WE'VE COME TO Ferrari's Fiorano test circuit, near the factory in Maranello, to drive the F12 Berlinetta, the company's new two-seat, front-engine, 12-cylinder GT. At the moment I'm reorganizing my own viscera with some high-energy cornering and braking so hard at the famous hairpin I'm making myself sneeze. A suction-mounted GoPro camera I had stuck to the driver's door has been spun off into Albania.

The new F12 Berlinetta is Ferrari's new sports car with 740 horsepower that can speed up to 212 miles per hour. WSJ's "Rumble Seat" columnist Dan Neil test drives the power vehicle at Ferrari's Fiorano test circuit. (Photo: www.ferrari.com)

Ferrari says the F12 is its quickest, most powerful and most dynamic street car to date: 740 horsepower, a top speed of 212 miles per hour, and zero to 124 mph in 8.5 seconds, which is about as quick as an all-wheel-drive Bugatti Veyron. With its carbon-ceramic brakes glowing like the hinges of hell, the F12 will decelerate from 124 mph to zero in 426 feet. Gesundheit.

It certainly sounds fast. Maranello's engineers, having identified the ardent resonance of a Ferrari V12 engine as a critical customer demand, have played the noise up something grand. The 6.3-liter's red, crinkle-finish intake plenums have these strange hollow projections at the front—passive resonators that help evenly pressurize cylinder filling even as they thrum with glorious induction harmonics. Likewise, the equal-length exhaust headers have been carefully tuned to evoke the third and sixth harmonics that are the aural signature of V12 engines (because a V12 comprises two banks of six cylinders, and 2 times 3 equals 6 and 2 times 6 equals 12). In any event, the sound—the braying, bawling, soaring, roaring, bonfire-of-currency sound—will bring a tear to your eye.

Still, don't let the noise, or the test-track venue, fool you. This is very much a road car, with a suavely modern, leather-to-the-hilt interior design; splendid seats; big stereo; and optional fitted Poltrona luggage the likes of which would make Louis Vuitton plotz right there on the Champs-Élysées.

With the F12 grand tourer, Ferrari has again used a blowtorch of code-writing to loosen the bolts of physics. Dan Neil has a review on The News Hub. Photo: AFP/GettyImages.

It drives like a road car. The hydraulic steering is quite quick, yes—2.0 turns lock-to-lock, 11.5 degrees/degree of steering angle—but the steering effort is surprisingly light and the car doesn't have that snap at the wheel, that commitment to direction that race cars have. Ferrari's engineers confirmed that even with all the electronics switched off, the F12 chassis (front wishbone, rear multilink, with new dual-coil magnetic dampers) has a modest degree of understeer dialed in, to help keep clients out of the weeds. Good idea, I reckon.

Photos: Fit for the Gods

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Yes, the F12 is mighty. The 6.3-liter, naturally aspirated V12 directs more than 500 pound-feet of torque through the seven-speed, dual-clutch rear transaxle. Among other things, the F12 powertrain is immensely flexible. If, motoring along in fourth gear at 1,000 rpm, you nail the throttle, the car will generate nearly 0.5 g of longitudinal acceleration until it hits 6,000 rpm. Passing-lane euphoria.

But with 3,500 pounds of grand touring car to move, even this splendid engine—direct-injection, dry-sump, a sky-high 13.5:1 compression ratio, 8,700-rpm redline, 65-degree V12—can't hope to serve up the sensations of a track-focused machine, that distinctive corner-exiting moment when you jump into the throttle and the engine's torque hits you in the back like a bag of wet cement.

Meanwhile, the last remaining edges have been filed off the seven-speed dual clutch transmission. Previous to the F12, upshifting events (typically 100 milliseconds or less) would cause momentary pauses in acceleration, just enough to nod the occupants' heads. The F12's clutch hardware and software revisions have all but zeroed that out. In fact, at full throttle, the car's upshifting is masked with a microburst of extra torque.

The kinesthetic quality of the F12 is therefore that of a supremely civilized, well-tempered GT: easy to drive, supple, frictionless, balanced, undertaxed, impeccable, imperturbable. Compared with a raw-as-a-wood-chipper race car, or even one of Ferrari's midengine sports cars, this thing is a comfy couch.

And so, I am confused. By rights, the F12 shouldn't be able to do what Ferrari says it can do, which is to lap the Fiorano circuit, the company's time-honored reference track, in 1:23. That is outrageously and

completely drooling mad. Remember the Ferrari Enzo (2002-04), 651 hp, 3,200 pounds, skeletal in carbon fiber, pushrod suspension, F1-derived V12 mounted amidships? They might as well have called it the Death Race 2000. That car lapped this joint in 1:25, two full seconds slower than the F12.

Picture that: Line up an Enzo and an F12 and say "Andiamo!" In one minute, 23 seconds, the F12 howls across the line. Two drowsy, indolent seconds later, here comes the Enzo. If it had a bell it could sell ice cream.

“Ferrari has again used a blowtorch of code-writing to loosen the bolts of physics.”

So, one would reasonably ask, how? How can this big, amply furnished front-engine berlinetta, with nearly 18 cubes of cargo space in the back (with bench seat folded), outpace a carbonized wraith of a car like the Enzo? Weight-to-power ratio? No. The F12 has virtually the same weight-to-power ratio as the Enzo (4.8 lb./hp). All things being equal, the lighter Enzo should be more agile around a racecourse. And yet it ain't.

Tires? Yes, absolutely part of the answer. With an additional decade of tire development baked into them, the F12's custom Michelin Super Sport tires (255/35R20 and 315/35R20, front and rear) are significantly more adhesive and dynamic than the Enzo's Bridgestones. Also, better tires have a multiplier effect as they give the chassis engineers more opportunities, grip-wise.

Brakes? Again, they don't hurt. The F12 brandishes the new generation of Ferrari's heat-shedding carbon-ceramic brakes. Up front, six-pot calipers grip discs the size of novelty sombreros. The big brakes, working with car's track-tuned ABS, the stability control and the fancy magnetic dampers' "body-control logic," enable the F12 to perform truly miraculous feats of trail braking. I'm coming into Turn 1 about 165 mph, going to 100% braking just before the 100-meter mark, downshifting like mad, and letting the car rotate (sweetly, predictably) with several degrees of software-managed oversteer as I bleed off brake pressure, as drama-free as a quickie Las Vegas divorce. I only wish I were this good a driver in real life.

Chassis balance? OK, now we're getting warmer. The F12 (aluminum-alloy space-frame with alloy body panels) is actually smaller (2 inches shorter and 2.5 inches lower, as well as 154 pounds lighter) than the car it replaces, the 599GTB. The F12's center of gravity is 18 inches off the deck (an inch lower than the 599GTB's) and the car's weight distribution is 46/54, front/rear—exactly that of the midengine Enzo, by the way. All that puts the F12's dynamic point of leverage, its polar moment chakra, if you will, almost precisely at the base of the driver's spine. If you were a lizard, you'd think you'd grown a red tail.

2012 Ferrari F12 Berlinetta

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Price as tested: $330,000 (est.)

Powertrain: Naturally aspirated, direct-injection, 48-valve, 6.3-liter DOHC V12 with variable cam timing and lift and stop-start; seven-speed dual-clutch automated manual transmission; rear-wheel drive with electronic torque vectoring

Horsepower/torque: 740 hp at 8,250 rpm; 509 at 6,000 rpm

Length/weight: 181.8 inches/3,573 pounds (est.)

Wheelbase: 107 inches

0-60 mph: 3.0 seconds (est.)

0-124 mph: 8.5 seconds (mfr. claim)

Top speed: 212 mph (est.)

EPA fuel economy: 16/23 mpg, city/highway (est.)

Cargo capacity: 11/18 cubic feet, rear seatback up/down

Corner-exiting acceleration? Aha! Bingo. This is where the F12 makes up most of its time around Fiorano, and it's a result of, well, all of the above: the massive, free-revving torque; the evolved tires; the new rear links; the chassis-stabilizing magnetic dampers; and, of course, the company's brilliant torque-vectoring rear differential (E-Diff), which directs power to the rear wheels in a way that helps turn the car.

Picking up my lap again, it works like this: Touch the apex, look ahead, open up the wheel and, well, just stand on it. The E-Diff's software "grip-estimation integration" calculates the maximum torque allowable for the given steering input at each wheel and puts it down, summarily. The stability system even lets the car's tail end step out handsomely, heroically, until it doesn't (I estimate about 10 degrees of power-on oversteer before the computers say n'more). There's no sawing about. All is quiet at the wheel.

Ferrari says the car's corner-exiting acceleration is 30% higher than the 599GTB's, with 32% less steering-wheel-angle activity.

It's a velvet nuke, this car. Again Ferrari has transcended the limits of what seemed possible in a road-going GT. Again it has used a blowtorch of code-writing to loosen the bolts of physics. Again it has made touch-the-sky performance accessible to talentless bums like myself. It's brilliant.

But is the F12 Berlinetta two seconds more fun than the Enzo? Obviously not. And this points to Ferrari's continuing dilemma. In order to be this fast, this amazing around Fiorano, the F12 requires another heaping helping of go-fast automation, another layer of intermediary software, more spooky action at a distance.

All things considered, I'd rather have ice cream.