



TEST DRIVE

By Winfred Cross



1993 Mazda MX6 LS



1993 Mazda 626 ES

Photo/Calvin Ferguson

Mazda is full of surprises. Most thought Honda would be the first Japanese company to offer a car that would classify as a domestic product, but Mazda beat Honda to the punch.

The newly revamped 626 sedan and the gorgeously curvy MX6 are built at the AutoAlliance International Inc., in Flat Rock, Mich., co-owned by Mazda and Ford Motor Co. Both cars also have enough American content to classify them as domestic products.

Both the MX6 and the 626 are clean designs. The 626 can be described as Japanese conservative at its best. It will not stand out in a crowd for its jellybean shape, but it won't get lost either.

The MX6's shape is anything but conservative. It is svelte, curvy and down right sexy. It looks the part of a no-nonsense sports coupe.

The interiors of both cars are tastefully done. Mazda wisely got rid of the clunky, stacked dashes and replaced them with more flowing forms. All the controls are placed logically and are easy to see. The steering wheels are fat, with air bags, thus ditching the automatic seat belts.

The 626 has ample amounts of leg, head and hip room for front and back passengers. The back seats of the MX6 are best reserved for small children or medium sized adults if the trip is short. If you have a six-foot acquaintance that is particularly annoying, putting him in these seats would be a legal form of torture.

But the MX6 isn't designed to haul a bunch of people. It's designed to haul its own tail down the road very quickly, and in style, especially if you choose the deep breathing V6. The engine is found only in the LS model for the MX6 and the ES 626.

This is an engine with exceptional smoothness -- from its lack of noise, vibration and harshness to its delivery of power. Carrying 164 horses, the engine will get the MX6 to 60 mph in about 7.5 seconds.

The MX6's handling is excellent, remaining firmly planted to the asphalt, even in sharp curves at ridiculous speeds. The ride is comfortable for a sports car, getting rough only on the worst of pavement.

In fact, that's the only fault of the MX6 -- it's too smooth. This is more of a luxury sports coupe than a full-blown sports car. That's not a bad trait, but the car's direct competitor is Ford's hot Probe GT, which is essentially the same car except it's a bit faster, more aggressive and a little less expensive. Mind you the Probe doesn't get the fine leather seats, exceptional stereo or top notch build quality, but it doesn't lack badly in any of those categories (except the stereo).

The 626 is another story. It has the kind of smoothness you want in a family sedan. It is not as wide as a Toyota Camry, but it has the same interior volume. Five adults can ride in comfort.

The ride is just that -- comfortable. The 626 doesn't handle as sharply as the MX6 but it will hold its own with any other car in the class.

Both cars are equipped with driver's side air bags, four-wheel disc brakes, 15-inch aluminum alloy wheels, 60/40 split rear seats and dual body colored heated power mirrors.

The MX6 LS base price is \$18,575. Options on my test car included floor mats \$70; air conditioning \$850; power sunroof \$560, compact disc player 700, anti-lock brakes \$800; leather package \$1000. With \$350 freight, the as-

tested came to \$22,905.

The 626 ES has a base price of \$18,725 it was equipped with the exact options as the MX6 (except air conditioning which is standard) which brought the as tested price to \$22,395.

Those are premium prices but these are premium cars. They may be the best domestic cars you can buy for the money. And that's saying a lot.

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