



FIRST DRIVE MAZDA 3

Protegé replacement rises from an amalgam of 'world parts.'



We have all been so mesmerized by the changes of fortune at Nissan that the revival of Mazda has gone largely unnoticed. Although Ford has had control of its Japanese affiliate since 1996, it wasn't until 2001 that Mazda revealed its Millennium Plan, an all-new model lineup that would give life to what—the Miata aside—had become a dull and boring range.

Against all odds, the RX-8 continues Mazda's rotary adventure. The mid-size, V-6-powered Mazda 6 s made it onto our 10Best list for 2003, and the 6 i's four-cylinder engine became the standard four-in-line motor for the Ford world. Now comes the Mazda 3, which replaces the 323 in Europe and Japan and the Protegé in the U.S.

Here at *Car and Driver*, we like the Protegé, which won an economy-car comparo as recently as November 2002. And last May, we said the turbocharged 170-hp Mazdaspeed Protegé "rewards real drivers," although it lost in its contest to the Dodge SRT-4 and Ford SVT Focus. That's interesting because the Mazda 3 is, in all essentials, a Focus—not the current model, but the new small Ford that appears in Europe as the C-Max minivan this autumn and worldwide as a five-door hatchback in 2004.

The current Protegé has nothing in common with the Focus or its predecessor, the Escort. Mazda's new plan required its small car to be an integral part of the Ford C1 family, along with the new Focus and the replacement for the Volvo S40/V40 (see page 38). Ford doesn't talk about platforms anymore; this is "global shared technology," where each company is able to pick and choose from a basket of components and systems. But look at an unclothed Mazda 3 and examine its specs, and it's clear it shares the elements that make the current Focus such a good, fun-to-drive all-around car.

The Mazda 3 will be offered as a four-door sedan and five-door hatch, but it is the latter that will first come to the U.S. Engine choices will be a 150-hp 2.0-liter and the 2.3-liter four-cylinder from the Mazda 6, upgraded to 170 horsepower.

We had an early preview of the Mazda 3—a five-door with the 2.0-liter and five-speed manual—on a sinuous proving ground near Paris and found the car had most of the sharp precision of a Focus without

feeling quite as stiff over the bumps. Although Ford's rivals are moving toward steering with electric power assistance, the C1 variants have conventional hydraulic assist fed by an electric pump. Engineers at Ford and Mazda think this gives more natural steering feel. We agree.

The five-door makes a case for itself as one of the new genre of sport wagons. Although it doesn't look it, the Mazda 3 is actually 1.3 inches taller than the current Focus and is spacious for its size as well as easily adaptable with folding rear seats. One downside to the car's shape is that the reverse-angle rear-most side windows leave a big pillar area that inhibits rear-quarter visibility. Otherwise, the styling, with its distinct shoulders and raised hoodline makes a connection with the handsome Mazda 6.

The interior has managed to depart from the plain-vanilla norm of the cheaper Japanese cars. Areas that you feel and touch have soft materials and finishes. Bright-rimmed instruments have interesting lighting. Surprisingly, the aluminized plastic that forms the center panel of the Mazda 6 is not used here. A more sober piano-black finish enhances the quality appearance, but the rotary climate controls feel flimsy.

The four-door sedan shares few of the five-door's skin parts, and its coupelike lines are a marked contrast to the more angular hatchback.

The Mazda 3 and its Volvo equivalent made their debuts last month at the Frankfurt auto show, around which time the first version of the new Focus, the C-Max, went on sale in Europe. The C-Max—a compact minivan trying to be a sporty hatchback—is the best-driving vehicle of this type but isn't the most practical of minivans. Some mini-minivans have seven seats and arrangements for stowing two seats under the floor when not in use, but the C-Max has only five seats.

Richard Parry-Jones, Ford's head of global product development and the architect of the sharing system that is designed to give economies of scale while maintaining product differentiation and brand integrity, sees no problem with a sporty minivan: "These vehicles may be bought for sensible, practical reasons, but why shouldn't they also be good to drive?" It's a fair point.

—Ray Hutton