

M TIMES THREE = PERFORMANCE

BMW refines the M3 for the U.S. and delivers more driving pleasure without sacrificing the performance of the European version

By Dutch Mandel



The aero panels added to the Three Series when it becomes the M3 attract attention even when not painted in Electric Salmon Tartare

The radar detector's wail focuses attention. The alarm has been a long time coming; this driving stint across Pennsylvania's Turnpike has been boredom's payback for the privilege of flailing BMW's new M3 around tight Lime Rock Raceway, where driving is an exercise that must be done with rapt attention. BMW thought track time a proper way to introduce "the two personalities of the M3"—freeway cruiser and back roads guerrilla. They were right. With this

new offer, BMW has looked the question of performance—a question not easily answered with other recent Three Series cars—squarely in the face.

Now, lurking behind shrubbery in the turnpike's median is someone interested enough in the car that he's spraying it with microwaves. Understandable. Speed aside, the M3 can't help but attract attention. It does so with uncanny regularity, whether it's idling at a filling station or blazing down a two-lane. On this particular car, color

adds to its attention-getting. BMW calls the hue Henna; we refer to it as Electric Salmon Tartare. Even in one of three other available colors—metallic silver, metallic gray or white—any M3 is instantly recognizable as the BMW Motorsports (hence the "M") version of the yupster's quichemobile.

This is not the first time we've seen the M3. It made its debut at the September 1985 Frankfurt Auto Show and has been available in Europe for some time. Now it is available through U.S. dealer channels in

limited numbers only—2400 will be brought here this year—and it is arguably a *better* car than the version sold in Europe.

How so? The European version we drove flat-stick last fall along the autobahn (AW Nov. 3, 1986) was less refined than the M3 whose thick shoulder bulges are within our trooper's radar range. This M3 is more polished in almost every respect, yet gives up little in performance. Not wimpy and not harsh—it's simply a pleasure to drive.

Not that this will necessarily be enough to make the M3 a hot seller here. Granted, the M3 helps BMW climb back to the upper realm of performance car makers. But Mercedes-Benz, seems to be smarting from its decision to sell its small sporty 190E 2.3-16. Since its introduction in late 1985, the 16-valve has not been a resounding sales success. Total 1986 sales? A scant 1202. As a strengthening deutschemark adds to an already steep price, there are rumblings that M-B plans to drop the Cosworth-headed Baby Benz from its line.

BMW, however, is unconcerned. It has high hopes for the M3 here. This has been the company's most fertile market, planted with buyers who've shown as much affection for the *status* of owning a kidney-shaped grille as for the *performance* of the cars. Knowing the appetites of those who've bought Bimmers recently, BMW expects all 2400 cars will be scooped up quickly.

Which doesn't mean the car's sticker won't stop a few in their tracks when it comes time to write checks. While Mercedes-Benz today asks \$43,420 for its 190E 2.3-16, BMW will price the M3 at \$34,000 initially. To put that into perspective, when we first looked at the M3 (AW Nov. 4, 1985) our International Editor estimated the sticker at a then-hefty \$20,000.

Gee, Biff, were we wrong. Today, that 34 grand represents a differential of nearly \$11,000 between the M3 and the least expensive Three Series, the two-door 325. In fact, the M3 only costs a grand less than a four-door 535i. And several thousand more than a Corvette or Porsche 944. Is the new car worth the price of admission? At first, and with still-distinct memories of the European version, we would have said no. Now, after spending time with the U.S. version around the track and around town, we have second thoughts.

The Euro M3 we tested was a buzz box. Its high-revving motor chattered, transferring vibrations through the racing-patterned gearbox to the driver. This assessment may well have been prejudiced because that test included the luxurious and sporty M5 and M6. But still, the M3 seemed a raw ride.

This U.S. M3 has a much different nature. The high-revving motor, a 16-valve 2.3 liter four banger, still winds to 6750 rpm, develops 192 horses, and moves the car from standstill to 60 in 7.6 seconds. And that's just the half of it, because zero-to-60s are not this car's strong suit. Torque



Drag coefficient drops to 0.33 from 0.37 of stock Three Series, a benefit appreciated fully when radar guns aren't present

peaks at 170 lbs ft at a rather high 4750 rpm and it plants your tail all through the powerband once the motor turns above 2000 revs. However, with relocated and buffered engine mounts and three-inch-thick, hood-mounted insulation (it looks like a topographic map glued to the bonnet's underbelly) carved to fit precisely into engine bay gaps, no undue rumble intrudes into the cabin. That includes an absence of quake in the ultra-smooth Getrag five-speed. Like the Euro M3, this one is capable of 145 mph—a terminal velocity we found with ease along German autobahn, but wouldn't dare approach with jail-happy troopers here.

One of the things the U.S. M3 does share with the Euro car is what's now laughingly known—thanks to Detroit marketing mavens—as the "Euro Look." The M3 is fitted with flared rocker kick-panels and bulging fenders; these meaty slabs of metal and plastic give the boxy Three Series Bimmer a mad-dog stance. Then there's the rear wing, an almost ungainly device that, in conjunction with the rest of the grab-bag assortment of lips, flares and spoilers seems almost certain to increase drag. Not so. The body parts are a quantifiable asset—they lower the coefficient of drag (and lift) from the non-bulked Three Series' 0.37 to 0.33, a substantial gain. (But likely imperceptible to most drivers.) Also adding to better aero numbers is an entirely new backlight, bonded with epoxy so it, like the windshield, is flush-mounted.

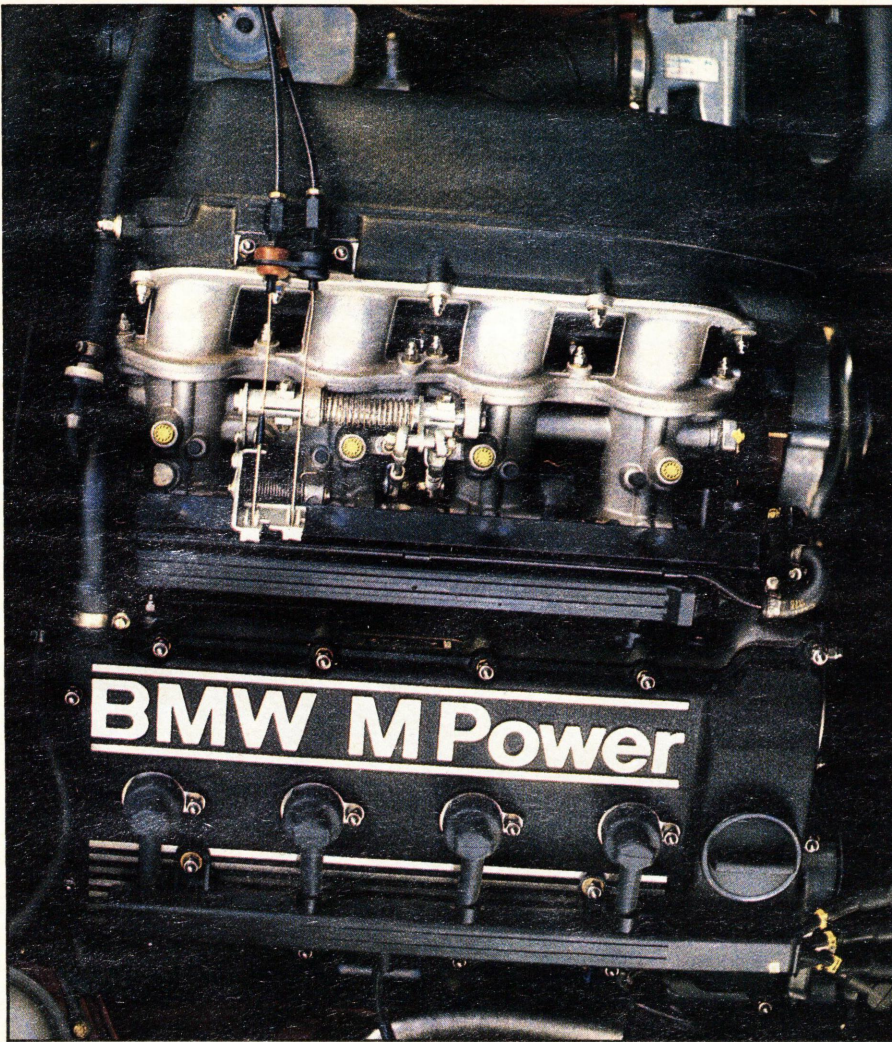
While the M3's muscle-bound body is first to catch the eye, it's the roadworthiness that captures the heart. There is real delight in a morning's commute; the M3 gobbles up freeway ramps with ease. Not to sound trite, but weekends were made for this car, or vice versa. Take it to an S-double-C-A Solo II match-up, slap on a set of autocross



sneakers and you're ready for the world. That's how we'd like to see it used: As a plaything of the motorsports kind. That's what God and BayEmVay planned for the M3 originally with its original 5000-unit run of this Group A homologation special.

And run is the operative verb. The way this car works a piece of asphalt—the twistier the better—shows it has the dexterity of a race car without the ride harshness. With fully-independent suspension on all corners, the M3 is easily one of the most balanced cars available. A car that exhibits neutrality with a hint of front-end push. But don't think it's an understeerer; find a favorite corner, lift off the throttle and then stand back on it. What you'll quickly find is just your basic throttle-induced oversteer. The severity depends on how quickly you react and how quickly you can keep power down on the healthy 205/55VR-15 rubber. Feed steady input to the steering, and the car behaves as a well-trained animal should—only to your commands. The other real pleasure with the M3, like all BMWs, is the security of knowing there's an anti-lock braking system should real problems arise.

Do not be mistaken: This isn't only a



While the 2.3 liter four still winds to 6750 rpm, improved sound insulation keeps things quiet for driver and passengers

racer waiting for track time. BMW has gone to its typically great lengths to make the car's interior a capsule of comfort. Trimmed in smooth black cowhide—seats, steering wheel, shift knob and gauge cluster—the cockpit looks like nothing short of a leather warehouse and is appointed better than many U.S. luxury cars. Everything on the inside comes as standard equipment: stereo, electric windows and two-way power roof. The whole schmeer is included in the price.

If only the seats were better suited to long distance runs. Rarely in testing do we get to evaluate long-haul capabilities. That wasn't the case with the M3. After the thrilling twists and turns of Lime Rock, we headed westward for Motown. The verdict: the seats need work. We know they've been designed with excruciating attention to firmness and comfort, but we also know that distance driving in Europe often takes less time than in the U.S. As we neared Harrisburg, our thrumming lumbar regions demanded a lower back bolster or support.

But right now, it's not the seat's firmness

SPECIFICATIONS

Base Price:	\$34,000
Wheelbase, (in):	100.9
Length/width, (in):	171/66.1
Curb weight (lb):	2735
Powertrain:	Front inline dohc 2.3 liter/140 cu in four, four valves per cylinder, iron block, alloy head, 192hp @ 6750 rpm, 170lb ft @ 4750rpm, rear-drive five-speed manual
0-60 (sec):	7.6
Top speed (mph):	143
Mph at 1000 rpm in top:	27.0
Suspension:	Ind. front MacPherson struts, lower control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; ind. rear semi-trailing arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Brakes:	vented front discs, solid rear discs, abs
Tires:	205/55VR15
Mpg/range:	24.5 mpg x 15.3 gal = 374.8 miles

that's making us squirm. The officer's KR-10 radar gun has draped a veil across a dozen or so 'pike runners, none of whom looks the part of offender quite the way the Electric Salmon Tartare M3 appears. The Bimmer's detector is at full snarl, and the I-76 remoras who've attached themselves to the M3's bumper back off in unison. The trooper, intent on completing the report of his latest victim, doesn't even look up. The BMW has gotten away with it again. ■

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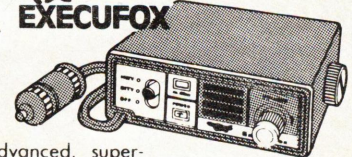
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