

'If you want to convince anyone of the merits of rear-wheel drive, the M3 CS will do it'



Above: CS may not be as extreme as the CSL, but past tests have suggested that it may well be the best E46 M3

No contest, then? The CS is as good as ever, flowing in the most wonderful, malleable way over difficult roads, the chassis offering fine adjustment, the steering direct, pure and feelsome. If you want to convince anyone of the merits of rear-drive, the CS will do it.

This is not game over, though. CSL owners are an enthusiastic bunch and, four years after the model's launch, they've improved it. According to Steve Davies, owner of this CSL, the majority of UK cars are now running the huge AP Racing brakes and regular Goodyear Eagle F1 road tyres found on his car. There's no question it feels more special than the CS when you slip into the

Current M5 (below right) and M6 (right) use the same 500bhp 5-litre V10, making for effortlessly rapid progress, but their size, weight and extra sophistication means neither can match the intimacy found in the older models



tight embrace of its race-style seat, survey the swathes of carbonfibre and take hold of the slim, suede-covered steering wheel rim. There's more menace and purpose to the note of the straight-six too, here partly because Steve's car runs a race cat.

I'm expecting the CSL to feel good on the smooth, sinuous road that leads from the car park, but it's not – it's brilliant. The brakes feel sensational, offering massive stopping power with great feel and progression, and the chassis is fabulously direct without being nervous – imagine the agility of the E30 M3 in a slightly bigger, heavier package. It's direct, sharp and very grippy, yet adjustable too, and even the SMG 'box is superb, punching up and down the ratios faster and smoother than the SMG in the CS.

Then the road gets lumpy and tricky. It's the deciding moment between the two models for me. The CSL is firm, but riding on the Goodyears it has more than enough suppleness to cope with rural Welsh roads. It gets the nod from me.

## E60 M5 (2005-present) and M6 (2005-present)

Years of gradual evolution, of shape and detail refinement, meet an abrupt end in the

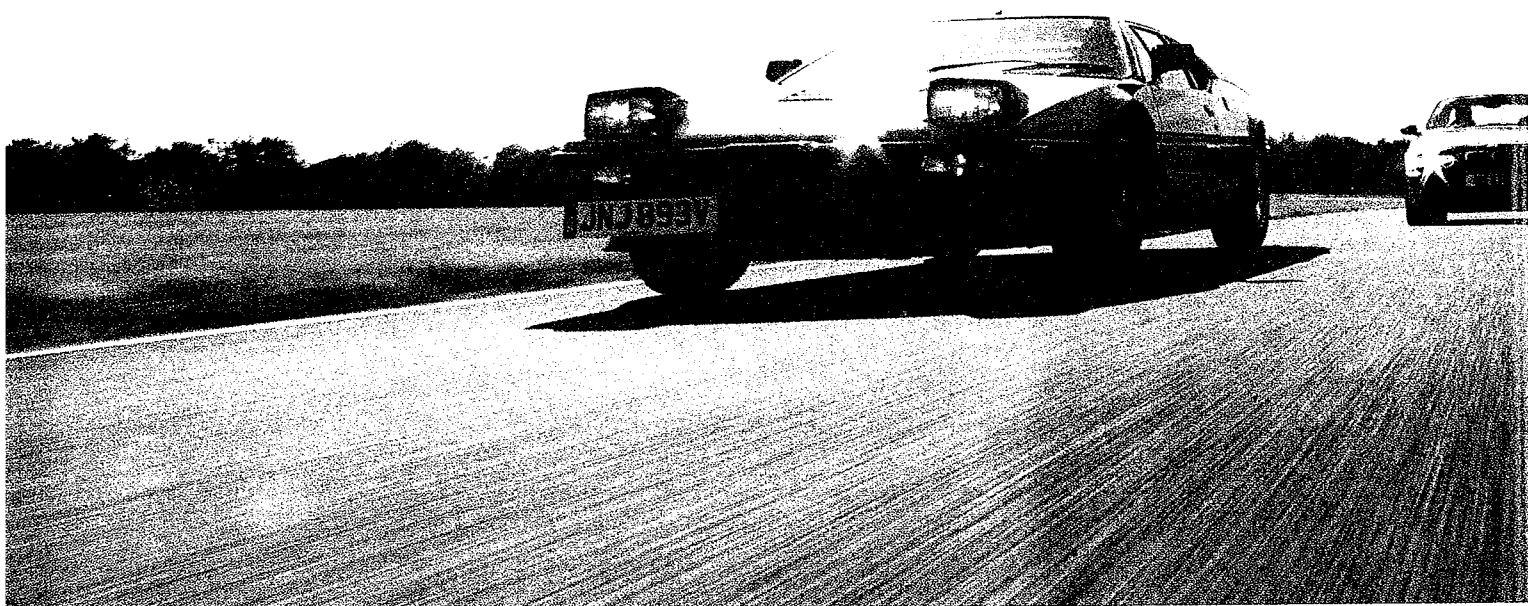


current M5. Chris Bangle has arrived. As ever, the treatment that turns the cooking 5-series into the M5 is subtle – four tailpipes, big wheels, side skirts and deeper bumper aprons – but alongside its predecessors the E60 M5 looks less convincing, and huge. The same goes for the interior, which is wilfully less conservative and cohesive. iDrive has reduced the switch and button count significantly, but there's a multitude of buttons for tuning the way it drives, including

two-stage EDC, adjustable shift speed, DSC and a 'power' button, not to mention the 'M' button on the steering wheel.

There's revolution under the bonnet too, of course, with a new 5-litre V10 engine delivering a mighty 500bhp, while a succession of light and precise manual gearboxes give way to a seven-speed SMG paddle-shift type. From the original M5's 1431kg, the M5 now stands at 1830kg. That's only about 100kg more than the V8 M5, but

Z4 M Coupe (bottom) is our favourite of the current M-cars in this part of the test, but it can't match the appeal of the M1, E39 M5, E30 M3 and E46 M3 CSL (right)



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it doesn't take long to discover that the new car isn't as rounded in its abilities.

About two corners is enough. The first thing you notice is that, even without the power button pressed, the traction warning light is flickering out of the turns. Then you heft the wheel into an inviting turn and, after an initially keen bite, mass takes over and the car shifts wide of the apex. There's no question that the warbly V10 is delivering the goods, though. Thumb the M button and throttle response sharpens and all 500bhp is at your disposal. The shove is mighty and sustained, upshifts thudding home briskly before the onslaught resumes. Ride quality is impressive too, but crucially you never feel connected with the car and the road as you do in other M-cars.

The mechanically identical M6 is a more satisfying package. It's more stylish inside, has more supportive seats, and the V10 sounds beefier too. Point it down the same road as the M5 and it feels like a smaller car,





better controlled, too. It weighs 120kg less, which probably helps, yet compared with the other M-cars there still seems to be a filter between you and what's happening at the road surface.

'The ease with which the M5 and M6 make huge speeds is impressive,' says Green, 'and they'll cover huge distances effortlessly, but that's not really what you want from an M-car, is it?'

### Z4 M Coupe (2006-present)

Like its Z3-based predecessor, the current M Coupe brims with character and visual appeal. Nestled under that long snout is the E46 M3's storming straight-six, all 338bhp of it, and it delivers acceleration that's eye-opening even if you've just stepped out of the M6. It's a more exciting and involving ride too, the engine loud and proud, the gearshift of the five-speeder snappy in that knuckly way that defines BMW's manual gearboxes, and the chassis is up for a bit of fun if you get stuck-in mid-corner in second gear.

Sure, like the original M Coupe, it's not a

cutting-edge drivers' car, getting a bit ragged over difficult surfaces, but it has a verve and intimacy that make it the pick of the current cars in this section of the test. Will it make the cut? Probably not. 'The old girl gets my vote in the battle of the Coupes,' says Green. 'You have to dig that bit deeper to find the new car's spirit.'

### The reckoning

After two days on glorious roads with twelve of the finest M-cars, each of our testers nominates their top four, with no conferring. I was expecting two, maybe three cars to make everyone's shortlist but, astonishingly, there is virtually complete agreement.

Everyone has chosen the M1, the E30 M3 and the E39 M5, and all of us have nominated the E46 M3 CSL too, apart from John Hayman – he went for the CS.

The M1 makes the cut not because it's such a landmark, or because it's the most exotic, as Catchpole explains: 'It stands head and shoulders above the others in terms of looks and charisma and so had to work extra hard

to earn its place, but it did.'

Almost all of us were worried that the E30 M3 would fall short of our high expectations, but in fact it exceeded them. 'You don't need 500bhp,' says Vivian. 'It's a cliché, but less is more.' Hayman is unequivocal: 'Perfect, isn't it? Its tactility stands out.'

The first two generations of M5 had their admirers, but the third was almost universally praised. 'Everything is in proportion; it's so right,' says Vivian. Catchpole goes further: 'Anyone setting out to make a rear-drive V8 saloon should get themselves into an E39 M5, because it is the idea perfected.'

Surprised to see the CSL make the cut? While its single-mindedness was recognised when it was new, it was hard to see how it justified the massive price. Now, its abilities enhanced and broadened by the stronger brakes and road tyres which most wear, it's a compelling car. 'Everything is so instant,' says Green. 'A kindred spirit to the E30,' says Catchpole.

Those are the four, then. Time to bring on the new M3...