

Name: First Drive: 2013 Ferrari F12berlinetta

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Over the past decade, Ferrari road cars have experienced enormous growth in build quality, speed, and handling. Two years ago, the 599 GTO showed its taillights to the famed Enzo, beating the supercar around the Fiorano test track by a thick second.

Now, the new F12berlinetta, which replaces the 599, can haul its screaming self from start to finish in one minute, twenty-three seconds -- a clock tick faster than the GTO. In other words, a well-equipped, smooth-riding, luxuriously appointed, rather rotund GT beats Ferrari's carbon-tub, world-slaying, named-after-the-man-himself supercar by two long seconds.

Astonishing, yes, but we've come to expect this kind of continual performance evolution at Ferrari and, after all, the Enzo is now ten years old. The last thing we expected to hear straight from the prancing horse's mouth, however, was that one of the primary goals for the F12 was to be more fun to drive under the limit.

Fun? That's something with which Ferrari hasn't seemed to be concerned. Sure, Italian thoroughbred sports cars are fun: by virtue of their looks, their sound, their price, and their speed. But the latest Ferraris have gained more and more capability at the expense of being slightly clinical. Modern Ferraris

have slightly anesthetized steering and carbon-ceramic brakes that aren't particularly predictable and automated gearboxes that work well on track but always don't react the way you want.

Not anymore! The F12 might be Ferrari's fastest car ever, but more important, it's the most fun Ferrari in years. Slap on a grin and hop on in; this is a rolling festival of perfection; a glistening red celebration of beauty, performance, and involvement that shames the all-new Porsche 991-chassis 911, the Lamborghini Aventador, and everything between. Imagine supercar performance, luxury-car accoutrements, and driver's-car steering. It is, if you can indulge us in a made-up word that's as silly as the car's official name, F12brilliant. And here it is, broken down into its components:



THE ENGINE

A gift from the gods of combustion.

The F12 uses a pimped version of the FF's 6262-cc, 65-degree, direct-injected V-12. With a much higher compression ratio (13.5:1 versus 12.3:1), freer-flowing intake and exhaust, and more aggressive cams, it produces 80 additional horsepower for a total of 731 hp at 8250 rpm and 509 lb-ft at 6000 rpm. The massively oversquare (the bore is 94 mm, while the stroke is only 75.2 mm) twelve responds instantly to the throttle, spinning like a cocaine-fueled Tasmanian devil from idle to its 8700-rpm redline and making the best V-12 noises in the business.

For that last part, you can thank 6-to-1 exhaust headers and intake resonance tubes that carry the induction honk straight into the cabin -- a guttural, eardrum-punishing delight previously enjoyed exclusively by the petrified occupants in the car you were about to overtake. There isn't a single point on the RPM and load continuum where the V-12 makes noise; it's always music -- mechanical music, intake music, and exhaust music.

THE TRANSMISSION

A true automatic mode short of perfection.

Of course, as is the case with all current Ferrari models, no manual transmission is available -- it would be more fun, but it certainly wouldn't be faster. The Ferrari/Getrag seven-speed dual-clutch automatic transaxle is the only available gearbox, and it's gotten better and better with time. Its shift times are, for all intents and purposes, zero. The F12's computers will play tricks to cut power briefly under full-

throttle shifts, giving a glorious exhaust bark on upshifts or an extended burp during on-power downshifts. The transmission is programmed not to shift down past fourth gear at highway speeds, so even though it has a perfectly smooth automatic mode, you'll have to grab a paddle if you want full passing power. Speaking of fuel economy, Ferrari claims a 30 percent reduction in fuel consumption, but this wasn't achieved by absurdly long gear ratios. In fact, the F12 has no overdrive, and it reaches its 211-mph top speed in seventh gear.

The F12 is the first V-12 Ferrari to use the E-Diff electronic locking rear differential, and it's nearly magical in its ability to put power to the ground. Of course, mechanical grip is aided by a rear-biased weight distribution (54% of the F12's weight is on the rear axle), a five-link rear axle (the 599 used wishbones) and enormous Michelin Pilot Supersport tires (315/35s at the rear, 255/35s at front, all on twenty-inch wheels.) Still, successfully applying 731 horses to the ground in first gear is no small feat -- and it results in a 3.1-second zero-to-62-mph time, according to Ferrari.



THE STEERING

With easily the best steering of any Ferrari from the past decade, the F12's superfast rack might just be the best part of the whole car. With an overall ratio of just 11.5:1, the small inputs are met with big steering reactions, and on the road, you almost never need to shuffle-steer. It is, in typical Ferrari style, very light, but the effort builds palpably as cornering forces increase.

Just as so many car companies have begun to embrace electric power steering, Ferrari has reset the steering feel benchmark -- and, of course, it's with a hydraulic-assist system. When asked why they've stuck with hydro, Ferrari engineers responded by saying steering feel is too important to the company and no current EPAS solution is good enough. Amen. In fact, even true purists who disapprove of power steering altogether might still be impressed: although the F12's steering is feather-light, it offers the best steering feel this side of an unassisted Lotus Elise.

On-center feel is ever present, with the small wheel telegraphing every relevant bit of information you need. Driving supercars is always stressful, especially on narrow Italian roads, but the F12's talkative steering takes half the stress away. Knowing exactly what the front tires are doing and precisely where they are -- even if information on the latter comes from actually feeling the tire roll over the tar strip you saw -- makes all the difference in the world. It helps, too, that the front end is high enough that it doesn't scrape.

In the rare event that the F12 should understeer, you'll feel the wheel go limp in your hands. When (not if) the rear end comes around because you've asked for way too much power in a corner, the wheel will dance in the direction of countersteer. This is a car you could drift blindfolded. Porsche's

steering engineers should go order an F12 right now.

THE CHASSIS

...where's the carbon fiber?

The F12 is made of aluminum, not carbon fiber like you might have expected. The upcoming Enzo replacement will, of course, be made of carbon -- but that ultra-low-volume, ultra-expensive hypercar will use entirely different construction techniques. The F12's price point and production volume require construction techniques that, Ferrari says, would actually add weight. In this case, apparently, aluminum isn't just the better choice, it's the lighter choice.

And we can't argue with the weight figure: Ferrari calls the curb weight 3593.5 lb, and says so without a smile or a wink. Though we've found that Ferrari's scales are liberal, several engineers offered a wager that the F12 is lighter than the Lamborghini Aventador. Lamborghini might claim the carbon-tub bull weighs 3600 lb, but we've seen it on a scale and the real number starts with a four. Of course, the F12 is a bit smaller than the Aventador (and it doesn't have four-wheel drive). Interestingly, it's also significantly smaller than the 599 it replaces -- 2.0 inches shorter and 0.8 inch narrower. But it's the third dimension where the size has shrunk so much: the F12's roof is 2.4 inches lower than the 599's. The engine is mounted 2 inches closer to the tarmac, resulting in a center of gravity now just 18.1 inches high -- 1.2 inches lower than the 599's.

The low center of gravity helps reduce body motions. From the driver's seat, you'd swear there's no suspension travel at all -- except that the photos show body roll in corners and the F12's ride is appropriately compliant over bumpy pavement. Credit the computer-controlled magnetorheological suspension for all of the above. The F12 is no McLaren MP4-12C magic carpet in the ride department, but it's never harsh, never unduly firm, and always comfortable -- unlike a certain bucking bull from Sant'Agata.

THE COMPUTERS

Computer, what computer?

Neither midcorner bumps nor straightaway jumps seem to faze the F12. Driven in anger, the newest Ferrari handles like a formula car, almost always perfectly neutral with a slight tendency toward oversteer. Since all of the large masses are well within the wheelbase and since so much of the weight resides in the rear, it rotates more like a mid-engine sports car than a front-engine GT, turning in instantly and rotating on an axis right at the driver's spine.

Even driving the F12 like it begs to be driven, you'll never notice that the whole experience is computer controlled. This is the brilliance of modern Ferrari: the computer is continually adjusting an incomprehensible number of parameters, but from the driver's seat, the F12 feels like there are no computers at all. The stability control doesn't interfere or even intervene, it merely influences. The F12 feels like a race car that always wants to kill you but somehow never does. It's nothing short of

unbelievable.

Drive the F12 like a New York cabbie with binary throttle inputs and grand-mal steering spasms, and the stability control warning light will flash continually -- but the Ferrari maintains a safe trajectory. With all systems on, it's the most idiot-proof pussycat this side of the cowardly lion -- even while it's setting Enzo-beating lap times.



THE STYLING

A fistful of air through the fenders.

Looking at the F12's profile, it's hard to imagine a long, tall V-12 engine mounted completely behind the front axle. But that's exactly where it is. (A couple things of note: the front of the engine is right at the front axle centerline, so there's no room for a FF-style four-wheel-drive system -- something Ferrari admits it might have considered in retrospect. However, there is room at the rear for a KERS-type hybrid system. Also note that the side sills are extrusions that allow for thicker walls with no external dimensional changes -- read: convertible.)

The F12's styling is perhaps the best-yet interpretation of the new swept-back headlights of the 458 Italia and the FF -- thankfully without the FF's smiling anime air intake and with none of the California roadster's awkwardness. On the road, it instantly reads as a Ferrari GT: understated, elegant, and timeless. There's no doubt that Ferrari took a purposefully conservative route here -- after all, the funky FF is at the opposite end of the spectrum.

That said, the F12 is aerodynamically advanced, with both a low coefficient of drag (0.30) and as much downforce as you're likely to see in a road car (a claimed 271 lb at 124 mph.) Some of the downforce comes from the Air Bridge, a novel aerodynamic device you might not have noticed. Look closely at the photos and you'll see that part of the upper front fenders has been removed, creating a tunnel that allows air to flow across the hood, out to the sides, and along the doors, creating downforce in the process. It's a neat idea to take away part of the body for aero, when, conventionally, designers have

added stuff (wings, spoilers, splitters, diffusers). To our eyes, the Air Bridge is more elegant and sophisticated than tack-on appendages, besides.

Inside, the F12 is typically Ferrari gorgeous, with enough controls and buttons on the steering wheel to confuse a C++ programmer. A new infotainment system has been codeveloped with Harman-Becker, but it wasn't finished in time for our drive. We can, however, report that the dash screen is very high-res and sharp, but unfortunately it's only visible to the driver -- a significant ergonomic foible on a car meant to take well-heeled (read: well-aged) couples on long trips.

Still, the seats are comfortable, the driving position is natural, and the visibility? Well, you can't see much behind you, but there will be an optional rear-view camera for parking. At least you can see well out the front, where your view is punctuated by the tops of the air bridges.

THE CONCLUSION

The F12 is both a ten and a one.

The 599 Fiorano was a perfectly nice car when it debuted, but its evolution models highlighted that it wasn't quite perfect out of the box. Its understeering ways were rectified by the handling-package 599 HGTE. Then, it was finally given the dose of high-rev mania it needed with the 599 GTO. On the other hand, the F12 debuts as a whole; one complete vehicle composed of near-tens in all categories. There is probably no other car on earth that combines this level of performance, elegance, drama, and luxury with this much driver involvement.

Of course, that comes at a price, and the F12berlinetta will cost as much as a beautiful house. But since Ferrari's V-12 sports car has added "driver's car" to its supercar performance, it saves a bit of dough. See, you can sell both your 599 and your Porsche 911 to buy an F12 because it does everything better than either. That's the last thing we expected to say, but it's exactly what we've been wishing for.