

GAC Motor has its sights set on North America for 2019

That's what China-based automaker **GAC** is claiming, even though first there's the tricky issue of tariffs to resolve. The first of a planned series of cars heading state-side is the midsize seven-seat **GS8** utility model, possibly



GSA's G8 midsize SUV

followed by the smaller **GS5**. The GS8 is powered by a turbocharged V-6 while the GS5 will come with a turbocharged four-cylinder. Although there's nothing official regarding marketing and distribution channels in the United States, it's rumored that the Fiat-Alfa Romeo dealers (part of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles) will be selling GAC vehicles.



Dropped due to its fuel inefficiency, Mazda's rotary engine may ironically return as a range-extender for hybrids.

2015 Mazda RX-9 concept

Mazda's return to the rotary

Months ago, rumors were circulating that the Japan-based automaker would revive the pistonless **rotary engine** that was last used in 2012 for the retired four-seat **Mazda RX-8** (top). And despite the appearance of a Wankel-powered **RX-9 concept** (above) at the 2015 Tokyo Motor Show — rumored to be planned for the maker's 100th anniversary — Mazda even dropped rotary engines from its single-seat racing series last year. Word now, though, is that the rotary will be returning to production, but this time as part of an extended-range gasoline-electric powertrain. In other words, the rotary will generate electricity to recharge the battery pack, instead of driving the wheels. Mazda claims the rotary is ideally suited for the task because of its tiny size, light weight and the ability to burn all kinds of fuel, including liquefied natural gas. Mazda also confirms that its goal is to produce only hybrid or all-electric models by 2030.



The Faraday FF 91 will have three electric motors that put out 1,050 horses.

"Tesla killer" set to launch

If you were paying attention in your high school science class, you might be familiar with Michael Faraday's law of electromagnetism. Certainly, those who are behind one potential competitor to luxury maker Tesla — itself named after an electricity pioneer — are aware of the comparison.

Maybe that's hubris, but it never stopped Elon Musk from, well, anything.

The American automotive startup **Faraday Future**, which has set up shop in Hanford, Calif. (with considerable backing from business in China), recently built the first preproduction **FF 91**. And the numbers are impressive. According to Faraday, the all-electric four-door hatchback's three motors combine to produce an astonishing 1,050 horsepower, which can propel the car to 60 mph from rest in 2.3 seconds.

The car's lithium-ion battery pack is good for more than 370 miles between recharges. There's no word yet on pricing, but the best guesstimate is you'll need about \$175,000 to get an FF 91 when it goes on sale in mid-2019.

A little steeper than your Nissan Leaf, sure, but keep in mind that pre-orders are already backed up for the upcoming **2020 Tesla Roadster 2.0** starting at \$200,000. Then again, that car supposedly goes from 0 to 60 in 1.9 seconds, which if true would make it the fastest production vehicle ever.

Faraday Future FF91



The Porsche Speedster has plenty of carbon fiber and 500-plus horsepower.

Porsche fast-tracks the Speedster

Sources indicate that Porsche will sell a limited run of 1,948 special-edition models of the 911 Carrera 4 cabriolet-based **Speedster**, with production beginning in calendar 2019. The sports car is named in honor of the original Porsche 356-based speedster from the mid-1950s; the planned production number represents the year that the first cars wearing the Porsche logo were introduced. The Speedster's most identifying features are the lowered windshield, carbon-fiber "double bubble" engine cover and a special tonneau cover that replaces the convertible soft top. The front fenders, hood and engine cover will also be made of carbon fiber. The Speedster should also live up to its name with a non-turbocharged six-cylinder engine making more than 500 horsepower.

TEST DRIVE

2019 Mazda MX-5 Miata

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With the manual transmission, EPA says you can expect 26/34 (formerly 27/34), and 26/35 with the automatic (27/36). The exhaust system has been retuned this year. Engine noise is always evident, and it's at a slightly lower pitch than previously, but you won't be turning down the sound system to listen to it.

During my high school and college days, I worked a variety of jobs, mainly to buy (and then support) a variety of cars. Most of these jobs were in gas stations, back when these locations hired people to do more than sell you beer and beef jerky. My buddies and I worked mostly the night shift, and ate mostly fast food. One guy was notable for his taste in cheeseburgers, which he would always order minus the burger. This amounted to cheese and condiments on a bun — an early effort (as he saw it) at vegetarianism.

What brings this to mind is the Mazda Miata's transmission. (Bear with me, I'll connect the dots). My test car was outfitted with the automatic. Automatics make sense for most people, in most cars, in

most situations. But in a sports car, the mission of which is to connect person and machine closely in the joint pursuit of driving fun, a stick is the way to go. If you've got a cranky knee or other physical restriction, I get having an automatic. If not — like the guy ordering the burger minus the meat — you're missing the point.

MX-5 handling is a delight. The car is balanced, agile and forgiving. The base suspension will suit the majority of drivers just fine, with plenty of grip and good ride quality, for a small car. Performance upgrades are available (sport suspension, limited slip differential, shock tower braces, etc.) for those with weekend autocrossing in mind. Just remember that dialing in more traction also adds a bumpier ride.

Interior stowage space for pocket contents is very limited. A tilt/telescoping steering column is now standard, though this is a snug cabin and even at full seat pushback, the distance from the dashboard makes the extending function seem unnecessary. More universally useful is another new feature — the rear view camera. HVAC controls midway up the center stack



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are easy to access and non-distracting. One cup holder is in easy reach, the other, not so much. With its 7-inch touchscreen, the Mazda Connect infotainment system is fairly straight forward in operation.

The available Bose nine-speaker sound system is worth springing for, though here as elsewhere in the Mazda lineup, a CD player is no longer available. As Baby Boomers ponder the sonic slight, younger folk wonder when Mazda will make the infotainments system compatible with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. The company is behind the curve on their smartphone enabling technology.

Top end models like the RF Grand Tour-

ing are handsome little touring cars, but carry a sticker price in excess of \$36,000.

To me, the essential Miata experience is found at the opposite end of the lineup. For a starting sticker price about \$10,000 less, a Sport soft top offers the crisp handling and open air enjoyment that made Miatas the torch bearer for modern sports cars, at a price that won't break the bank.

Just remember that it's a drink that's best when stirred with a stick.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 25 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 180 calendars.