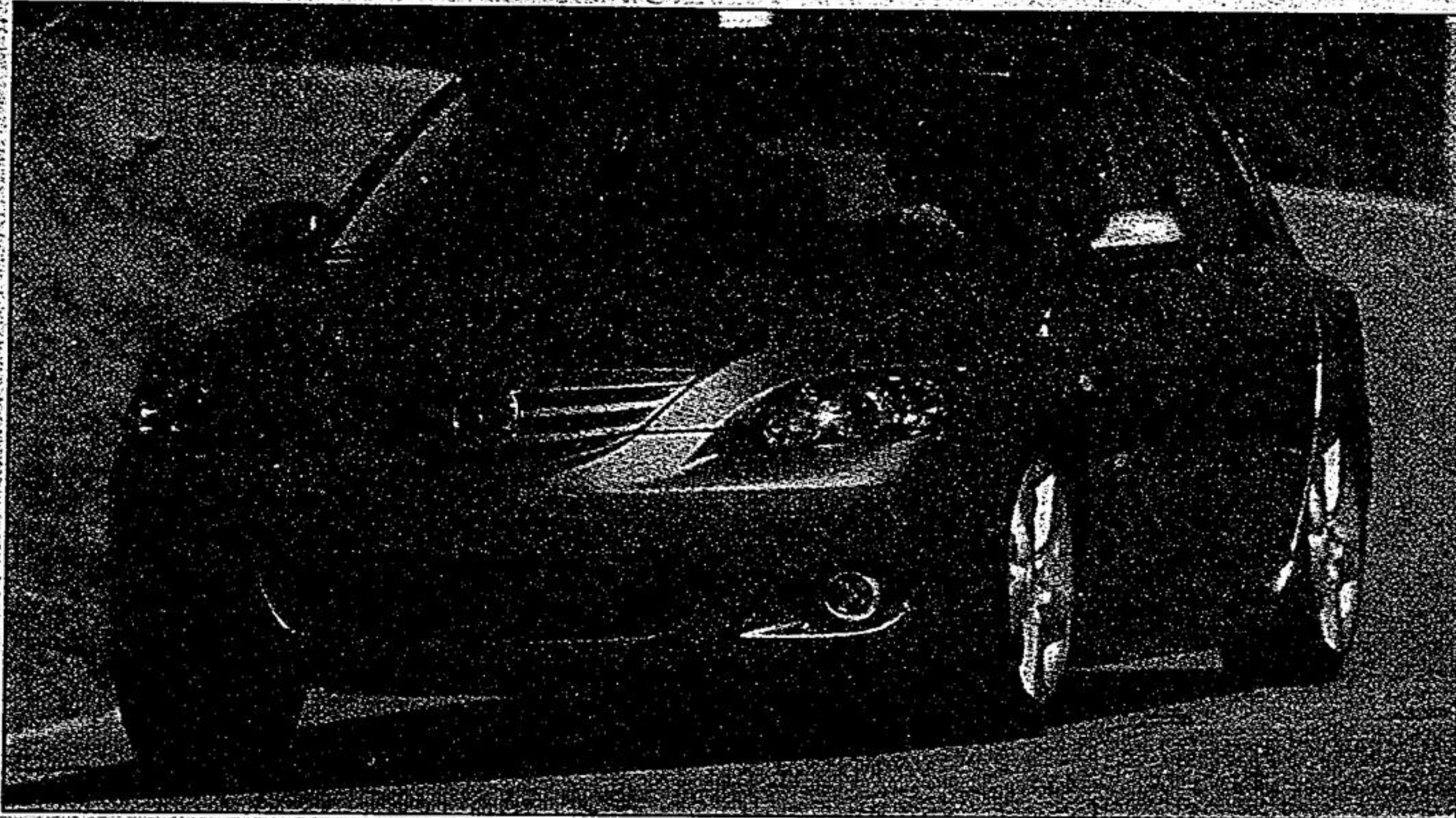




WHEELS

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Instead of following the Japanese trend of compact cars with anonymous looks that blend in, the Mazda3 demands your attention. With its decidedly German looks, this Mazda is going to appeal to drivers who crave a little visual verve in their driving.

The interior of the Mazda3 is surprisingly turned out for what is a compact car. For instance, the glove box is big enough to hold a laptop.

Visually exciting Mazda3 is 2004 Car of the Year

By JIM ROBINSON
Road-Worthy

The buzz that the Mazda3 might be named the 2004 Canadian New Car of the Year (COTY) began last October.

That's when members of the Automotive Journalists Association of Canada (AJAC) held its annual 'Test-Fest' in the Belleville area. It attracts car writers from across Canada who, over four days, rate all the new vehicles sold in Canada by secret ballot. There are several sub-categories, but the prize is the overall car and the overall truck of the year.

Normally, the journalists don't talk openly about their favourites so as to not let Carmaker X know you think his latest sled is a dog.

At Test-Fest, however, several writers were open in their praise for the Mazda3. Yours truly was in the family sedan sub-category (won by the Mazda6), so I did not get a chance to drive the car at that time. But with the announcement of the COTY at this year's Canadian International Auto Show (CIAS) in Toronto being the Mazda3, I grabbed one to try it on for size.

The 2004 Mazda3 is offered in two body

styles 4-door and 5-door and three versions: Mazda3 4-door (2.0-litre engine), Mazda3 4-door (2.3-litre engine) and Mazda3 5-door (2.3-litre engine).

Despite the compact car price point, the Mazda3 comes standard with a tilt and telescopic steering wheel. Multi-adjustable driver and passenger seats allow occupants of practically all sizes to travel in comfort. Mazda designers and engineers even placed the parking brake beside and behind the gear lever, which they determined would allow smaller drivers to operate it more easily when the seat is in a forward position.

An uncluttered instrument panel, combined with clean-cut door trim, reinforce a feeling of spaciousness, comfort and quality. The prominent red-backlit, three-gauge instrument cluster is integral to the Mazda family look and feel, as is the three-spoke steering wheel with integrated audio controls and, when ordered, cruise control.

A choice of contrasting interior colors and materials offers Mazda3 owners an opportunity to express their own personality and taste. These choices enhance Mazda3's highly ergonomic environment, which, quite literally, envelops the driver to give greater com-

fort and control, and a heightened sense of connection to the car's overall performance.

Optional on Mazda3's 4-door and 5-door is leather-trimmed seat upholstery making Mazda3 one of very few cars in this segment to offer such luxury.

The interior holds a lot of nifty features like a glove box big enough to hold a laptop computer, purse, two-liter beverage bottle or as many as 16 CD cases. And there's a double-tiered centre console/armrest and two cupholders in the center console and one more bottle holder in each door.

The shape of the Mazda3 has the new corporate look of a five-point grille, rising hood line and pronounced rear wheel well haunches. Instead of following the Japanese trend of compact cars with anonymous looks that blend in, the Mazda3 demands your attention. With its decidedly German looks, this Mazda is going to appeal to a drivers who crave a little visual verve in their driving.

The Mazda3 4-door is available with either the 148 hp, 2.0-litre engine (Mazda3 4-door) or 2.3-litre engine (Mazda3 4-door), while the 5-door is only available with the 2.3 (Mazda3 5-door). Mazda3 (both 4-door and 5-door models) produces 160 hp. To provide power

at higher rpm levels while not sacrificing low rpm driveability, the 2.3-litre engine incorporates Variable Valve Timing (VVT) on the intake valves.

The car is offered with a five-speed manual transmission, as tested, or a four-speed automatic that can shift 20 per cent faster than the automatic it replaces. Suspension is coil springs over struts at the front and an independent multi-link with coil springs at the rear.

The Mazda3 4-door is available with a sport package for a more aggressive personality and on-road presence. In developing the package, engineers focused on functional aesthetics and subtle details. More importantly, the development of the package was integral to the Mazda3 program, and the resulting components combine seamlessly with the body contours in a way that cannot be achieved with aftermarket parts. The sport package includes specific front and rear bumpers, side-skirts, 17-inch alloy wheels, front fog lamps and unique taillights. The sport package is standard on Mazda3 5-door as tested here.

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