

MUSCLE PEACH



No, Pontiac's new 2004 GTO is not an ear-shattering, liver-pummeling reincarnation of the original Goat. Yes, it is the fastest, most appealing GM muscle coupe in memory.
by Arthur St. Antoine

One look at the CD player, and you know the brand-new 2004 Pontiac GTO isn't General Motors business as usual. There, in the center of the dash, where you'd expect to find a member of the Delco family settled into its customary reserved seat, your eyes fall on the word "Blaupunkt." It's as startling as finding a Löwenbräu in your McDonald's Happy Meal.

And it's only the first of the GTO's many surprises. ▶



• PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN KIEWICZ AND BRIAN VANCE



GM interior tailoring at its finest: The GTO cockpit blends astutely arranged controls, handsome materials, tasteful metallic accents, and a level of fit and finish that sets new standards for General Motors vehicles. The sculptured seats are as appealing to the eyes as to the backside.

The historians toiling in *Motor Trend's* windowless basement tell us that "GTO" stands for "*Gran Turismo Omologato*," which apparently is Italian for "goat." Or something like that. Anyway, you may recall that it was two score years ago that Pontiac, with a pre-DeLorean John DeLorean calling the shots, plopped a hulking Bonneville V-8 engine into a compact Tempest body to create the original GTO (well, okay, the name actually first appeared on a vehicle from a faraway carmaker that rhymes with "Ferrari," but let's not let that get in the way of a good story). The GTO's Schwarzenegger-engine-in-a-Hugh-Grant-body formula was an instant hit and, for the rest of the 1960s, an ever-more socially irresponsible breed of so-called musclecars painted America's streets with the ribbon-like remnants of their tortured rear tires.

When word leaked out that Pontiac—now under the stewardship of another octane-loving visionary, GM Chairman Bob Lutz—would be unveiling an all-new GTO, some 30 years after the retirement of the original, the regulars around the *MT* water cooler immediately weighed in with predictions. "It'll be about as subtle as a Jerry Bruck-

heimer movie," said one. "Probably pretty rough around the edges," opined another. "Bet it breathes fire," offered a third.

That was before a gleaming 2004 GTO showed up at our Los Angeles HQ—and proved that our crystal ball had been unplugged all along.

Surprise #2: The new GTO looks nothing like a jukebox on wheels. True, the Yellow Jacket paint scheme on our test car was bright enough to give George Hamilton a sunburn, but the bodywork is as clean and sleek as a modern Euro coupe's. This may not be the most memorable shape behind today's showroom glass, but we applaud Pontiac's decision to skip the bolt-on body cladding and the shaving-mirror chrome wheels—indeed, the body is entirely free of "I'm a musclecar" costume. Even the small rear wing looks appropriate, lending just the right sporty finish to the tail. In fact, the GTO is so tastefully subdued, it'll surely disappoint those expecting the Vin Diesel treatment. Yet the muscle is there for those who appreciate subtlety. Check out the ride height, for instance. When have you seen a factory General Motors product so rakishly low to the ground—or sporting such narrow tire-to-body gaps?

The GTO runs not like a shuddering, rickety musclecar, but like a sophisticated executive's express.



Part of the explanation, of course, is that the GTO is no ordinary Pontiac. The car is based on the Monaro, a popular and athletic rear-drive coupe built by GM subsidiary Holden in Australia. And, in fact, all GTOs will be assembled Down Under. Starting this month, Pontiac will import roughly 18,000 annually at an expected base price of \$33,000 (final figures had not yet been announced at press time).

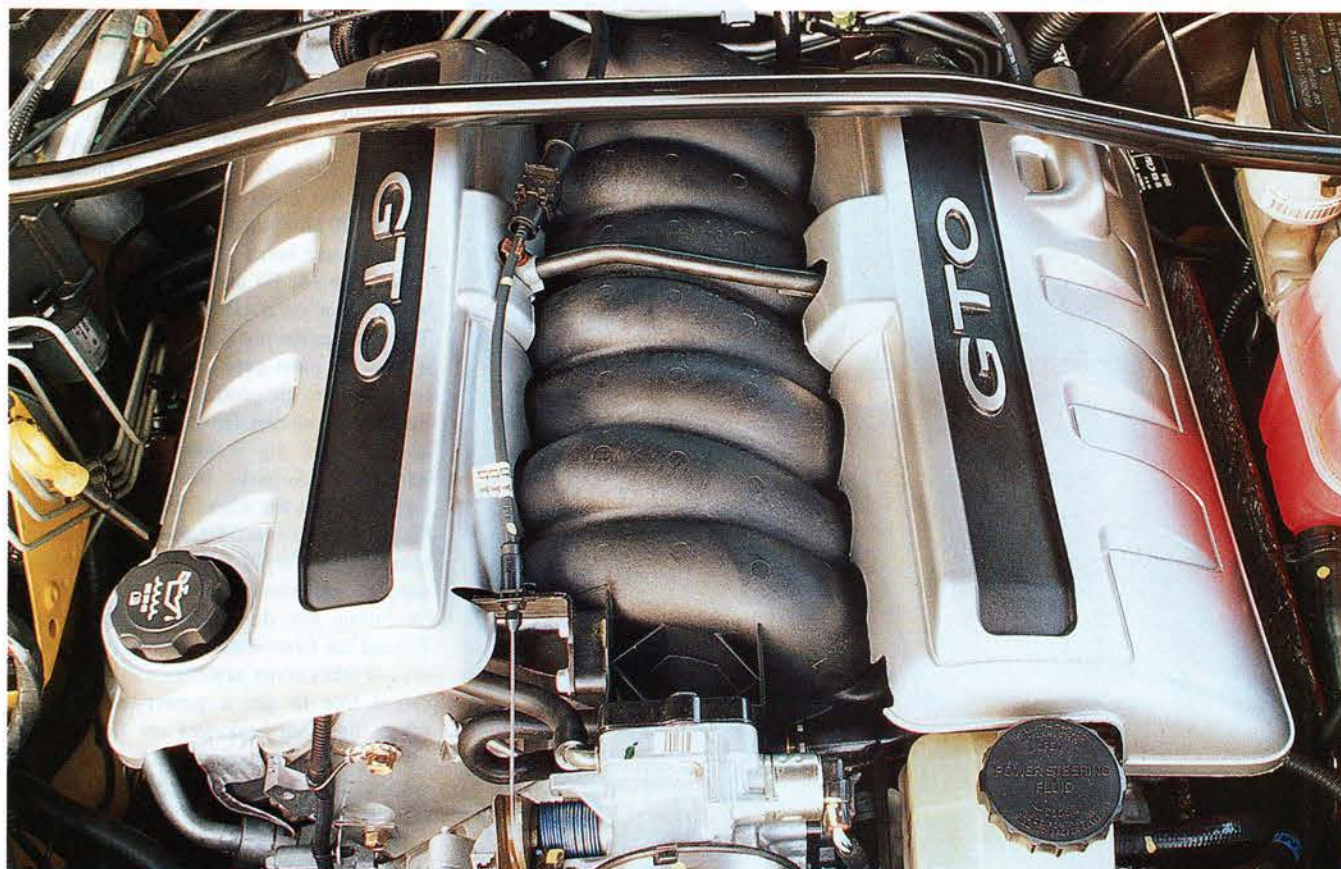
Surprise #3: The cabin has the sporty elegance of a BMW's. Four large analog gauges (wearing faces color-coordinated with the exterior paint) lie in a large pod behind the wheel; the dials and much of the interior are trimmed with a classy satin-nickel finish (as are the drilled pedals). The four-spoke steering wheel (with integrated audio controls) feels good in your hands and is infinitely adjustable for tilt and tele-

scope—something we've been nagging GM to do for years. The center stack houses straightforward climate controls and that Blaupunkt audio system—a 200-watt, 10-speaker affair with in-dash six-disc CD changer. There's not a blob of bling-bling marring the cool, businesslike ambiance. Your \$500 aluminum attaché case will look right at home here.

Surprise #4: Fit and finish are the finest we've seen on a GM vehicle in decades. The body emits not a squeak and shimmies not a whit, parts gaps are tight and uniform (even on our preproduction pilot vehicle), the interior shapes flow smoothly into one another, and the materials are rich and handsome. Superb, beautifully stitched leather covers the wheel, the shift boot, and the seats. The seats themselves are simply spectacular, deeply bolstered for excellent support, and roomy enough to be accommodating for drivers of various sizes. Behind the front chairs are two more buckets—it takes some acrobatics to get to them (we'd like to see a power-seat advance when the front backrests are flopped forward), but once back there, adults can sit without holding their knees to their chins. (Trunk room is another issue: The GTO offers a paltry nine cubic feet of space under its bespoiled rear deck.)

Surprise #5: Although it'll happily melt its rear BFGoodriches into rubber pudding (a standard traction-control system will step in to save your tires unless you switch it off), the GTO runs not like a shuddering, rickety musclecar, but like a sophisticated executive's express. The muscle is certainly there: Under the hood lies the same 5.7-liter LS1 V-8 that powers some Chevrolet Corvettes; in the GTO, it delivers a studly 350 horsepower at 5200 rpm and 365 pound-feet of torque at 4000. Coupled to the optional (\$695) Tremec six-speed manual transmission (an electronically controlled four-speed automatic is standard), the Vette V-8 kicks the GTO with inspiring swiftness. Even wearing its standard M+S tires, our test car scorched from 0 to 60 mph in 5.3 seconds and tripped the quarter-mile lights in 13.62 seconds at 104.78 mph—numbers that





Rippling with 350 liquid-smooth horsepower, the pushrod 5.7-liter V-8 engine—borrowed from the Corvette—launches the new GTO from a standstill to 60 mph in a soul-satisfying 5.3 seconds.

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would leave a 1960s-vintage GTO seeing yellow (see data panel).

When we last tested a supercharged Ford Mustang SVT Cobra (another front-V-8, rear-drive two-plus-two priced in the mid-\$30s), it bettered those numbers, reaching 60 mph in just 4.8 seconds and nailing the quarter mile in 13.0 at 110.7 mph. But the track stats tell only a small fraction of the story. The aging Cobra is quick, sure, but driving it means putting up with its clunky personality and a suspension that clomps over the road as if it's wearing horseshoes (which explains why Ford will be releasing an all-new Mustang in months). The GTO, in stark contrast—both to Ford's outgoing Mustang and to many previous GM machines—is all finesse and gracefulness. There's no penalty for the GTO's performance: The mighty Corvette engine is deliciously smooth and flexible (and makes exhilarating noises as it sweeps to its 6200-rpm

redline), and the six-speed shifter moves as if cradled in a vat of precision goo. For sheer drivetrain refinement, the GTO easily matches Europe's best sporting coupes. And in a straight line, it'll smoke a similar rear-drive, V-8 two-door like the \$52,000 Mercedes CLK500.

Surprise #6: The GTO apparently has Cool Whip in its suspension. Forget that punishing big-numbers ride we've come to expect from American performance coupes—the GTO is too well-mannered to deliver constant, seat-pounding reminders of its sport-coupe intentions. Maximum handling grip—0.80 g—doesn't set any performance standards, but the GTO's real-world useability does. Several of our test

drivers commented that they had driven few other coupes so poised, so well-balanced, so confidence-inspiring when you're in full-hustle mode. In that respect, the GTO will lose locker-room debates based on spec-chart bravado. But it shines where it counts: in the driver's seat.

So the 2004 GTO isn't the rip-snorting, retro-themed muscle machine many diehards may have been waiting for. We're not disappointed. What GM has delivered instead is a superbly crafted, tastefully styled, tautly muscled grand-touring car that stimulates your brain, not your kidneys. That such a suave machine wears the Pontiac badge may be the biggest—and the most pleasant—surprise of all. **MT**



GOAT TALES

The 1968 GTO, Motor Trend's Car of the Year, goes spec to spec with Pontiac's new-for-2004 edition

	1968 GTO	2004 GTO
Engine	400-cubic-inch V-8	346-cubic-inch V-8
Horsepower	360 @ 5400 rpm (SAE gross)	350 @ 5200 rpm (SAE net)
Torque	445 lb-ft @ 4800 rpm	365 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
Transmission	4-speed manual	6-speed manual
Curb weight, lb	3650	3725
0-60 mph, sec	6.5	5.3
1/4 mile, sec @ mph	14.80 @ 96.00	13.62 @ 104.78
Braking, 60-0, ft	150	120
Base price	\$3228	\$33,000 (est)



ILLUSTRATION BY ANTOINE GUILBAUD

HERE COMES THE JUDGE

An even more potent GTO rumbles over the horizon

If the 2004 GTO's 350 horsepower isn't sufficient brawn to earn your attention (perhaps you're a fan of biceps that actually shred the T-shirts they're encased in), well, sir or madam, your musclecar is coming. Within the next 12 months, Pontiac is expected to release an even more compelling, extra-powerful GTO.

Pontiac has made this power play before. By 1969, five years after the original GTO's unveiling, rival muscle machines like the Plymouth Road Runner, Chevy Chevelle SS396, and Ford 428 Cobra Jet Mustang were stealing GTO sales. Pontiac responded by fortifying the Goat with an extra-potent Ram Air engine and a host of flashy cosmetic add-ons. In deference to Flip Wilson's popular "Here comes the judge!" skit on the hit "Laugh-In" television show, the

company dubbed its creation The Judge.

A quarter century later, Pontiac has similar plans for the new GTO. The 21st Century Judge will almost certainly use the high-output 5.7-liter LS6 V-8 that also serves in the Corvette Z06 and the Cadillac CTS-V. Output will hover right around 400 horsepower; a six-speed manual will be the only transmission offering. Also look for quad exhausts—two extending from each rear corner or possibly even two pipes running along each side. Wheels and tires will likely grow in size to 18 inches; the suspension will also receive stiffer, more aggressive tuning.

Cosmetic changes likely will include a racier cockpit, a larger rear wing, and probably a hood scoop. Misty-eyed nostalgic types on our staff are also predicting flashy graphics and, with luck, an Orbit Orange paint job to match the original Judge's.

Look for the high-output model to account for roughly 10 percent of GTO volume—say, 2000 cars a year or so. In all likelihood, Pontiac won't use the GTO Judge name. But to us, it sure sounds a lot better than "GTO Plaintiff."—A.S.

2004 Pontiac GTO POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS

Vehicle layout	Front engine, rwd, 2-door, 4-pass, coupe
Engine type	90° V-8, aluminum block & heads
Valve gear	OHV, 2 valves/cyl
Bore x stroke, in/mm	3.90 x 3.62/99.0 x 92.0
Displacement, ci/cc	345.7 / 5665
Compression ratio	10.1:1
Max horsepower @ rpm	350 @ 5200
Max torque @ rpm	365 @ 4000
Specific output, hp/liter	66.8
Power-to-weight, lb/hp	10.6
Max engine speed, rpm	6200
Transmission	6-speed manual
Axle/final-drive ratio:1	3.46 / 1.97
Suspension, front; rear	Struts, progressive-rate coil springs, anti-roll bar; semi-trailing control links, gas-pressurized dampers, anti-roll bar
Brakes, f;r	11.7-in vented disc; 11.3-in disc, ABS
Wheels	8.0 x 17 cast aluminum
Tires, f;r	245/45ZR17 95W BFGoodrich GForce KDWS M+S

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in	109.8
Track, f/r, in	61.4 / 62.1
Length, in	189.8
Width, in	72.5
Height, in	54.9
Turning circle, ft	36.1
Legroom, f/r, in	42.2 / 37.1
Shoulder room, f/r, in	59.7 / 51.7
Headroom, f/r, in	37.3 / 37.3
Cargo capacity, cu ft	9.0
Curb weight, lb	3725
Weight, f/r %	55/45
Fuel capacity, gal	18.5

PERFORMANCE DATA

Acceleration, sec	
0-30 mph, sec	2.0
0-40 mph, sec	3.0
0-50 mph, sec	4.1
0-60 mph, sec	5.3
0-70 mph, sec	7.0
0-80 mph, sec	8.7
0-90 mph, sec	10.7
0-100 mph, sec	13.1
1/4 mile, sec @ mph	13.62 @ 104.78
Braking, 60-0 mph, ft	120
600-ft slalom, mph	63.5
200-ft skidpad, lateral g	0.80

CONSUMER INFO

On sale in U.S.	Currently
Base price	\$33,000 (est)
Price as tested	\$33,695 (est)
Airbags	Dual front
Basic warranty	3 yrs/36,000 miles
EPA mpg, city/hwy	18/26 (est)
Recommended fuel	Unleaded premium

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