to cool the engine bay, though there's now an exhaust fan rather than an engine-cooling fan under there.

Ah, yes, the engine.

THE REAR-MOUNTED BOXER SIX WAS DEEMED AS NECESSARY TO A new 911 as a front-mounted V8 is in a Corvette. With the mid-engined Boxster now in its lineup, Porsche was free to stick with its traditional placement. The basic four-valve-per-cylinder engine design is shared with Boxster, and as in that car, is now water-cooled, although it uses forged rather than cast pistons, and

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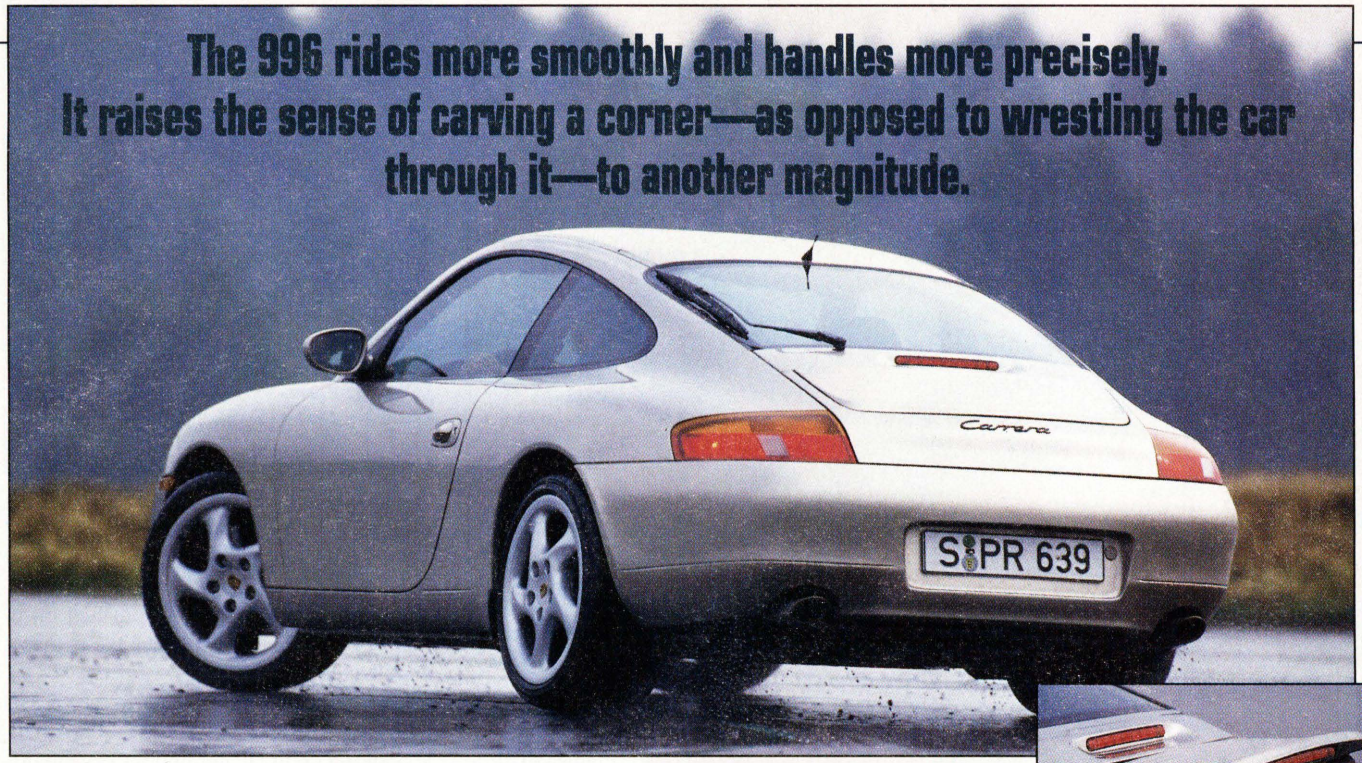


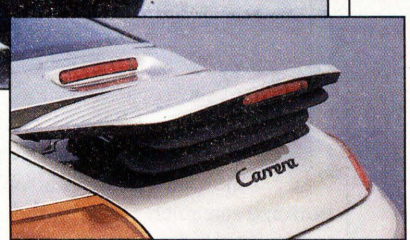
displaces 3.4 liters to the Boxster's 2.5 by virtue of bigger bores. Its Variocam adjustable valve timing and variable induction tuning set it further apart from the Boxster. The radiator inlets are found under each headlamp, and in Tiptronic models there's a transmission-fluid cooler in the center. Emissions are better controlled, and fuel economy is up by 10 percent. Power output is 296 hp at 6800 rpm, up from 282 at 6300. The torque peak of 256 lb ft exceeds the old engine's by 6 lb ft and comes lower in the rev range, at 4600 rpm vs. 5250.

Both the manual and Tiptronic transmissions are entirely different from those in the Boxster, and completely redesigned from the previous 911. The manual, for instance, has a two-piece casing rather than the old three-piece design, the ratios are all different, and the entire innards of the gearbox were redesigned for quieter, smoother operation. It is indeed quieter, so the engine note that so pleases 911 lovers comes through clearly, even though it is much softer than before.

The cable-operated shifter that replaces the traditional rod design will be a topic of some debate, though. It's hardly vague—indeed, in any other car it would receive praise—but it lacks the precise mechanical feel of the old shifter. But we never saw the new knob vibrate, nor did we feel that 911-esque buzz through the knob.

The suspension has been redesigned, with a true multilink setup at the rear. Up front is Porsche's heavily massaged version of a MacPherson strut design with track control rods and longitudinal links supplanting the lower wishbone. The front links are tuned for a bit of toe-out in cornering while the rear design provides toe-in under load to offset oversteer tendencies. The rear also has upper links that keep the wide tires properly controlled and flat on the pavement. The rear suspension mounts to the chassis, rather than to the old car's cradle that mounted with soft bushings to the chassis. Now, the suspension itself absorbs longitudinal inputs, in a more controlled fashion. Standard wheels are now 17 inches, with 205/50 and 255/40 Z-rated tires. Eighteen-inch wheels will be optional, with 225/40 and 265/35 tires.

The 996 rides more smoothly and handles more precisely. It raises the sense of carving a corner—as opposed to wrestling the car through it—to another magnitude. Part of this can surely be attributed to the steering mechanism, mounted forward of the wheel centers rather than behind them, which Porsche says is a development from racing. Despite the fact that the 996 is bigger and has a longer wheelbase, its turning circle is nearly four feet tighter than that of the old car.



Even in the wet, the 911's tail was reluctant to break loose for our camera (top). An exhaust fan under the rear wing (above) helps cool the 296-hp six.

Speaking of being tighter, production costs will be lower with the new model, so Porsche will be able to make strong profits without increasing the prices substantially, at least initially. Porsche says that tooling is good for about 350,000 copies of a car, and that it will build about 17,000 of its 911s annually. So it looks like we're going to have this model around for a while.

Our initial impression, then, is that the all-new 911 is a demonstrably better car by far. Our conclusions from driving early models in limited circumstances must be necessarily qualified, but something can be said about the character of the car. The handling has leaped forward, making as big a step as the 993 did from earlier iterations, or as the C5 Corvette or Ferrari F355 each has from its previous generation. Unlike the old 911, the new one is suited to a modern world of safety and emissions concerns, not to mention the competitive marketplace. In fact, most of the changes were long overdue, and probably should have come with the 964 or 993 platforms, if only Porsche had the money and/or the inclination at the time. Now it has all been done in one blow, and some will no doubt worry that something of the old car's edginess has been lost in the translation. The change is dramatic, and traditionalists may warm to it slowly. But considering how much better the new one is in every respect, and that the alternative is really no 911s at all, that would be small-minded indeed. ■