

2012 Ferrari 458 Spider



First Drive Review

Ferrari's newest roadster is not absolutely perfect.

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Despite some compelling evidence to the contrary, the Ferrari 458 Spider is not perfect.

For example, some people believe that certain details of the design, such as the flat nose or three-pipe exhaust or staircase of LEDs in the headlamp clusters, are weird or ugly. But those are matters of taste, and those people are clearly wrong. Also, Ferrari offers no manual transmission in the 458, spider or coupe. We're a bit more inclined to take that complaint seriously.

And then there's this: During our first drive of the new 458 Spider on an autostrada near Bologna, Italy, we followed another writer who was driving a pearlescent white 458 Spider doing its best Buick Lucerne imitation, right-turn indicator blinking for about five miles. We pretended for a moment or two that this might have been the writer/journalist signaling to other motorists that they were right to think of Ferrari drivers as doofuses not worthy of such a car. But we knew it was the fault of the driver's unfamiliarity with the car's odd steering-wheel-mounted turn-signal buttons. In Ferrari's zeal to locate pretty much every control away from the car's column-mounted shift paddles, the signals—controlled by a stalk in just about every other car ever built—are now actuated by buttons on the steering wheel. Covered in knobs and buttons and blinking lights, the wheel looks like what you'd find in a Formula 1 car, or like a dinner plate covered in knobs, buttons, and switches. It makes you feel racy but not so much *look* racy.

Commence Fawning

There's pretty much nothing else to complain about, because the 458 Spider is a spectacular car. We've said as much about the coupe version, the 458 Italia, after every encounter. Following our last drive, we concluded that the Italia is "perhaps the closest man has come to creating an animal." We stand behind that. An animal, that is, that has Benzedrine racing through its vessels like electricity through copper, its humming synapses welded open and its pupils wide. This is not an animal you would let in the house.

All of this means that the 458 Spider is like an animal created by man that can remove its head.

The topless 458, which arrives in January, is the fifth generation of Ferrari's mid-engine V-8 volume car to get the spider treatment. But the 458 is not like the cloth droptops of the 348-through-430 Spiders and actually is more similar to the targa-style GTS versions of the earlier 308 and 328 models.



Ferrari has been noodling around with the novel flip-off hardtop for almost as long as it has been doing the modern spiders. The company considered a single retracting fabric piece, Renault Le Car-style. It thought about stacking hard roof panels, à la Pontiac G6 with the panoramic roof option. It tried, in limited production, the 575-based Superamerica, which used a single-piece electrochromic glass roof that pivoted 180 degrees open and closed.

The 458 Spider's solution is the best combination of all these approaches. As on the Superamerica, the roof (or a large piece of it, anyway) pivots back and forth. Unlike on the Superamerica, a small piece of the roof at the trailing edge separates, tucks vertically behind the seats, and is covered by the main roof panel—all of which is then covered by a hard, rear-hinged tonneau cover. What's left is a small power-operated rear window located between two big structural buttresses that act as integrated rollover protection. The whole transformation takes but 14 seconds.

Ferrari claims that this arrangement is 55 pounds lighter than a conventional softtop arrangement. Downsides? Well, there's no chance that Ferrari can do an engine-viewing window as it did on the 360 and 430 Spider. The engine would be half-blocked by the retracted roof, anyway. And unless you are bringing sheik-level money, don't bother asking for an electrochromic roof panel. Ferrari has no plans to offer one. The new top arrangement steals a nominal two millimeters of headroom compared with the coupe. So no high-top fades, okay?

Naturally, this rejiggering required some redesign of the rear quarters. On the coupe, the air intakes are snorkels that draw air from right behind the side windows all the way back behind the engine before directing it forward into the raging 9000-rpm supernova on a leash that is the Italia's 562-hp, 4.5-liter flat-crank V-8. The spider's engine, which makes the same 562 hp at 9000 rpm and 398 lb-ft of torque at 6000 rpm as the coupe's, now gulps air from large, cavelike openings near the trailing edge of the rear deck.

Ferrari modified the exhaust, too, adding different baffles to the mufflers and such to make the sound better for top-down driving. We're not at all sure what better sound quality for top-down driving means, really. What we know is that our drive partner for the day was dead-on correct in describing the vicious bark of the engine on downshifts as the engine's way of hollering, "Screw you!" Well, the staccato rhythm was right, if not the substance of the message.



A Slightly Less Spectacular 458 Is Still Really Damn Spectacular

Ferrari says that spider buyers have a “sporty but not aggressive driving style” compared with a coupe customer. The spider is also more likely to see daily use than the coupe and is more likely to have its passenger seat filled with a passenger more often. Also, the spider is claimed to be 110 pounds heavier than the coupe, and its structure is not quite as stiff, despite reinforced sills and the structural buttresses. All of this is supposed to indicate that the spider is less intense and less sporty than the coupe. Maybe so. But such is the heat of the fire in the belly of the basic 458 arrangement that it’s not so easy to notice the spider is perhaps a degree or two cooler than the coupe.

The spider’s steering ratio is absurdly quick, and its turn-in behavior is immediate and certain. Its seven-speed, dual-clutch automatic transmission snaps off shifts so efficiently and quickly that the whole idea of a conventional manual transmission seems quaint, sort of like using a wood fire to heat your house instead of a high-efficiency gas furnace. It takes more attention and skill to maintain something approaching a consistent temperature with wood, but it’s not the way of the future, no matter how much of a disappointment that may be. The suspension is every bit as unfettered by undulations and bumps as it is in the coupe, while returning the litheness and neutrality we’ve come to expect.

In other words, the 458 Spider’s behavior is just like that of the 458 Italia, or so close that the difference is almost academic. Ferrari has taken the occasion of the spider's introduction to modify the coupe's traction- and stability-control and transmission software to allow more wheelspin and yaw rate and to provide firmer shifts in race mode. The spider is plenty sporty enough, though. It is a nonstop piloerection.

You will pay 10 or 12 percent more for the spider than for the coupe, a percentage increase consistent with the price of past spiders. That puts the 458 Spider’s base price somewhere around \$258,000, although what eager early spider buyers will actually pay is outside our considerable powers of estimation. Ferrari figures it will make between 1500 and 2000 458 Spiders per year and that you’ll have to wait 12 to 18 months to take delivery of your baby. That’s plenty of time to practice the operation of the turn signals. We love it when a plan comes together so nicely. [View Photo Gallery](#)

