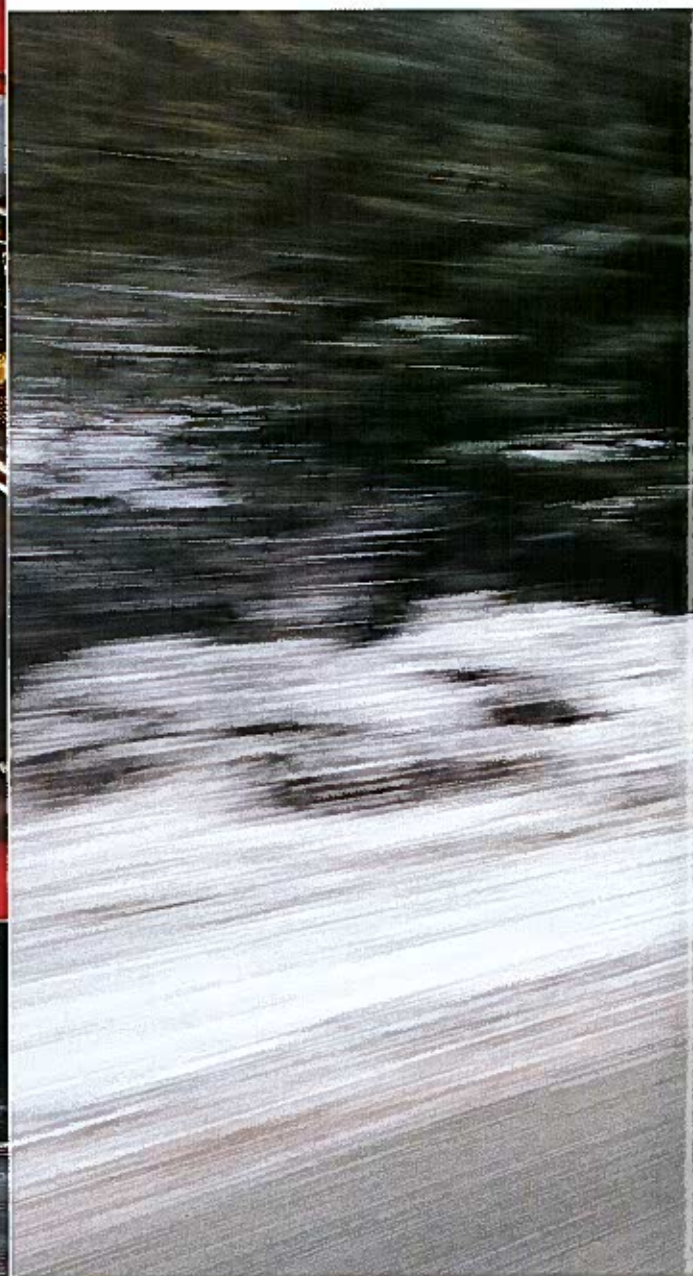
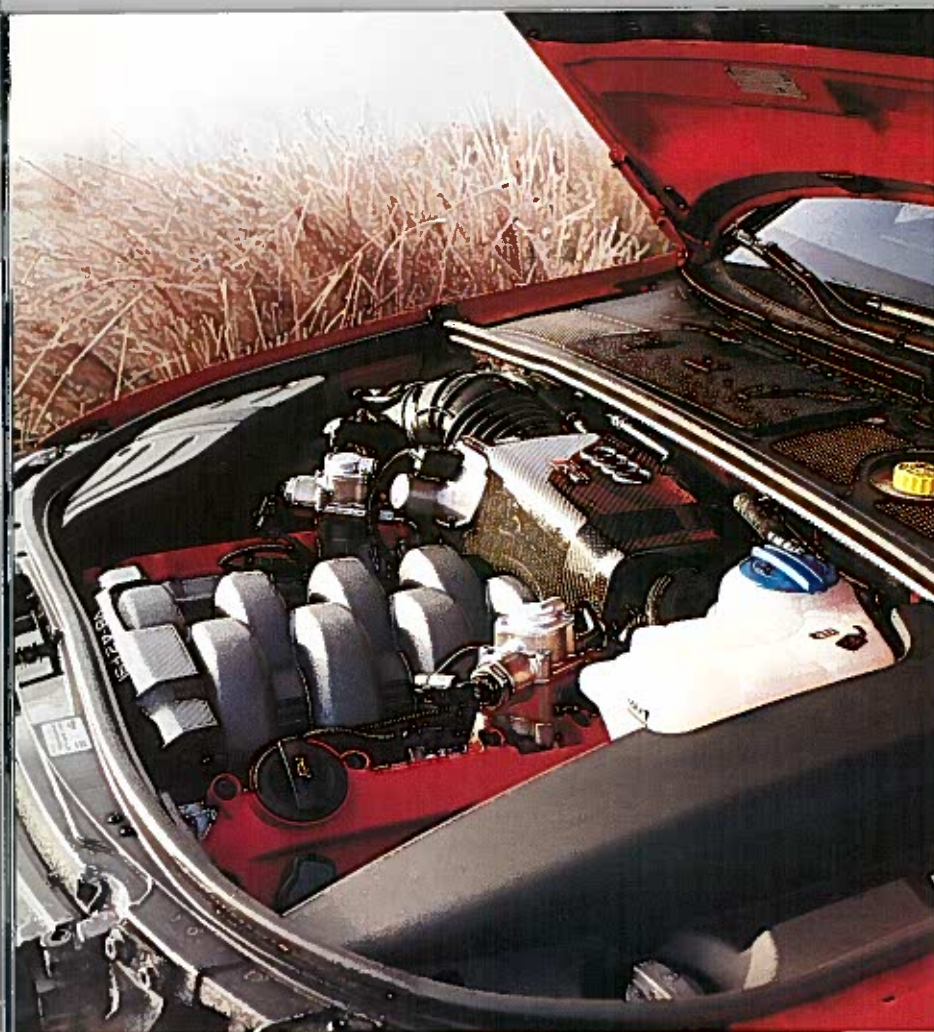




Power
shift

More rear bias in its 4wd system and a blisteringly powerful V8 - the brilliant new RS4 has the M3 CS and C55 AMG firmly in its sights ©



The players may be getting faster, louder and ever more sophisticated, but the script never changes. It goes something like this: a new hot Audi is launched, with class-leading power, huge cross-country pace and the sort of pumped-up, hunkered-down appearance of a heavyweight boxer in a slim-cut Savile Row suit. Meanwhile, the ageing, down-on-power BMW M3 saunters quietly alongside and slowly but surely picks the latest and greatest Audi apart piece by agonising piece, in so doing reaffirming itself as the ultimate all-rounder.

To add insult to injury, a few months later a brand new M3 will usually be launched, the segment redefined, and Audi (and the rest) must start the inevitable game of catch-up. As sure as night follows day, the M3 will always be a step ahead of the competition. Untouchable, delectable and deeply desirable.

The spec sheet suggests little has changed with the launch of the new Audi RS4. It has 414bhp

sophisticated than ever and channels the monster power to four broad 255/35 R19 contact patches. That's the cross-country pace taken care of. Then there's the appearance that's so tough you hardly dare look it straight in the piercing xenon eye. So far, so predictable... But it's in the detail that the RS4 seems to be going seriously off book.

That quattro system now has a distinct rear bias (40:60), all the better for balance and interactivity. The 4.2-litre, 48-valve, normally-aspirated V8 engine could have been developed within the walls of BMW's M Division such is its free-revving nature (the rev-limiter halts the madness at 8250rpm) and creamy-smooth yet unmistakably hard-edged voice.

This is a new sort of fast Audi, and having tasted its potential in Italy (evo 085) we were desperate to find out if the cycle had finally been broken. Has Audi really torn-up the script and built a car to surpass the mighty, iconic, and – with the introduction of the CS

The Audi-versus-BMW battle is the main event, no question, but we've also brought along a Mercedes C55 AMG. Often overlooked, the C55 is surprisingly nimble to drive and awesomely fast. Its 5.5-litre V8 thumps out 367bhp and enough torque to take chunks out of freshly-laid tarmac. Think of it as an SLK55 with a fixed roof and four seats. And without the image problem. Make no mistake, the C55 has the potential to give both RS4 and M3 CS a serious run for their money.

We're in Wales, where else? Okay, we're not exactly getting in the spirit of Audi's attempt to explore uncharted territories and hit new highs but, a bit like the M3, the roads that criss-cross North Wales are the benchmark against which all others must be judged. When you want definitive answers to the big questions, there's nowhere better to seek them.

So, the stage is set: £49,980, 414bhp, 4.2-litre V8 RS4 head-to-head with £43,555, 338bhp, 3.2-litre straight-six M3 CS and £48,790, 367bhp, 5.5-litre

Above: pumped-up RS4 typically handsome and business-like. Top left: new engine is a high-revving normally-aspirated 4.2-litre V8 good for 414bhp; it still sits ahead of the front wheels but nose-heavy handling is counteracted by quattro system's new rearward bias

The M3 looks the best value, but such is the ubiquity of BMW's searing baby on the used market that the lower initial outlay will quickly be negated with tumbling residuals. These three are perfectly matched.

Parked side-by-side, all three cars gently pulsing to the beat of their potent engines and gradually shedding the thick layer of ice that's clinging to their bulging bodywork, it's the Audi that punches out of the fog and demands your attention. Of course, it's the least familiar, which lends it an air of mystery, but the beautiful multi-spoke alloys, bold face and heavily swollen arches combine to make the sober C55 look, well... limp. Even the M3 seems to be cowering in the RS4's presence.

While road test assistant Hayman drives on his



'Get it right and the C55 dances with a delicious angle until the road straightens'



discusses the shoot-list with photographer Morgan, I jump into the Audi's hot seat... Ah, heated seats. Don't you just love 'em?

The RS4 is soon up to temperature. As we thread along the narrow roads that will soon open up, climb, fall, flick, swoop and generally do their best impression of an Alton Towers roller coaster, there's no question I've chosen the right car. The seats are wonderfully gripping and supportive, the funky flat-bottomed steering wheel perfectly positioned. The cabin feels worth every one of those fifty thousand pounds. Nobody does this sort of thing better than Audi.

More surprising is the RS4's ability to glide over nasty ridges and clumsy surface 'repairs'

with impeccable wheel control and no hint of kickback through the steering. It feels light on its feet and even at modest speeds the chassis has a balance and responsiveness that immediately sets it apart from any other Audi I've driven. It's big brother, the mighty RS6, feels like a ballistic steamroller by comparison; all muscle and no subtlety. Clearly the RS4 signals a new philosophy for sporting Audis.

We swap cars at the Shell station in Betws-y-Coed (which must be one of the most profitable petrol stations in Britain. Behind the counter, there's a photo of one of their better days: a line-up of Enzo, F50, 288GTO and F40, with one John Barker feeding them Optimax). I now find

myself in the C55 AMG, chasing the RS4. The roads are still slick with morning dew, and despite the bellowing 5.5-litre V8 shoehorned into its engine bay, the C55 has no meaningful reply to the RS4's awesome combination of immense grip and ferocious power.

Incredibly, when you think of Mercedes integrity just a handful of years ago, the C55's interior feels cheap after the supreme quality and cool design of the RS4. The plastics are hopeless and the dash is a mess of tiny buttons with indecipherable legends. The C-class may be in the winter of its life, but the RS4 makes it feel obsolete already.

Still, with the RS4 long gone I can concentrate

on just what the C55 has to offer as a driving experience. The ride isn't as settled as the Audi's: the damping feels slightly less controlled and there's certainly more body-roll and pitch. The steering has a dead patch either side of neutral but then weights-up nicely, and although it's by no means the most feelsome of systems it does start to feel more accurate the quicker you go.

Like all AMG products, it's the engine that really defines the C55's character. It doesn't rev to the heavens like the RS4's V8, but in the mid-range you can feel the advantage of that extra displacement. Any throttle movement is rewarded with an instant, neck-snapping response, and the thick seam of torque morphs

effortlessly into an anarchic, almost shocking top-end. The Mercedes' bombastic mid-range delivery makes even the RS4's mighty power unit feel like a VTEC. The C55 may have just five gears and be hampered by a conventional torque-converter auto, but it's clear that in a straight line fight it's anything but outmoded.

With the winter sun burning the early-morning fog from the sky and rapidly drying the road surface, perhaps the Mercedes will start to shine. It seems that the M3 CS already is. Hayman drove the car across to Wales last night and was keen to stick with it this morning.

'After the fantastic memories of our Car of the Year test, I have to say it felt a little ordinary

Above: M3 CS's sharp turn-in, superb balance and fizzing 3.2-litre 'six' enable it to stick with the RS4 despite power deficit; C55 AMG experience dominated by bellowing 5.5-litre V8 with its huge mid-range punch; ride not as controlled as the other cars', but its abundant character wins you over

yesterday,' he sighs. Fortunately there's more: 'Up here it's incredible, though. Even in these conditions and with its power deficit, it can happily match the RS4. And the balance is just so good.' Sounds like the cue to reacquaint myself with an old friend...

Where's all the power gone? Ah, there it is – much higher up the rev-range. And what a noise! All high-tech, high-displacement fizz and crackle. Incredible throttle-response, too. The

