

# LAPS OF CONCENTRATION

So, the Elise is the business. But Renault builds something similar and Ginetta, a past Lotus rival, is back. **JOHN SIMISTER** track-tests them all

**Lotus Elise v Renault Sport Spider v  
Ginetta G27**





**E**LISE: MID-MOUNTED 16-valve engine, extruded aluminium chassis, composite body, no frills. Renault Sport Spider: mid-mounted 16-valve engine, extruded aluminium chassis, composite body, no frills. Both outrageously unconventional, deeply indulgent. It's a showdown made in heaven.

But the Lotus, centrepiece of the moment, is more than just a beyond-the-state-of-the-art sports car. It represents Lotus's first serious attempt in years at a basic, small, pleasure-centred driving machine aimed at folk with a single-minded determination to have the purest of good times. And that's the sort of car in which the cottage-based part of Britain's motor industry has specialised for years. Caterhams we know about, Westfields too, but once-famous Ginetta is all too easily forgotten.

That's why we've remembered it now, and added a G27 to the mix: front-mounted 16-valve engine, tubular steel chassis, composite body, absolutely no frills. At least, not in the form you see it here, which is ready for the race track at £17,625 with a set of overalls thrown in, plus a season's entries to the G27 one-make race series including hospitality for the driver and three hangers-on.

In this search for the ultimate back-to-basics, back-to-first-principles pleasure machine, a race-prepared Ginetta, a revitalised relic from the 1960s, before computers augmented instinct, might seem an irrelevance against the 1990s interpretations by Lotus and Renault. But it's not: if the aluminium-framed newcomers seek to give race-track pleasures to road-bound drivers, it's good to compare them with a real track car on a real track. And you'll soon be able, once again, to buy a road-going Ginetta G27 with proper paint, trim and equipment. Our racer's just a taster. Besides, the Renault also has its own race series, and so will the Lotus.

MALLORY PARK, LEICESTERSHIRE: 'the friendly circuit'. That's where we're heading, to neutral ground and the joyous prospect of unfettered speed. The Elise is proving as balletic, as fingertip-delicate as Lotus promised when we first saw that startling piece of aluminium chassis sculpture unclothed. The Spider is feeling wide and weird, while the G27 is primitive – all snort, snarl, crash and bang – but viscerally entertaining. It has a four-link live rear axle and solid joints everywhere; road-spec G27s have double wishbones to match those at the front, and a deal more compliance.

Why, exactly, does the Spider feel weird? Well, how often have you driven at speed – three-figure speeds, albeit in km/h as displayed by the centrally-mounted, digital speedometer – with neither windscreen nor crash helmet? There's a gradually-growing



Aluminium, plastic, leather. Centre of Elise's wheel looks aluminium, is vinyl

graveyard of flies within the scuttle-mounted air-deflector, and those that escape are blasted over my head, but I'm worried that my sun-glasses might not be up to the task of deflecting a stone or a kamikaze bird.

I love the clear view forward, I love the absurdity of not being blown to bits when I expected to be, I love the fearlessness of the Renault designers in concocting something as barmy as this screenless Spider, but I think I'd rather have a windscreen, thank you very much. Fellow doubters will be pleased to know that UK-spec rhd examples, available from October at £25,000, will be screened. Probably soft-topped, too.

FROM ROAD TO RACETRACK, where personalities are about to be pressurised. Let's sit in each car in turn, and take in three steps to starkness as we contemplate the smooth, empty tarmac ahead. In the Elise, the architecture is all straight lines, exposed aluminium and the merest hint of oozing epoxy. You sit low, the side sills are high, the feeling of cleverly-stressed solidity is total.

It's a more delicate demeanour than that of the Renault, whose considerable girth and industrial-strength aluminium chassis sections suggest a more brutish form of solidity and a good deal more weight. (So it proves: the Elise weighs a welterweight

675kg, the Spider a solid 930kg.) But there are strong similarities, such as the matt-aluminium-finished roll-over bar and gearlever, and the extruded fascia structure. Here, too, we find a tiny instrument pack ahead of the driver – chrome-bezelled this time – but it lacks such ephemera as a speedo and fuel gauge which are banished to that central LCD display. And a heater? Don't be ridiculous.

There are, of course, no wind-up windows. No windows at all, actually, which leaves room in the Spider's wide body for two of the only three storage spaces in the entire cabin: a phone-sized net in each door. There's another, map-sized net on the centre tunnel, and that's it for chattels apart from the front boot. What isn't aluminium or composite is rubberised vinyl, so your Spider won't drown in the rain, and you can see the road past the height-adjustable, perforated-metal pedals so you know there's a way out for the water.

The Recaro shell-seats don't recline, but you can unbolt them, tip them bodily and remount them in your choice of three positions. And those doors... if there wasn't already a crowd gathered round your parked Spider, hinging a door skywards on its gas-strut will soon bring them out of the bushes.

For this much is already clear. It's the Renault, not the Lotus, that gets the attention. While the Elise is pretty in a petite but derivative way, reinterpreting old themes and cementing its relationship with reality, the Sport Spider is outrageous, outlandish and out to lunch. Drive this car, and you'll never, ever be lonely. If it resembles anything, it might just be a foreshortened, roofless Porsche 906 by Walt Disney, but that doesn't account for the vision of a blue carapace shielding the metallic grey undercladding. More insect than arachnid, I reckon, especially with the doors up in the air.

And check out those scoops. The Elise's are demure apertures with a grid to discourage unlawful entry, but you can practically climb into the Renault's, squeeze past the radiator and crawl out the other side. But mind you don't scratch the paint, for like the Lotus this Alpine-built Renault has a flawless finish over the very best of ripple-free plastic.

Against these two big-bucks professionals, the retro-pretty Ginetta is prehistoric. Wavy, round-edged panel gaps, lashings of visible glassfibre matting in the cabin, a general air of being unfinished and having no finish. But it's a race car, remember? And a hard-used one at that. Road G27s have, or can have, metallic paint, rigidly-attached panels, leather trim, a neat pair of fairings on the rear deck behind the occupants' heads, and two properly-padded seats worthy of the name. Like that, it costs up to £18,000, but forgo some of the jewellery and you can be on the road for £13,000. It would be



No Lotus has been this well made before, no rival feels as fluid under pressure



Least powerful motor here, but 1.8 K-series gives light Lotus the snappiest pace



'While the Elise is pretty and petite,  
the Spider is outrageous, out to lunch'



unrealistic to expect honing to Lotus and Renault levels, but past Ginetta road cars suggest that today's examples should be decently finished.

Right now, though, I'm clamped by a four-point harness into the most minimal of seats, clutching a tiny Mountney steering wheel, peering forward along a humped bonnet with roll-bar scaffolding forming a force-field around my head. The speedo isn't connected, but there's a big red light on top of the dash (a moulding barely changed since the Ginetta G4 of the 1960s from which the G27 is derived) which lights up when it's time to change up. That's straightforward, then.

**MALLORY'S START STRAIGHT** beckons. Let's go – Ginetta first, to get the feel of a track car on the track. This car has a *terrific* engine. Road G27s come with Ford's regular 130bhp Zetec 1.8, late of the Escort XR3i, but this one is race-ready with a pair of Weber 40DCOE's, a cat-less, back-pressure-less exhaust system and Lumenition ignition in place of the usual EEC-IV management (which the Webers render redundant). It's great. Modern engines usually work pretty well even with their green gadgets, so when you fit them with old-school tuning bits the effect warms both tyres and hearts.

Thus unconstrained, the Ginetta's engine is the feistiest of the three. Trouble is, it's also by far the loudest, which is great for savouring the sort of throttle response you thought had vanished with increasing environmental verdance, but might land you in trouble on real roads. Here on the track it doesn't matter, and you can

use all the torque (lots) and all the revs (7000-ish) to squirt out of bends and up the straights, exercising your left collar-bone as you slot from ratio to ratio with the stiff, but ultra-precise, Sierra-sourced gearshift.

With its negative-camber front end, quick steering and well-located live axle, the Ginetta dives keenly into corners and stays balanced through them. You can bring the tail round under power, progressively in typical live-axle fashion, and on a smooth surface like this, the G27 hangs on well. Its responses are clean, friendly and uncorrupted; as a racing car, it's a good one. As a road car it's not so hot, mainly because of negative-camber twitchiness and a serious lack of suppleness and ground clearance.

With parameters set, it's time for the Renault. The engine feels softer, of course – it needs 7.3 seconds to reach 70mph from 30 through the gears, against 5.8 for the G27 – but the maximum speed, a quantity less affected by weight, is identical at 124mph. That makes sense, given that the Mégane Coupé-sourced 2.0-litre engine delivers similar power (150bhp against the Ginetta's 140).

Most of the time the Spider sounds ordinary, but rev it hard and you'll hear a hard-edged blare to get your interest rising. The gearchange furthers this cause, with a super-quick, metallically clack-clack action and a keenly spaced set of ratios. It's looking good for an entertaining couple of laps, but it's quickly apparent that the Renault's faithfulness of trajectory is dictated more by grip than by balance, despite double wishbones all round (trailing at the rear), and race-car-like bell-cranks and horizontal



Renault's race-car rear suspension sits next to engine (left); minimalist dials sit behind Moto-Lita wheel (below)



Ginetta's dials are pure 1960s; note race-car add-ons (above). Weber-fed Zetec rorty and torquey (right)



G27's shape is little changed from 1963's G4, apart from pop-up headlights





'The old-tech G27 is blown away by the force of forward thinking'

spring/damper units at the front.

Piling hard into the hairpin, we're understeering much more than in the G27. Piling hard out, same thing, because the track is hot and the rear tyres are sticky. On the fast bends, things are more or less neutral, unless you back off suddenly, in which case the Spider might – might – lose its tail rather suddenly. This you feel through your shell-seat, but not through steering whose precision and considerable weight is not matched by a feel of what's happening underfoot. The problem is too much friction in the rack, which could be a ploy to disguise kickback. I'd rather have the feedback, and put up with the kickback.

What the Renault does have is a remarkable ride, almost as good as the Elise's. Otherwise, it quickly becomes clear that the Lotus functions on a higher plane than either of its adversaries. It sears around Mallory's corners, fast or slow, as though inertia-free; you can tune the line with the accelerator, but you'll neither unstuck the rear wheels nor goad the front ones into ploughing onwards when they should be turning. If you want them to turn, they turn, no more and no less than they are bid.

It sounds as though it could be almost dull, but it isn't. How can it be, when the steering is so light, so delicate yet so alive, so talkative? There's a direct transmission of the track (or road) surface's topography to your fingertips, almost as though you had a second pair of eyes down at tread level. It's uncanny, and it instils huge confidence. So do those unservoed brakes with their aluminium matrix

discs, light in action but powerful, totally progressive and a fine demonstration of the damage a servo can do to brake feel. They're the best brakes here, though all are powerful, consistent and similarly unservoed.

The Elise is also the quickest off the mark, thanks to its fantastic traction, even though its engine is the least muscular and its gearchange is the slowest and the least precise. We'll allow it this one failing, and hope that Lotus can hone the shift to match the lightness, precision and speed of operation of the other controls. More power would be good, too, and more is promised.

GINETTA'S G27 IS AMUSING AS a racing car, deeply flawed as a road car when in race-car trim. That's no surprise, but it's hard to imagine even the proper road version being as beautifully wrought as the Renault Sport Spider. And whatever uncomplicated charm it may have, the old-tech Ginetta is blown away by the force of forward thinking that has gone into its rivals. A G27 is cheaper and lighter than the portly Renault, true, even if it's less of a conversation piece. But then so is the Lotus, a car so spectacularly good, yet so easy to live with, that the outcome of this test was clear within the first mile.

It's simple enough. Like the original Elan, the Elise redefines what a sports car can do. And, unlike the original Elan, it feels as though it should be able to do it for more than a few thousand miles. That's the bit Colin Chapman never got quite right. This time, though, Lotus has cracked it. With aluminium knobs on.

## PERFORMANCE

ACCELERATION (sec)	In 3rd/4th/5th (sec)				
	0-30	0-60	0-100	30-50	50-70
Ginetta	3.1	7.0	24.6	3.9/5.7/7.0	3.9/6.1/7.4
Lotus	2.3	6.5	20.3	3.9/5.3/8.1	4.0/5.4/8.5
Renault	2.7	7.5	21.3	4.4/6.4/9.2	4.2/6.4/8.5

SPEEDS IN GEARS (mph)	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
Ginetta	48	70	94	119	124
Lotus	39	68	95	121	122
Renault	37	66	88	112	124

FUEL CONSUMPTION (mpg)	Urban	56mph	75mph	Official ave
Ginetta	na	na	na	na
Lotus	New EC urban 28.9, extra-urban 49.9, combined 39.4			
Renault	28.5	44.1	33.6	33.7

## SPECIFICATIONS

	GINETTA G27 RACE CAR	LOTUS ELISE	RENAULT SPIDER
Price	£17,625 (car + race entries)	£18,990	£25,000
Engine	1796cc 16V dohc four, longitudinal, front-mounted	1796cc 16V dohc four, transverse, mid-mounted	1996cc 16V dohc four, transverse, mid-mounted
Bore/stroke, mm	80.0/88.0	80.0/89.3	82.7/93.0
Compression ratio	10.0 to one	10.5 to one	10.0 to one
Power	140bhp at 6125rpm	120bhp at 5500rpm	150bhp at 6000rpm
Torque	116lb ft at 4500rpm	122lb ft at 3000rpm	136lb ft at 4500rpm
Power-to-weight ratio	204bhp per tonne	178bhp per tonne	161bhp per tonne
Transmission	Five-speed manual, rwd	Five-speed manual, rwd	Five-speed manual, rwd
Front suspension	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, extruded uprights	Double wishbones, pushrods, horizontal transverse coil springs, anti-roll bar
Rear suspension	Live axle located by upper and lower radius rods and Panhard rod, coil springs	Double wishbones, coil springs, extruded uprights	Unequal length double semi-trailing wishbones, horizontal coil springs, anti-roll bar
Brakes front/rear	Vent discs/drums, unservoed	Ventilated discs, unservoed	Ventilated discs, unservoed
Tyres	195/50 R15	185/56 R15 (front) 205/50 R16 (rear)	205/50 16 (front) 225/50 16 (rear)
Length/width/wheelbase	3690/1583/2148mm	3726/1701/2300mm	3735/1830/2343mm
Weight	663kg	675kg	930kg