

Toyota Supra: An Icon A Half-Century in the Making

May 12, 2019

Image not found or type unknown



When can it be said that a vehicle captures the essence or “DNA” of its manufacturer? When it sets new benchmarks for quality and value? When it becomes a leader in its segment, selling many millions around the globe?

The answer, for Toyota, would be “all of the above,” with models like Corolla, Camry, RAV4 and Tacoma perfectly matching those criteria for decades.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a different set of standards defines another brand icon: *the Supra*. Specifically, the fourth-generation Supra, known inside Toyota as the A80 and by its many fans as the “Mk. IV,” has come to exemplify the brand’s illustrious performance and racing heritage. It is the car that most inspired the 2020 GR Supra, the A90.

Offered in the U.S. market from 1993-1998 and in Japan until 2002, the fourth-gen Supra was then the pinnacle of a series that began in 1979 as an upscale version of Toyota’s popular Celica sport coupe. The Supra evolved, in quantum leaps, into a benchmark sports/GT with supercar-level performance.

The “Mk. IV” Supra became a design and performance touchstone, achieved global acclaim and inspired owners to start clubs, websites, social media pages and national events. It also became a pop culture star and is today a sought-after collectible.

The new GR Supra is the culmination of 50+ years of Toyota sports car heritage, infused with the spirit of the fourth-gen model thanks to its striking design, turbocharged 3.0-liter inline six-cylinder engine and driver-centric focus on world-class performance. Supra’s journey to this point has not been simply a lineage of cars, but also a story of dedication from designers, engineers, racers, a Toyota CEO passionate about sports cars and, most critically, Supra owners and fans.

At Toyota’s press conference for the 2019 North American International Auto Show in Detroit, where the GR Supra made its global debut, Toyota CEO Akio Toyoda expressed his fondness for the Supra. “I’m sure for each of you there’s been at least one car in your life that you have a particular attachment to, one car that holds a special place in your heart, and for me the Supra is it,” he said.

The Supra story begins well before its name even appeared ...

1967: Toyota 2000GT

On its path toward becoming a global automotive force and buoyed by a rising Japanese economy in the mid-1960s, Toyota decided to make a bold design and technological statement. The result was the 2000GT, a diminutive but daring 45-inch-high sports car powered by a high-revving DOHC 2.0-liter inline-six under its long, curvy hood.

This was a genuine “halo” car for Toyota. Just 351 coupes were hand-built, and only 62 left-hand-drive models were imported to the United States, where the car sold for about \$7,000 (\$53,000 adjusted for inflation).

Millions of Americans saw the 2000GT, perhaps without ever knowing what it was, when it made an on-screen debut in “You Only Live Twice,” the fifth film in the James Bond franchise, in summer 1967. (The two film cars were custom-made as roadsters.) Driven by pretty but (spoiler alert) doomed Japanese agent Aki, the speedy 2000GT likely left 007 stirred, not shaken.

Road & Track called the 2000GT “one of the most enjoyable and exciting cars we’ve driven.” The model quickly earned racing provenance, including winning the inaugural Six Hours of Fuji in 1967. In America, Toyota contracted with Carroll Shelby’s racing operation to campaign the 2000GT in the SCCA’s C-Production class. Two cars were raced for 1968 only, taking third and fourth against seasoned Porsche 911s that had been

dominating the class.

Today, the 2000GT is a sought-after collectible, becoming the first Japanese car to eclipse \$1m at an auction sale. The model today remains a point of pride and inspiration for Toyota designers and engineers.

Gen 1 (A40): The First Supra

The 2000GT accomplished its mission, establishing Toyota's performance car credentials on the world stage. Toyota was in the meantime developing the high-volume Celica, a pioneer in the compact sport coupe category. The right car at the right time, the Celica became an instant hit when it reached the U.S. in 1971.

The second-gen Celica, designed by Toyota's Caltex Research Design studio in California, continued the momentum. Its responsive four-cylinder engine struck an admirable balance between performance and efficiency, though Toyota saw more potential. For 1979, a longer-wheelbase version of the Liftback model with a 110-horsepower, 2.6-liter inline-six joined the line: the Celica Supra.

Exclusive styling details and wider tires distinguished the premium Celica variant. Buyers could choose from standard five-speed manual or optional four-speed automatic transmission. The \$9,758 base price included a more luxurious interior than Celica's, with standard air conditioning, AM/FM stereo, power steering, tilt steering column, power windows, remote-control side-view mirrors and more.

Among the first Supra's few options were a sunroof, 8-track stereo tape player and aluminum alloy wheels. The first-gen model closed out its run for 1981 with a 116-hp 2.8-liter six, also offering an optional sports premium package with firmer suspension and front and rear spoilers.

Fun fact: in Japan, the Celica Supra was called Celica XX ("Double X").

Gen 2 (A60): "The Right Stuff"

For its second generation in 1982, the Supra took a hard turn toward sporting GT. Based on the taut, angular Celica body that was also new that year, the longer-wheelbase "A60" Supra version carved out its own identity with an exclusive front-end design featuring pop-up headlights.

On a new "P" (Performance) model, exclusive wider wheels and tires and muscular flared fenders accentuated the Supra's knife-edge profile. A unique sunshade over the black-framed glass liftback suggested a spoiler and became a signature design feature. The Supra P was priced at \$14,598 for 1982, while the subtler "L" model (Luxury) was \$1,000 less.

Under the hood, both used the 5M-GE DOHC 2.8-liter inline-six with 145 horsepower, which was on par with some domestic V8-powered sport coupes of the day. Transmission choices included a crisp-shifting five-speed manual or a four-speed automatic.

Further signaling Supra's evolution away from its Celica base, the second-gen model debuted independent rear suspension not shared with its four-cylinder cousin. Chassis tuning by Lotus, not surprisingly, made the Supra a wonderful handler. *Car & Driver* magazine, which put the Supra on its "10 Best" list for 1983 and 1984, judged the sporty Toyota's handling superior to two Porsche models, a Ferrari and a Lotus Esprit in a test to find the best-handling imported car.

The second-gen Supra helped define the accessible luxury/performance GT with such standard features as power windows, power door locks, power mirrors, automatic climate control and cruise control. A sunroof and two-tone exterior paint scheme were among the options. The Supra L featured electronic instrumentation, while the P model's more sport-focused cockpit had traditional gauges and eight-way adjustable bolstered sport seats with

inflatable lumbar support. The graphic equalizer for the cassette stereo was ideal for fine-tuning the sounds of The Cars, Def Leppard and Pat Benatar.

The A60 Supra got more power during its five-year lifespan (161 hp by 1985) and could run from 0-60 in a bit over eight seconds. About 115,000 were sold in the U.S.

The Supra's balanced performance wasn't the only reason that advertising for the car featured legendary racer Dan Gurney proclaiming it had "the right stuff." Toyota Racing Development, founded in 1979, had partnered with Gurney's AAR team to compete in IMSA's GTU (under 2.5-liter) class with the Celica, and by 1985, had achieved 10 victories. They next entered the IMSA GTO class (over 2.5 liters) with a specially built, tube-frame Celica racecar, and won the 1987 championship. In the early 1990s, Toyota sponsored Gurney's AAR Eagle Mk. III car in IMSA's GTP (prototype) class, winning 21 out of the 27 races entered, and taking the 1993 championship.

Toyota's racing pedigree would continue to influence Supra development.

Gen 3 (A70): The First Supra Turbo

While second-gen Supra was becoming its own car in customers' eyes, separation from the Celica was well underway. In 1986, the two models would part ways, sharing only their Toyota badges.

The Celica moved to a front-drive platform and offered compelling four-cylinder performance variants. The Supra that arrived in mid-1986 remained rear-wheel drive on a new platform, built to compete against a wider variety of international sports/GT models.

The third-gen Supra design blended angular lines with softer edges in both coupe and new Sport Roof body styles, the latter with a lift-off roof panel to create a semi-convertible. The feature was not new to Toyota; its tiny 800 Sports model had one in 1964, before the Porsche 911 Targa made it more famous.

The luxurious A70 Supra brought more. The new DOHC 7M-GE 3.0-liter inline-six, with the first four-valve-per-cylinder configuration for a Supra, produced 200 horsepower and 196 lb.-ft. of torque. Five-speed manual or four-speed automatic transmissions were again available.

The Supra's new chassis, with double-wishbone front and rear suspension, delivered world-class ride and handling, and this was the first Supra to offer ABS brakes. That was just for starters. Arriving a bit later, the first Supra Turbo used the new 7M-GTE turbocharged/intercooled version of the six good for 230 hp and 246 lb-ft of torque. With the standard five-speed manual transmission, the Supra Turbo could hit 60 mph from rest in about six seconds.

The Supra Turbo was much more than an engine upgrade. A standard Sport Package (optional for the naturally aspirated model) bundled a limited-slip differential and the Toyota Electronically Modulated Suspension (TEMS). The system electronically adjusted the gas-filled shock absorbers automatically to soft, medium and firm settings in response to road conditions, steering angle, vehicle speed and braking. The driver could choose between "Normal" or "Sport" modes, each following different programs to cycle through the three settings.

Like the exterior, the driver-centric dash replaced hard-edged lines with softer curves. New luxury included an optional power driver's seat with power bolster adjustment. The A70 Supra won praise for overall performance, poised handling, sophisticated and comfortable cockpit design and refinement. It sold nearly 109,000 in the U.S.

And then came a shockwave.

Gen 4 A80: King of the 1990s

Toyota had decided the fourth-generation Supra should, like the 2000GT a quarter-century before, make a bolder

statement for design and performance. Blending supercar performance, polished refinement and Toyota quality, the Supra stood apart in what was undoubtedly a renaissance period for Japanese sports cars. Its design echoed the 2000GT's classic proportions without being "retro."

The fourth-gen Supra, offered in coupe and Sport Roof body styles, was based on a shorter version of the platform that also underpinned the Lexus SC coupe. *Car & Driver* called the robust foundation "as flex-free as a granite tombstone."

To achieve lofty performance goals set for the A80 Supra, Toyota focused on both weight reduction and increased power. At 3,450 pounds, the Turbo model weighed about 125 less than its predecessor, some of the savings coming from an aluminum hood, roof and bumper supports – and even hollow-fiber carpeting.

The all-new 2JZ inline-six engine, however, used an iron cylinder block rather than aluminum for the strength to handle a substantial increase in power over the previous Turbo model. In naturally aspirated form, it produced 220 hp and offered the choice of a five-speed manual or four-speed automatic transmission.

The Turbo version, the 2JZ-GTE, employed two sequential turbochargers and produced 320 hp and 315 lb-ft of torque. The manual transmission was a six-speed, and the optional four-speed automatic had a manual mode. (The six-speed had a one-year hiatus for 1996.)

The Supra Turbo left no reviewer unimpressed, doing 0-60 in 4.6 seconds and the quarter-mile in 13.5 seconds at 106 mph, according to *Car & Driver*. Other outlets recorded similar performance. For perspective, the Supra Turbo was slightly quicker than that year's Porsche 928 GTS, which cost double the Toyota's \$39,900 price. The Supra Turbo's top track speed was electronically limited to 155 mph, but it was known that without the limiter, 180 was possible.

Handling and braking were no less impressive. Said *Road & Track*: "Like the Supra Turbo's acceleration, its handling and braking prowess are close to the best we've ever seen, regardless of cost."

The Turbo's tall, hoop-style rear wing, which became a signature feature, was functional, adding downforce to enhance high-speed stability. The wing's look was a matter of personal taste, though, which is why Toyota did not make it standard. The cockpit was more driver-focused than in previous Supras, and the front seats were praised for comfort.

The fourth-gen Supra remained a low-volume car, with just over 11,200 sold in the U.S. before its withdrawal from this market in 1998. Nearly 7,000 of those were Turbos.

A80 Impact

The 2JZ engine made the Supra Turbo a favorite of tuners, whose highly modified cars inspired the Supra featured in the 2001 hit film, "The Fast and the Furious." The movie, in turn, helped inspire a new generation of enthusiasts to seek out and modify used Supras.

More recently, Supras have been attracting car collectors' attention and rising in value. The "Fast and Furious" movie Supra sold for \$185,000 at an auction in 2015. In early 2019, a red 7,000-mile '93 Turbo brought \$121,000 via the Bring a Trailer online auction, and then two months later, a 1994 Turbo with 11,200 original miles sold for \$173,600 at an Amelia Island Concours auction.

FT-1: Bridge to the Future

Years after production of the Supra had ended, many inside Toyota, including Mr. Toyoda, were eager for a sports car revival. The 86, initially marketed as the Scion FR-S, got things started in 2012 as an affordable yet highly capable sports coupe praised for stellar handling. That model instigated talk that something more potent

could be coming.

“Even though Toyota had no plans to make a new Supra, just like a lot of other diehard Supra fans around the world, I secretly wanted to make it happen. So did a small group of our designers at Caltly, it turns out,” Toyoda said at the 2019 NAIS.

In 2014, Caltly created the FT-1 concept car. “FT” meant “Future Toyota” and “1” indicated “ultimate.” The car’s extroverted shape clearly alluded to the previous Supra, and it certainly got the boss’s attention.

The link between past and present is visibly clear today. The FT-1, at a quick glance, almost seemed like a fourth-gen Supra turned into a 21st-century superhero’s ride. Meanwhile, its “double-bubble” roof, wraparound windshield and side glass openings were distinct nods to the classic 2000GT, and those elements, which together suggest a racing helmet and visor, carried over to the GR Supra.

The Caltly crew craftily worked with Polyphony Digital, creators of the popular Gran Turismo driving simulator, to put the FT-1 into the game. Company executives then “drove” the FT-1 in timed laps around a virtual Fuji Speedway. Mr. Toyoda, an accomplished racecar driver, completed the circuit faster than his best real-world lap time at Fuji in his Lexus LFA.

The boss was sold. The Supra got the green light.