

POWER PLAY

Brian Palmer kept his senses while experiencing the magic of four new Ferraris in one day — but only just

MARANELLO Concessionaires Ltd could have chosen some God-forsaken desolate, wind-blown spot of the British Isles in which to have sampled the current Ferrari line-up and we journalists would still have come running and left content. As it was they centred us on a tiny village in the Oxfordshire countryside. Great Milton echoed to the sound of expensive machinery — a sensation it must be acclimatising to since master chef Raymond Blanc opened his superb restaurant, *Le Manoir Aux Quat' Saisons*

I will not disappoint you by saying that lunch was other than the fulfilment of a gastronome's dreams and in an idyllic setting, but lest you should feel that my judgement of such expensive toys was clouded by good wine, let me hasten to assure you that my driving impressions were gained *before* lunch.

Lined up in the Manor House courtyard for us were four Ferraris, three — Mondial, 328GTB and Testarossa — in Ferrari red (what else?) with a fourth 412 in oddball silver. With such a mouth-watering array it would be impossible — nay an impertinence — to pretend to really know such machines after so short an acquaintance. But those tantalising moments told me a lot about four very different Prancing Horses and, like the food that followed, made me anxious to repeat the experience.

Ferrari 412

The patrician 412 would have stood out from the others even had it been daubed in matching red. Longest-lived of all current Ferraris, the 412 carries on the proud tradition of front-engined V12 machines. Some say it is dated but the 412's classic lines offer an elegance that is worlds away from the almost volcanically elastic shapes of today's mid-engined Ferraris. It performs a different function too, for it is aimed at another class of Ferrari clientele. Call it the Chairman's Ferrari, if you will.

The magic V12 engine now boasts a 4,943cc capacity thanks to bigger bores while careful tuning has brought peak power up to 340bhp at 6,400rpm. In the process refinement and fuel consumption have both benefited. Unusually, for a Ferrari, automatic transmission is offered and, usually, specified on this model underlining its special role in the Ferrari family. Yet again it is this, of all Ferraris, that has been endowed with ABS brakes.

Inside and out the 412 whispers suavity and good breeding, and the cabin is by far the most luxurious of the four, with the best integrated instruments and controls proclaiming to the world that it is a marque in its own right and not a jumped-up Fiat. Beautiful leather abounds. You feel totally divorced from the rough and tumble of everyday life once inside.

Of course it is possible to potter around the countryside in such a magnificent motor car but you are always aware that in such a state you have a sleeping giant at your command. Given a crack of the whip, those Prancing Horses will whisk you up to 60mph in 8 seconds and on to 155mph if you have the will. Thus excited, the silky-smooth V12 takes on a muted roar like distant thunder which only the most stoic soul would or could resist.

Double wishbone suspension front and rear is as modern as one could wish with self-levelling ride control at the rear. At low speeds ride can seem distinctly knobbly but everything smooths out impressively as the speed builds. Grip is impressive on 240/55 VR 15 Michelin TRX rubber and handling is extremely well balanced for so large a car. My memory of the steering, though, is that it is a shade too heavy and 'dead', giving the impression that the 412 is less than agile.

Growing a shade old-fashioned then, despite some clever cosmetic attention to styling and some technological improvements, the £58,449 Ferrari 412 2+2 coupé nonetheless overcomes its deficiencies with its overwhelming character and fascination. A Jaguar or a Porsche may offer better value for money but it will be a sorry day when there is no longer a classic front-engined V12 Ferrari.

Testarossa

The Testarossa is something else! The ravishing redhead — for that is the literal translation of *Testarossa*, named after the colour of the cam covers on a famous Fifties forbear — may have 12 cylinders like the 412 but there the similarities end. Some would say it is the ultimate roadgoing Ferrari and with its 180mph/0-60mph in 5.5 seconds performance and £70,000 price tag that's hard to argue with.

It's when you come to drive the brute that you realise it is a lot closer to a sports racer than a sports *tourer*. The Testarossa feels very wide — all the more so in narrow Oxfordshire lanes — making even Aston Martin's battleship V8 seem pocket-sized. Part of the reason is that you sit so much lower than in the Aston, again emphasising the feeling that the car was born more for Monza than for Middlesex. Every control feels dead and heavy or just dead heavy; have they forgotten to fit the suspension, you ask?

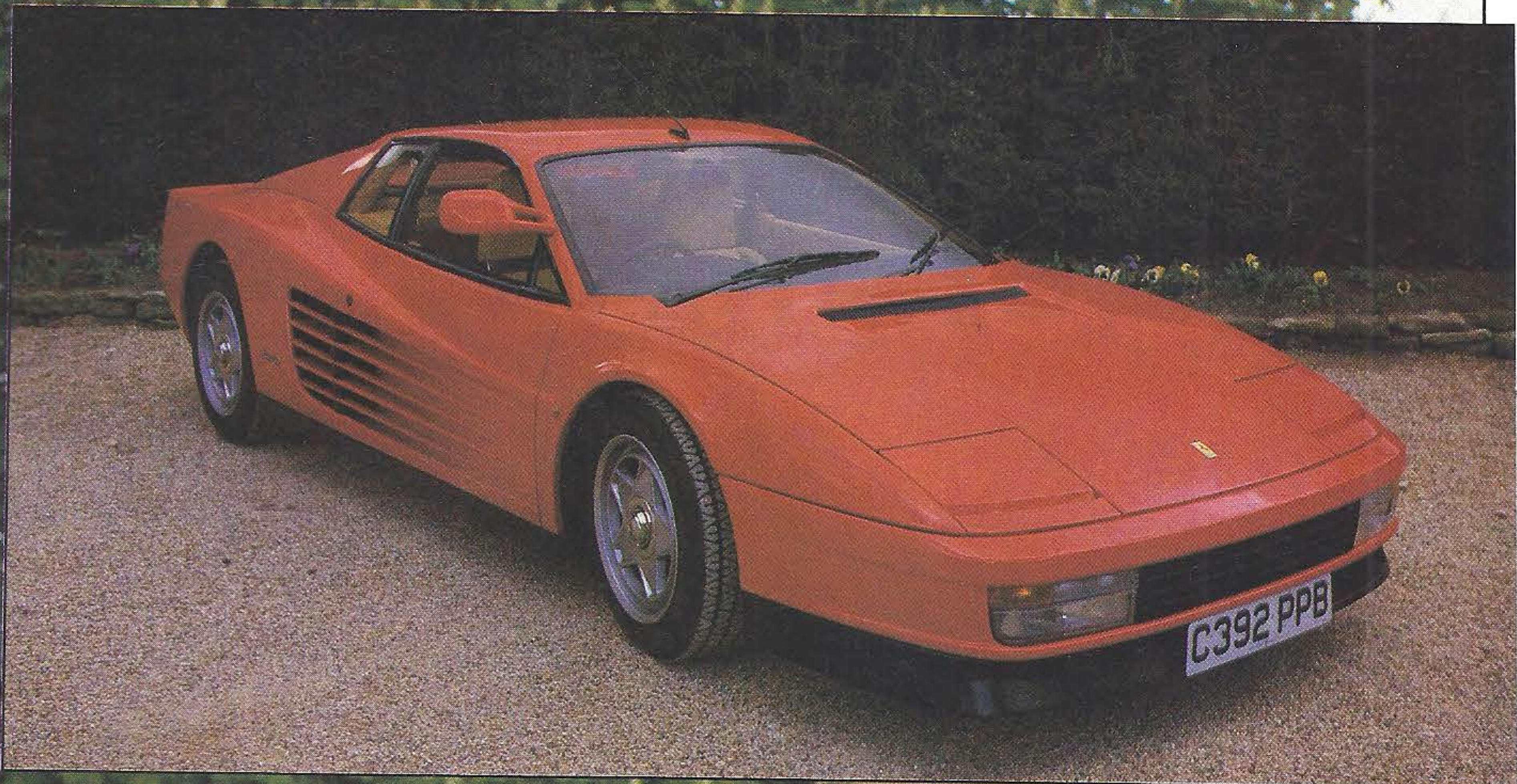
Then you press the accelerator pedal. A thousand banshees belt out a fearsome wail that adds goose-pimples to your goose-pimples; the scenery flashes by like the Starship *Enterprise* on warp speed. The whole thing makes you gulp in disbelief! You have that uneasy feeling that you are unleashing the very Devil himself but the experience is one that you are loath to relinquish. Slowly your brain cells acclimatise and you are aware that the car rides much better at these speeds, there seems nothing wrong at all with the steering (apart from a slight tendency for the tyres to 'nibble' at white lines) while the brakes are nothing short of miraculous.

There was insufficient time to sort out



Ferrari 412, inset, has traditional lines and classic V12 engine. Mondial is unhappy amalgam of mid engine and four seats, but still formidable performer, above and right





handling though my guess is that things could become pretty hairy at high speeds. Curiously, Ferrari have set the 390bhp Boxer 12 on top of the gearbox which rather defeats the object of having it at all. One is very aware of what I call the 'Dumb-Bell' effect which can make the Testarossa feel twitchy and nervous even in the dry. But make no mistake it is an engineering *tour de force* and that's reason enough for some to buy it.

Mondial 3.2/328 GTB

I had expected to be very impressed by the Mondial as one of the marque's newer models. But I wasn't. Don't get me wrong, it is a fine car by most standards. It has a tremendous V8 engine now boasting 3185cc and some 270bhp at 7000rpm, with 150mph plus top speed and taking about seven seconds to reach the 60mph yardstick. Somehow, though, the Mondial does not move me in the way a Ferrari should.

Of course its whole conception is something of a compromise. For starters they've tried to make a 2+2 out of a mid-engined chassis (it would be laughable in view of the room to attempt to call it a four-seater) which is either brave or foolhardy. It strikes me that Ferrari ownership is an indulgence to be shared at most with one close companion, though not necessarily always the same one. To try to make a Ferrari too practical is to destroy one of its chief attractions. The other is to destroy its looks. The Mondial is the ugly duckling of the group.

It would be absurd to suggest that the Mondial is anything but supremely competent on the road — and yet that feeling of compromise, in steering, in suspension, in engine sound is only too apparent. It is not as aristocratic as the 412, nor yet as full-blooded as the Testarossa.

If it is hard to express exactly what I do not like about the Mondial, no such problem exists when taking to the 328GTB. From the first instant the car feels right. The whole thing is *alive* in its response, it is an extension of the driver, it fits like a glove. The 328GTB is faster than the Mondial because it's lighter, but that is only part of the story. The chassis is beautifully balanced, the engine less muted (why stifle a Ferrari engine?), the brakes superb and the ride impressive. What makes this £35,000, and therefore cheapest, Ferrari special is its integrity.

Interior trim and instrument and control revisions make this Ferrari more habitable but taller people still find the driving position a little strange.

I'd probably add £1,000 or so to the price for the targa-topped GTS and there are various extras available that would add another couple of grand which makes this 'cheapy' Ferrari expensive compared with opposition against which it can more than hold its own. You could go for the Porsche 911 Sport for its renowned German efficiency and image or a Jaguar V12 for its traditional virtues, silence and value for money. In the end though a Porsche is only another Porsche, a Jaguar a Jaguar, whereas, a Ferrari will always be a FERRARI. ▲



Above, Testarossa interior has low-set seats and space for no more than two. Restrained fascia and huge wheelarch intrusions are features

Below, four pop-up headlights on the 412 complement the indicators and 'daytime' lamps. Magnificent V12 gives silken 155mph performance

