

RETRO ROCKET

RPM's latest CSR project takes the blank canvas of a silver 996 C2 and turns it into something truly special. Enter the CSR Retro, with added Pasha

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Porsches and modifying. It's a slippery slope and, as many have discovered, once you've started, it's very difficult to stop. The motivation is to create something different, to enhance, to improve, to simply mess around and go on a bit of a journey. It's a balancing act, too. It's so very easy to get it badly wrong, but such is the vast industry that has grown up around making Porsches go faster, with a bit of research and imagination your perfect Porsche is out there. You just haven't built it yet.

And where did it all start? With the factory, of course. With racing in the genes, Porsche has always been adept at raiding the parts bin and creating 'specials', particularly where the 911 is concerned. Bits of this and bits of that. Think 911R with its wide arches and Fuchs up front and Miniltes at the rear. Not pretty, but needs must. RSs followed in varying formats and proved to be the inspiration for many 911 hot-rods. At varying points 911s have gone backwards and forwards depending on the prevailing winds of trend. Turn a classic

911 into a Turbo lookalike? Yep, fair game in the '70s and '80s when a pre '74 car could be had for peanuts. A '73 RS or any other type too expensive? No problem, wind back an SC or a Carrera 3.2. After all, with donor cars at £15,000 or less, it's a no-brainer. But that was then. Right now modding any sort of air-cooled 911 takes a bit more guts. Donor cars have tripled in price, so value and desirability lies in their standard, unmodified state. A £30k RS lookalike is now a £60k and beyond RS lookalike. It's still happening, but the market has changed.

So where does the mod squad head now? That's easy. They go modern. You won't have failed to have noticed that the 911&PW fleet has shifted mainly from air-cooled to water-cooled. It's a pragmatic choice based on what we can afford and how we use our cars. They are in the main everyday machines, not garage queens trapped by their inflated value. They are all of a certain age, too, whereby bits are wearing out, so it makes sense to replace and upgrade. Our fleet is of a value, too, where we don't have to be precious about



A beguiled Bennett at the wheel. Note hints of Pasha, but we'll come to that properly in a couple of pages

messing about. At £13k my own 996 C2 is something of a blank canvas and affordable. Strip it out and turn it into a junior GT3? Why not. Go fast road, with some suspension mods etc? No-brainer, or even keep as stock and wait for the market to turn around. It's a 911, so it will happen.

Part of the reason for choosing a 996 C2 was that it makes a perfect starting point. It's what the factory would choose. Simple, light, rear-drive, no complications. It's no surprise that the 996 GT3 used the narrow 996 bodyshell, just as it's no surprise that when Porsche creates something like the Sport Classic, or the GTS models, they start with a rear-drive format (although lately they haven't been able to resist applying GTS to just anything that moves. GTS Targa? Don't think so) and leave the front to handling and steering duties only. Sure you will get more oomph from a Turbo, but they're all about horsepower. For finesse and handling it's all about a C2,

particularly in the world of the 996, where the wider S models are just a little too civilised to lend themselves to modifying.

And here's the other thing when it comes to modifying modern 911s. With so much history to draw on, the possibilities and the inspiration are endless. Because the basic

ducktail and those Fuchs.

Which brings us neatly to this latest creation from 996 stalwarts RPM Technik and an amalgam of styling cues from the '70s, '80s and modern era. It's called the CSR Retro and it rocks. Starting from the blankest of canvases – a silver 996 C2 –

“ A 996 C2 is a perfect starting point. It's what the factory would choose ”

silhouette is the same, what worked then will work now. And Porsche is hardly backwards in coming forward when it comes to this sort of thing. We can name-drop the Sport Classic (currently changing hands at around a quarter of a million pounds) again, with its '73 RS inspired

they have created something that works on so many different levels – a hybrid of classic and modern influences. But let's start with its most radical feature. Forget about the Fuchs, forget about the ducktail, just peer in through the window. Whoa, that's Pasha. Well, it was going to happen

Hard to believe that a somewhat bland silver 996 can be so transformed. Ducktail is a great aero and visual enhancement. The Fuchs fill the arches and the stance is just right

one day. Porsche's frankly deranged chequered past has been on the cusp of a return for some time, and RPM have had the balls to do it. Think 928, think 911SC and Carrera 3.2. It may not be to everyone's tastes, but it's a fantastic talking point, which is exactly what you want if you want to draw attention to your wares. Other interior options, that we whole heartedly approve of, are tartan, houndstooth and Porsche logo.

We wouldn't normally get excited about an interior, but seeing as we're poking around inside, we might as well stick with it. Pasha aside, the interior of RPM's CSR Retro has been completely retrimmed in grey Alcantara (faux suede) and the effect is astonishing, bringing a very classy look and appeal to the 996's normally staid interior. It's the quality of the job, too. It looks completely factory finished from

dash top to door cards and seat bolsters, complementing the Pasha inserts. Adding a race car look is a dished Momo three-spoke suede wheel, which is a tactile delight to twirl around.

OK, so we've got the 'Changing rooms' bit out of the way. How about the exterior and underpinnings? Well, taking the body first, it's a simple and effective upgrade largely from the Porsche parts bin. Simply put, RPM have mixed a 996 GT3 Gen 1 front end with GT3 side skirts and their own carbon fibre 'ducktail' wing. The towering, crowning, most inspired styling tweak, though, is the application of genuine 18in Fuchs. Together with a perfectly judged ride height, the finish, the visual transformation and being the real article, their look is beyond question and certainly better than Porsche's own take on the modern Fuchs theme. They're ultra

light, too, at just 8.2kg (front) and 8.8kg (rear) per wheel, which counts when you want to minimise any unsprung weight.

Talking of which, RPM prefer to use the early 3.4 C2 Gen 1 cars for their various CSR projects because they are the lightest of the 996 bunch. At 1320kg a 996 C2 is a good 50kg lighter than a 993 C2. By comparison a 996 C2 3.6 is 1345kg, and even a Gen 1 Cayman S is 20kg lardier at 1340kg. Power-to-weight is half the battle, so you might as well start with something lithe and save a few quid in the lightweight process.

It's all well and good looking the part, but can the CSR Retro match its interior and exterior reboot, with the full driving experience? Oh, can't it just. I have to say I was hugely looking forward to getting behind the wheel of this latest RPM creation, and not least because I now



The real deal, 18in Fuchs take a lot of the visual glory here. They really suit the whole retro vibe. The Michelin Pilot Sport tyres are a class act, too, mixing grip with very low road noise



have my own 996 C2 3.4, which is crying out for some tweaks of its own. Added to that, I was able to get extended seat time in the CSR because we had signed it up to appear on the *911&PW* stand at the Porsche Club GB National Event at Althorp House. That meant I was able to return to it a couple of weeks after my first drive and try it on home territory on roads I know like the back of my hand.

But first the spec. Suspension-wise the CSR Retro uses KW Variant 3 coilovers all round, adjustable for ride height, bump and rebound. These are combined with Eibach hollow, adjustable anti-roll bars and fully polybushed suspension arms, topped off with RPM's fast road geometry

and ride set-up and configured to work with N-rated Michelin Pilot Sport tyres. Also fitted to this demo car are polyurethane engine mounts.

Engine wise the CSR is internally standard, but that's rather selling it short. For a start RPM are acutely aware of the M96 engine 'troubles' so this engine has been opened up to receive an IMS bearing upgrade. It also features a low temperature thermostat (994 3.4 engines run quite hot as standard) and is filled with Evans Waterless Coolant. So in terms of engine preservation tweaks, it's all covered. Adding a bit of sparkle and zing to the drivetrain is a CSR lightweight clutch and flywheel assembly, plus a Wavetrac

limited slip diff. Oh, and for noise and thunder, there is RPM's switchable exhaust, which can morph from plain fruity to Armageddon with lift-off artillery sound effects, at the push of a button.

Also optional, and fitted to RPM's demo car, is a bespoke engine management system with switchable fuelling maps which, in conjunction with the exhaust system and breathing mods, increases power by 25bhp and boosts torque by 10lb ft over standard.

So that's the parts countdown. The proof, of course, is in the driving experience, so just how does it go? Well, for me, it's all about the handling, and approaching the CSR Retro I was frankly

The CSR Retro's best feature – looks aside – is its handling. With KW coilovers and Eibach adjustable roll bars, plus polybushes, RPM have worked to create an excellent fast road set-up

frightened that the set-up would be just too uncompromising, a view tainted by the M030 suspension on my own 996 C2, and the general perception of coilover damper kits and polybushed suspension arms. I needn't have worried. RPM's set-up mixes firm with fair. The CSR Retro stays in contact with the Tarmac at all times, even the seriously broken stuff that surrounds RPM's Long Marston base. It's no magic carpet ride, but it works with the road with the tight control of vertical movement that's inevitably foreshortened by the lower ride height. The trick with this sort of set-up is to avoid running out of suspension travel by going too soft, or compromising by going too hard. In other words there is a

sweet spot that requires real experience and feel to get right. But when you do, the result is something like this and a set-up that you can really lean on and relax into. A bad set-up is the one that has you hanging on to the wheel as it jumps all over the road. A good set-up will see the car take the lead, with just subtle assistance from the driver, and that's exactly what RPM has achieved with the frankly mind-boggling variables available. It takes skill and experience to perfect.

The CSR Retro was impressive enough around RPM's local roads but, as already intimated, I had the opportunity to fling it down some of my own well-driven local routes and so therefore could judge the

CSR against 15 years of Porsche testing, which includes virtually every 911 variable, plus all the GT options, but most notably those with a 3 in the equation. It might only be based on a relatively humble 996, but then so was the first GT3. The CSR inspires a similar confidence. Point it and let it go, its movements pure 911, from the slight, constant side-to-side movement and the wriggling, fidgeting steering, to the characteristic squat of the tail under corner exit acceleration. All the stuff that has been ironed out of the 991 is beguilingly present with the CSR Retro. In fact it's beguilingly present with any 996, but enhanced here thanks to RPM's work.

Above all, what the CSR set-up brings

“ RPM's CSR Retro suspension set-up mixes firm with fair ”





The return of Pasha. Don't look for too long, it will make you go a bit funny! OK, so not for everyone, but in terms of making a statement, it's a bold one. Rest of the interior is trimmed with swathes of Alcantara. It's a quality job, too. Below: Solid engine mounts help keep engine mass under control

to the party is a confidence in what is going on between the tyres and the road and transmitted through the steering and the seat of your pants. The Michelins bring precision to the party, too, with grip and poise and an uncanny lack of road noise, which is often the bane of the modified Porsche. There is also a Michelin Pilot

thanks to the lightweight clutch and flywheel and that extra 25bhp doesn't flood the chassis. In fact, assuming that the CSR Retro is now packing circa 325bhp, with an extra dollop of torque, it feels perfectly matched to the chassis in such a way that it can be driven hard, but without any fear of being spat off the road should power

'holding back' going on here. Of course these things are both subjective and personal, but with the risk of repeating myself yet again, the base 996 C2 is the starting point, the blank canvas, and where you go from there is down to you. For some that's: "Nowhere at all, thank you very much. I'll keep my 996 standard," to which we say: "Good plan", because there will come a time when good, standard cars become sought after. But right now, with 996 prices where they are, and a ready supply of cars, why not be creative? From RPM's menu you could pick and choose where you want to go. A full interior retrim is perhaps tough to justify but, leaving that out of the equation, the CSR Retro here weighs in at around £30,000 all in, or to put it another way, about the same price as a new VW Golf GTI with a few options. That's a lot of 911 for the money and, right now, I'm very glad I've got a donor car sitting in the garage. When do we start? **PW**

“ So we rather like the RPM CSR Retro? Yes, you could say that ”

Sport Cup option too for more track focussed cars, and why not. This would make a great track day weapon, particularly now that GT3 have valued themselves out of the track day loop.

Engine and throttle response is enhanced

overtake grip. It's nicely analogue too, with no electronic interfaces offering artificial enhancements and intervention, usually at the behest of corrupting levels of power.

So we rather like the RPM CSR Retro? Yes, you could say that. There's very little



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