

2012

Mazda3i

Sedan SkyActiv Review and Road Test

The “Zoom Zoom” Compact Comes Back “Stronger”
By James Hamel | April 24, 2012



Just as people can sometimes come and go in your life and relationships can come to an end, so too can partnerships among car companies come to a point of conclusion either acrimonious or amicable. Usually in such cases there is one party that people assume will flourish after the alleged “break up” only to leave the other to fall apart. This is especially true of automakers who hop into bed with other car manufacturers with the amorous regularity of a “Jersey Shore” cast member and pretty much anything that moves.

Recently when Ford sold its long held majority stake in Mazda many industry pundits assumed that the much smaller Japanese firm stood little chance of surviving on its own. But clearly these individuals underestimated what the masterminds of the iconic Miata and RX-7 had up their sleeves. Not only is this car company surviving but it is actually thriving thanks to terrific new models like the compact crossover suv CX-5 and the revitalized 2012 Mazda3 SkyActiv sedan and hatchback, which this year have been racking up record sales.

And the 2012 Mazda3 SkyActiv is not just selling well, it stands as an undeniable statement of intent from this spunky automaker that they agree with the sentiment of pop singer Kelly Clarkson’s inescapable worldwide mega-hit “What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger.” Sure, Ford may have dated Mazda for years only to leave them at the altar but based on our driving experience with the 2012 Mazda3 this company has well and truly “come back swinging” to take a line from the aforementioned song. And, yes, thanks to all of the changes made to the 3 as part of the SkyActiv engineering program, it now kicks the newly introduced Ford Focus in the rear harder than Ms. Clarkson can rock a stage.



Exterior and Interior

Despite all of the changes made under the 2012 Mazda3's skin, the exterior and interior of this already stylish and well-built compact car look pretty much the same as last year. Besides some discreet badging, the one clear indicator of the inclusion of SkyActiv engine technology is a blue cover for the engine which is located in the usual location under the hood. No, Mazda didn't go crazy and put it in the back seat. If that were the case we wouldn't be calling this car ground breaking but rather we would be calling for a psychiatric analysis of Mazda's corporate and engineering team. Or we would be calling them a French car company.

But being that we just happen to be in the category of drivers who appreciate Mazda's latest unique design direction, even with the smiley face front grille, we weren't too sad that the 3 held onto its unique appearance. The interior is also a hit in our eyes thanks to its sporty styling and the very generous number of standard features. Any compact car could probably use a bit more rear legroom but that's only a complaint here in North America where we grow our young as tall as California Redwoods. So really, that's our fault.



What is SkyActiv Technology?

Although some of the percentages and technical information can be confusing to the layman, the changes Mazda made to the three extend far further than just a new engine and transmissions. First off, they did something unheard of in a mid-cycle refresh and redesigned the already capable chassis to improve handling and a "feeling of one-ness" with the car. That last part was how Mazda explained the chassis work and while it sounds like marketing hyperbole it is in fact true that the 2012 3 handles with a razor sharp precision that would be alien to previous owners.

But that wasn't all that Mazda changed in regards to the 3's bones as they were not only able to shed 220 pounds in overall curb weight but also made the body 30% more rigid thereby ensuring it was named a ["Top Safety Pick" by the NHTSA](#). This plus a number of smaller engineering enhancements also gave the unique benefit of increased stability at higher than legal speeds not that we would ever engage in such shenanigans. Okay, that's totally a lie. We are just afraid that no traffic court will accept an overabundance of "Zoom-Zoom" in your 2012 Mazda3 as a valid excuse for your accelerative indiscretions.

We were most impressed with the 220 pounds that the 3 lost since the last model year as you truly can feel how it afforded this car a feel when cornering that is very Miata-like. Not only that, but this weight loss also makes the 2012 Mazda3 feel a whole lot faster than last year's model which is something the improved horsepower figures wouldn't tell you. Truly, this weight loss has turned the 3 into a "fighter with footsteps even lighter."

Yes, that's another quote from the Kelly Clarkson song but we are quite convinced she wrote it about Mazda and choose to ignore that she sold it to Toyota for a series of their ads. We are sure that automaker threw money at her for the privilege and we assume Mazda instead chooses to spend its money on smart engineering, not on gimmicky ads.

Pricing, Features and the MyMazda Smartphone App

Our 2012 Mazda3 iTouring sedan stickered out at just \$18,450 yet came very nicely equipped with the most delicious 2.0 liter 155 horsepower/148 lb. feet of torque 4-cylinder and 6-speed manual transmission engine combination, air conditioning, power windows, door locks and mirrors, 16-inch alloy wheels, Bluetooth, AM/FM/CD 6-speaker audio, halogen headlamps and pretty much everything a new car buyer could want or need. It really is the whole package for one very low price.

Now, everyone has a smartphone nowadays don't they? Well, not only can you stream your favorite songs from your smartphone through your 2012 Mazda3's Bluetooth to play via the sweet sounding standard audio system but there is also a special app available for iPhone and Droid users. Known simply as the "MyMazda" app, this service is downloadable at no charge to owners of either of those phones and enables owners of Mazdas to keep track of maintenance, find a dealer and even locate their vehicle again in a parking lot. We really could have used this app the last time we parked our car in the Disneyland parking lot. That place is bigger than Disneyland now.

The Competition

There is a line in Kelly Clarkson's "Stronger" mega-hit where she sings, "you know in the end, the day you left was just the beginning" and that is a sentiment we think fits perfectly with Mazda no longer sharing ties with Ford. Not only do we think that the 2012 Mazda3 is a better car to drive than the Ford Focus but it is also a much smarter buy price wise. And the Focus is pretty fun to drive. And we haven't gotten to how it gives bloody noses to every other compact car on the market today as quickly as we imagine Kelly Clarkson would to any guy who tried to get too fresh on the first date.



So, to put it in perspective, the 2012 Mazda3 is more fun to drive and more affordable than any of the competition and also managed in our hands to be one of the most fuel efficient as tested. The 2012 Mazda3 has EPA estimates of 27 city/39 highway with the 6-speed manual but in our hands it returned an incredible 34 miles per gallon over the course of a week. Our averages usually wind up with fuel economy below the city ratings so we applaud Mazda's fuel economy accuracy.

So there you have it. We have driven the 2012 VW Jetta, Chevy Cruze, Honda Civic, Toyota Corolla, Suzuki Kizashi, Ford Focus, Mitsubishi Mirage, Hyundai Elantra and Kia Forte and we still think that this Mazda outclasses them all quite handily. There really is no better choice in this class.

Driving Impressions and Safety

Yes, ladies and gentleman, the 2012 Mazda3 just sauntered into our parking lot with a perfectly weighted SkyActiv 6-speed manual transmission with deliciously short throws mated to the truly amazing and all-new 2.0 liter inline 4-cylinder SkyActiv motor good for 155 horsepower and 148 lb. feet of torque. Sure, Mazda has been hyping this new technology pretty hard but rest assured that one test drive will alter at the molecular level what you expect from a compact car.

Just drop the perfectly weighted clutch and be amazed at how the 2012 Mazda3 will make it appear like you are a world champion autocross racer with 30 years of stick shift racing experience under your belt. The engine revs to redline with a zest and a vim and a vigor we can only say is truly life affirming. If you revel in the act of driving as a joy inducing experience then we have got the car for you. After each and every drive we returned home refreshed, giggling like giddy schoolchildren who just played a prank on their teacher.

The 2012 Mazda3 also is a refined cruiser at freeway speeds with ride quality on a par with vehicles a size up in the Accord and Camry class. But on twisty roads we loved the quick reacting handling settings and the razor sharp steering feel which is nearly on a par with the Miata for grins per mile. So there you have it, the 2012 Mazda3 is ready to have fun when you are but also knows when to shut up when you need a relaxing cruise home. Truly, this compact car is the perfect driver's companion.

And before you worry about a car this size being safe enough for you and your family, take heart knowing that the 2012 Mazda3 was named an IIHS "Top Safety Pick" thanks to its top ratings in their crash tests. But then one would only assume that to be true given all of the body rigidity improvements afforded by Mazda's exemplary SkyActiv engineering program. Kudos to Mazda for building such a world class ass kicker!



Conclusion

Over the course of the past year there has been little doubt as to the increasing importance and the very grown up feel of modern day compact family cars. Sure, the Civic and Corolla have been around for decades but only now do they have real competition from serious contenders from the likes of Hyundai, Chevy, Ford and VW. Soon even Dodge will be able to absolve itself from the sins of the Neon thanks to the upcoming Dart replete with shared technology from none other than Alfa Romeo.

Now, considering how many players there are in this segment and how new most of them are you would think that a model like the 2012 Mazda3 would be an also ran among a field of thoroughbreds. Well, if you think that then you clearly haven't driven the

2012 Mazda3 with the truly transformative SkyActiv technology. It quite simply has turned a good car at the middle of its production life into a piece of engineering artwork that proves Mazda is an automaker to be reckoned with.

Now, we aren't saying that Mazda doesn't face challenges ahead after its split from Ford Motor Company but just as in life it is often times the ones that people expect to fail that wind up becoming the most inspiring success stories. We think Mazda proves it has that potential with not only this SkyActiv Technology but also with upcoming models like our choice for the best 2012 compact SUV—the svelte and style CX-5. Truly, this divorce from Ford didn't kill Mazda but only served to make it “Stronger.” This is miles beyond regular old “Zoom-Zoom.”



What We Loved About the 2012 Mazda3 SkyActiv

- The responsiveness of the engine and picture perfect shift action from the manual transmission
- The can't be beat pricing
- We just happen to love the way this car looks inside and out. So sue us.

What We Loathed About the 2012 Mazda3 SkyActiv

- The thought that someone might buy this car without the manual transmission as it really is the best unit we have tried in a very long time.
- We are reaching here but more rear legroom wouldn't hurt matters.
- Not being able to tell from the outside how revolutionary the SkyActiv treatment proved to be for the 2012 Mazda3.