FOR THE SIXTH TIME, PORSCHE LAUNCHES A 911, AND IT IS GOOD

BY MAC MORRISON

2005 PORSCHE 911 CARRERA

"Whenever we introduce a new 911, there is a debate about whether we have gone too far, and half the people say we did not go far enough," says Peter Schwarzenbauer, suppressing a smile. A nearly imperceptible roll of the eyes tells you the CEO of Porsche Cars North America has had this conversation before, and he's prepared for it. "We had the same discussion on the launch of the 993 and 996. With 997, we will have much, much less discussion about the car's look than we did with the 996."

Schwarzenbauer means he expects less criticism from Porschephiles toward the 2005 Porsche 911 than they un-

leashed when the 996 bowed in 1998. That car, along with the Boxster, set the table for a corporate revival that now benefits the 997. It brought the tiny company into the 21st century of parts-sharing, reduced manufacturing costs and expanded customer base. It also triggered a maelstrom of discontent among purists who believed water was far more suitable for drinking than for cooling a boxer-six Porsche engine. And when the 996 rolled into the world looking like a slightly beefed-up Boxster with a fixed roof, well, the excrement really hit the fan.

While the people from Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen nod knowingly when you mention this, they won't blatantly knock the old car. "We are happy the 996 has been the most successful 911 to date," says chief 997 designer Grant Larson, who also served as design leader for the stunning Boxster concept and production car, as well as the Carrera GT.

Larson's point is true from a driving perspective, as the 996 caused longtime 911 drivers to recalibrate their backsides to a whole new performance envelope. It's also accurate from a sales perspective (approximately 160,000 cars sold worldwide) and, as Schwarzenbauer points out, the car did a wonderful job attracting buyers who never sat in a Porsche prior to 1998. But push the execs a little harder and read between the lines, and you know the purists' criticism

is not lost on them. Speaking about the 911's development from the 993 to 996 series, Schwarzenbauer says, "You have to walk on a fine line... Not everyone liked this hard-core sports car," referring to the 993. "[Many new 996 buyers] wanted to have a sports car, but with comfort, because they were used to comfort in their other cars. With the 997, we are trying to offer both worlds."

Porsche engineers claim the 997 is 80 percent new, the roof being the only carryover exterior piece. Round headlights return in place of the former teardrop-style projectors, with turn indicators, fog lamps and positioning lights mounted in a separate unit below. Headlights sit at a more vertical angle than



Story

those on the current car, and the corners of the hood are rounded rather than squared off. Taillights are smaller, and the Carrera GT-like rear bumper cutline extends up at an angle to run along the top of the lenses, rather than straight back as on the 996. Overall, the car is three millimeters shorter in length and 38 millimeters wider. Most appealing, the wide, shapely rear fenders give the 997 a stance reminiscent of the 993 and earlier Turbo-look Carreras. Schwarzenbauer may call it more hard-core, but it's clear this is also a more mature 911; "nurtured," Larson says.

The almost all-new cockpit treatment (the rear seats carry over) indicates Porsche wants those comfort-oriented buyers, but it thankfully hasn't crossed the line into self-indulgent luxury. The interior still screams "driver's car," perhaps even more so than the 996, but in a fashionably modern voice. The new dash, door panels and center stack may seem strangely out of place to aficionados familiar with traditional 911 materials, but it won't be long before you look back on previous interiors and wonder, "How on Earth did they get away with that for so long?" The plastic door pulls and steering-wheel stalks still are not quite appropriate for a \$70,000 status symbol, but the larger gauge cluster and new seats-especially the optional sport seats, with adjustable side bolstersenhance the driving experience.

Even the standard seats hug you more firmly behind the wheel as you discover the engine and chassis are somehow stronger than ever.

How much stronger depends upon which model you choose, as Porsche offers two normally aspirated powerplants for the first time since 1977, when it produced 2.7-liter and 3.0-liter engines. Available in 3.6-liter Carrera and 3.8-liter Carrera S trim, both cars share the same revised chassis and bodywork. The evolved exterior goes a long way toward restoring the visual aggression lost with the 996, as well as reducing the drag coefficient to 0.28 for Carrera, 0.29 for S (the 996 Carrera measured 0.30). For the first time, the hood and engine cover are aluminum. Porsche pays particular attention to aerodynamics, taking advantage of a new windscreen installation technique that does away with the need for big, unsightly rubber seals, and provides a more flush

greenhouse fit. The front air ducts direct expelled radiator air sideways into the wheel arches, rather than down in front of the wheels as in the past, and much of the underbody is covered for a flat-bottom effect. The rear spoiler features four wide openings rather than seven narrow slats, and still rises into the air automatically at 75 mph.

However, a dash-mounted button allows you to raise and lower the wing at your whim, though it always deploys at 75 mph, regardless of the button.

Beneath its new skin, the 997 uses the same unibody as the 996, but the chassis is substantially more rigid. New welding and bonding processes, combined with a strengthened bulkhead crossbar and steel profile plates within the door-frames, help to increase torsional stiffness by 8 percent and bending stiffness by a staggering 60 percent, according to Wolfgang Dürheimer, executive vice president for research and



2005 PORSCHE 911 CARRERA

development.

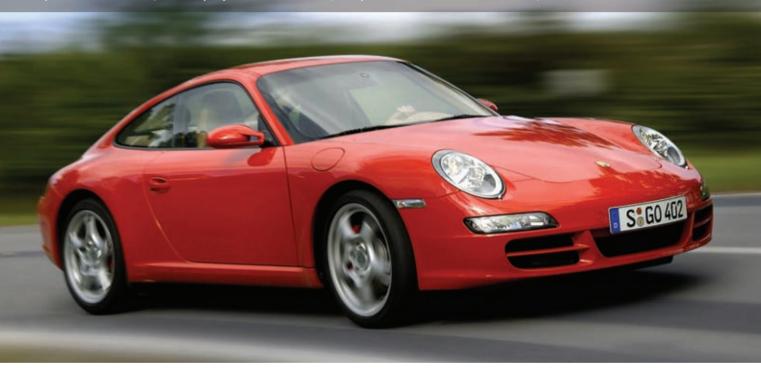
The Carrera uses the longserving 3.6-liter flat six, which makes 320 hp at 6800 rpm, 5 horsepower more than the 996 version. The power boost comes courtesy of revised intake and exhaust systems, but torque remains the same with 273 lb-ft at 4250 rpm. The Carrera S's even more over-square 3.8-liter engine (bore increases to 99 mm from 96 mm in the 3.6; stroke 4.6 seconds.

Blasting over the autobahn and twisty country roads near Hameln, Germany, those estimates seem accurate, even conservative. Compared with the familiar 3.6, the 3.8 redefines mid-range punch. You feel the extra torque, but the delivery is so smooth you may need awhile to realize yes, you are traveling that much quicker. Only when we noted engine speed and gear

gearbox delivers 15 percent shorter throws and quick, easy action. It's the best Carrera transmission we've driven, with no vagueness and little slop. A reprogrammed version of the Tiptronic S five-speed autobox is also available, but rumblings suggest only as a stop-gap measure until Porsche introduces a double-clutch transmission in the near future—despite the denials of executives and engi-

on the Carrera. The rear track increases by 36 mm on the S, due to 19-inch wheels. Tires are custom-designed Michelin Pilot Sports measuring 235/40 front, 265/40 rear on the Carrera; 235/35 and 295/30 on the S. The Carrera's four-piston brakes (12.52 inch front, 11.77 inch rear), always world-class, are the same as those found on the 996, though they boast greater servo assist. The S employs the 996

The Carrera's exterior, with round headlights and wide rear fender flares, recalls various past 911s. Both Carrera and Carrera S share the same bodywork, the S distinguished in part by its decklid badge, silver intake manifold and four exhaust pipes. With two versions, Porsche hopes to sell close to 15,000 911s per year in North America, a 20 percent increase over the record 12,449 it sold in 2002.



remains 82.8 mm) shares only its block, crank and connecting rods with the 3.6. Besides its greater displacement, the engine uses shorter, narrower intake manifolds connected to a two-piece resonance chamber. The resonator activates between 5000 and 6000 rpm to provide a consistent intake note, Porsche says. All told, the 3.8 produces 350 hp at 6600 rpm and 295 lb-ft at 4600. Porsche estimates the Carrera will run from 0 to 60 mph in 4.8 seconds (the same as the 996), the S in

did we realize how flexible the extra grunt makes this engine; at little more than 3000 rpm, the 3.8 nearly equals the 3.6's torque peak. The engine just keeps on cranking to 7300 rpm, as we discovered on our way to 160 mph, 22 mph shy of Porsche's claimed top speed. Third gear is a blast as you negotiate what you assume are thirdgear corners, but leave it in fourth and you can still tuck the S through the turns at a sickening pace. Choose to shift and the new, Aisin-built six-speed

neers we spoke with.

Engines are not the only major difference between the Carrera and S. The Carrera offers a redesigned, slightly stiffer version of the 996 suspension, while the S gets PASM active dampers (also available on the Carrera). There are new mounts for the MacPherson struts in front and multilink in back, as well as wider, lighter aluminum subframes. Front track increases by 21 mm, rear by 54 mm over a 996 equipped with 18-inch wheels, which are now standard

Turbo's larger binders (13 inches front and rear). For the first time, Porsche offers ceramic composite brakes as an option on the Carrera, as well as the S.

The active suspension lowers ride height by 10 mm and uses accelerometers to measure vertical body motion, as computer software monitors steering, lateral acceleration, brakes and throttle. An electronic control unit regulates oil flow through the shocks, increasing and decreasing damper rates as required. In normal mode, the

ride is softer than the 996 suspension, but sport mode stiffens things to the level of the old car's optional sports suspension.

Porsche claims PASM in sport mode slashes five seconds from a 997's lap of the old Nürburgring, and if you plan to drive on racetracks, you will want the sports chrono package, too: Flick a button on the dash and the electronic throttle responds more quickly, and the stability management program allows more yaw before activating. There's even a lap timer placed on top of the dash, and you can call up your data on the onboard computer screen at any time. It's a cool gimmick, but it would be better if you didn't have to manually start and stop the clock via a steering-wheel stalk.

For drivers who stick to public roads, we're torn over PASM. You indeed feel the difference between normal and sport, but our test drive did not convince us the system is desirable—at least not this version. We only drove cars with PASM, but would like to get some seat time with the standard suspension because PASM does not have a setting equivalent to the non-active setup. In sport mode, the suspension feels too stiff-at times even skittishover bumps, and the normal mode isn't quite sporty enough. Then again, considering that you must take PASM in order to get the 3.8-liter engine, the choice between cars-cost aside—does not seem quite so clear-cut. Note to Porsche: Add a third PASM setting between normal and sport.

Either way, the 997 feels sharper and more nimble than the 996. Grip, already supernatural, rises to another level. Where the 996 took just about everything a fool could throw at it without biting, the 997 seems capable of tolerating driver inputs that would be downright suicidal in other cars. The 911 does not want to snap side-



ways, nor does it want to powerslide; it simply wants to go forward, as quickly as you can push the throttle. The mechanically variable steering at first feels unpredictable, as its ratio quickens from 17.7:1 to 13.8:1 as you wind on more lock. But while the new rack-and-pinion gives less initial reaction, the increasing response once you apply 30 degrees of input is linear and natural. To twirl from lock-to-lock requires 2.62 turns, down from the 996's 2.98. When you get used to it, the steering, like the entire car, soon feels better than its predecessor.

Porsche expects the 997 to outsell the 996, too, with an annual North American sales goal of approximately 15,000 cars. Despite improvements, the price remains virtually unchanged. The Carrera starts at \$69,300 (Porsche has not yet announced a destination charge), only \$700 more than a 996 coupe. The Carrera S stickers for \$79,100, \$4,300 less than the 996 Carrera 4S coupe. A 997 Carrera 4 likely won't be available until next year, along with the Cabriolet. The Turbo and Carrera 4S won't appear until 2006.

If you can't wait until then for all-wheel drive and forced induction, Porsche will sell the 996 versions of the Carrera 4S coupe, Turbo Cabriolet, Turbo S coupe and Cabriolet (complete with X50 factory turbo upgrade and ceramic composite brakes), and GT2 in 2005. A limited number of GT3s will also be available as Porsche phases out the 996.

Whatever internal designation identifies future models, Schwarzenbauer assures us Porsche will likely never phase out the line. "This shape has been known for 40 years, and it's almost its own brand. I think it would be a huge mistake to replace the 911. Why would we?"

After driving the 997, we have no idea. ■