

# The 1992 Pontiac Salsa Concept Car



The 1992 Salsa was Pontiac's vision of what a "California-Style" active lifestyle vehicle might look like. Response was positive enough to send Pontiac back to research a business case to put it in production, adding a Firebird-based interior and toning down some of the details.

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**Photos courtesy of GM Media Archive**  
**and Tim Maddox**

If you've ever read the press information accompanying the release of a concept car, you will usually note references to its "features that may one day reach production." Sometimes they go so far as to say that "this car could be made production-ready if demand warrants it."

While that scenario is indeed a rarity, it does happen, as with the 1953 Corvette and 1957 Eldorado Brougham, among others.

More often than not, the concept cars that closely predict the look of future models are customized pilot line cars built a year or two ahead of the new production models.

While they do give a preview of the next generation of a given model, they were not the inspiration for them.

Every once in a while, however, a concept car comes along that sends market planners scurrying to build a business case for production. The 1992 Salsa was such a vehicle, a

# Analysis of a Show Car That Nearly Made it to the Showroom

concept car that nearly made it to production and, in retrospect, could have opened up a whole new vehicle segment. It was smart, hip, affordable and right for the time.

Designed by the California-based General Motors Advanced Concepts Center under the watchful eye of ACC Director Terry Henline, the Salsa was intended to appeal to trendy, style-conscious Californians and Southwesterners and to complement their active lifestyles with its versatility. Said Henline, "Our Advanced Concepts Center had been challenged by Chuck Jordan (GM Design Staff Vice-President) to continually search for innovative and exciting vehicles that capture the pulse of California and West Coast markets, ideas that might not normally surface in the Midwest. Working on various aspects of the pre-Salsa concept, along with Pontiac we saw this vehicle that could fill a niche at Pontiac whose direction pointed us even further toward a highly versatile, small multi-purpose vehicle that would appeal to the complex yet practical lifestyle of Californians and Southwesterners."

With this directive, Henline and his team set out to design such a machine in a way that would conform to Pontiac's brand character. A small front-drive vehicle layout was decided on, as it could be trans-



Pontiac design-studio sculptors work on the original clay model, which was used to make the molds for the two show cars. As well as being a concept car, a lot of work went into making this design a feasible production car.

formed from an open-air convertible to hatchback to panel truck with the addition of some innovative and specialized body modules. The idea was that the core vehicle would not be complete until the add-on modules were installed, giving the owner a chance to personalize the Salsa to fit his or her taste and personality.

Salsa was short and stocky, based on a 98-inch wheelbase with an overall length of 155.6 inches, an overall height of 52.9 inches and a maximum width of 71.3 inches. Track width was a hefty 65 inches for both front and rear, enough for Pontiac to stick the "Wide Track"

moniker on it, predating its return to the Grand Prix lexicon by half a decade.

Though the Salsa had a look that was nothing like any other production car, its Pontiac heritage was easily detectable, with a fish-like interpretation of the familiar split grille theme as well as slotted neon taillamps with black covers. The layout was very much a "cab forward" design, where the wheels were pushed out to the ends of the vehicle, leaving little overhang.

Its hood was short and carried the 62° angle of the windshield right to the tip of the nose. Wheel openings were heavily flared to



Unique "Crossbow" dash and console design is evident in this shot. Use of earth tones with the bright orange gave a Southwestern feel to the one-off Pontiac. Stereo controls tilt up for easy access. Gauge pod is inspired by motorcycle designs and add to the airy feeling of the interior.

make room for the aggressive wheel and tire combination. Slim cat's-eye headlamps and large round driving lamps gave a preda-

tory look to the Salsa's nose, rather like an unknown species of carnivorous catfish. Four round turn signals at each corner gave a one-off look



This turquoise panel truck was actually a static model made with fiberglass and wood. It did however have a full interior and was nearly indistinguishable from a fully operational car. It was frequently shown alongside the orange version, which was fully operational.

to the little prototype.

The aggressive angle of the windshield was also carried by the integral rollbar. As well as providing structural integrity, occupant safety and a wedge-like shape to the core vehicle, the rollbar served as a mounting platform for the add-on body modules.

Salsa's two body modules were similar in design and used removable roof hatches to close off the front seating area. One was a wagon-like section with a liftback that worked in conjunction with the built-in, swing-out tailgate. It provided excellent visibility and cargo-carrying capabilities.

The second module converted the Salsa into a stylish sedan-delivery body style. Though it was like the wagon module in terms of size and shape, the delivery body style was seen as critical since small trucks are popular in the Golden State. It could also have enhanced the Salsa's potential in the commercial market, ie, for businesses like pizza delivery.

When the Salsa was not outfitted with one of the modules, it was a slick five-seat convertible with an open rear section that could be closed off with a canvas-top system, using targa-style front sections and a bowed rear part that mimicked the wagon and delivery rooflines. Included was a bed extension that converted the Salsa into a handy pickup when the rear seat was folded down.

Inside, the Salsa bristled with innovation. Designers used what they called a "crossbow" shade provider for the sunny and arid Southwest

design, implemented for its space efficiency and its potential to be used as a structural component. The crossbow was an integral dash and console unit that rose up higher than most conventional consoles. It housed the stereo system in a water-proof, tilt-up container and featured several storage compartments for smaller items.

A motorcycle-style gauge cluster floated above the steering column and featured one large 110-mph speedometer, as well as a smaller 8,000-rpm tachometer and a fuel gauge on either side. The steering wheel was a thick-rim design, covered in brown expanded vinyl with slender spokes and a large, circular air bag cover. There was no passenger air bag, however.

Front bucket seats were of a tubular, open-frame thin-shell configuration to maximize interior space, covered in bright orange expanded vinyl with brown trim, as was the folding rear seat and the rest of the interior. Door panels were also designed with storage and space efficiency in mind, with long, molded-in map pockets and speaker enclosures.

The Salsa interior was designed for easy maintenance and cleaning. There was no carpeting. Removable heavy-gauge rubber floor mats were used instead and water drainage holes in the floorboards made it possible to actually hose out the interior without damaging anything.

Most practical was the rear seating area. Since the track width was so wide, it was possible to position a five-place rear seat between the



**The clay model is finished up with some bright yellow Di-Noc plastic sheeting to simulate a painted finish. This is an entirely different model than the turquoise showcar.**



**Left: With its rear seat down and tailgate opened, the Salsa could easily serve as a light-duty pickup truck. Slide-out package tray saw production on the Aztek. Right: Removable wagon top added weather-tight storage space.**



**Thin-shell bucket seats stylishly added interior space. Carpeting was passed up in favor of removable rubber floor mats.**



After the show season ended, Pontiac was very interested in bringing the Salsa to production. In order to make that happen, they contacted legendary Pontiac engineer and GTO forefather Bill Collins to get the job done. He had the concept painted a more sedate red with contrasting charcoal lower cladding and converted the hubs to a more traditional four-lug arrangement with five-spoke wheels. Inside, the custom interior was traded for Gen IV Firebird components. If this car was parked outside a Home Depot today, it would completely blend in.

wheels, rather than in front as with most cars. This allowed front and rear seats to be much farther apart than in conventional subcompacts. Though the Salsa had an overall

length similar to a Mazda Miata, it had at least the rear seat room of a Bonneville of the time, quite an accomplishment! The rear compartment had a removable, sliding

package tray that allowed the Salsa to be easily loaded from the rear. Cargo would then slide into place on the tray. Incidentally, this feature actually made it to production in 2001 on the versatile but much-maligned Pontiac Aztek.

Since the Salsa was a one-off show car, its finish would have to be over the top to even be noticed at the car shows. Designers specified a unique fluorescent orange paint, selected for its popularity in the Southwest and the fact that it harmonized with the earth-toned interior trim. Orange was carried over to the custom tri-spoke wheels shod with Michelin P175/70R15 tires. The Salsa used just three bolts to hold each wheel on, providing symmetry with the wheel design.

Power for the Salsa came from a 1.5-liter double overhead-cam four-cylinder mated to a five-speed



In this 2007 photo taken by POCI member Tim Maddox, it is clear that the interior was converted to a more production-ready configuration, including a Firebird dash and seats, as well as a modified console and matching door and side panels. This could easily have made it to the showroom.

manual transmission. MacPherson struts with rack-and-pinion steering comprised the front suspension, while a twist-beam rear-axle system made up the rear suspension. It was similar to that used in the FWD Aztek, but scaled down in size. Four-wheel disc brakes provided excellent stopping.

Though power figures were never released for the four-banger, it's likely that the engine put out somewhere near 115-120 horsepower, not exactly earth-shattering but enough to meet its intended performance and emission and fuel-economy needs.

When the Salsa debuted at the 1992 North American International Auto Show in Detroit, it turned heads. Two Salsas were displayed- a fully functional orange machine pictured here and a turquoise version outfitted as a panel truck. The latter was a static model constructed of wood and fiberglass though looking for all the world like a "real" car.

Critics applauded the Salsa's look and versatility, though some be-moaned the thoroughly conventional driveline. Apparently, they didn't see what was going on.

After the 1992 show season was over, Pontiac gave the Salsa serious consideration for production. The orange car went back to GM Design Center for its new role as a pre-production proposal and so made a move away from "Salsa the Concept Car" to what a production-spec Salsa might look like sitting in a dealer showroom. Interestingly, former Pontiac engineer and one of the fathers of the GTO, Bill Collins, was brought in on a freelance basis



**In the rear, the toned-down details are also clearly evident. The roof sections have been left off since this conversion.**

to assist with the transformation. Like a prized clutch player in baseball, Collins came in off the bench and delivered.

Exterior changes were simple but significant. Orange made way for a more conventional red, some of the body-colored urethane became semigloss gray and the orange wheels were traded for satin-finished replacements.

Interior changes were more acute. The crossbow dash/console became a production fourth-generation Firebird dash panel and steering and thus provided a passenger-side air bag. A Firebird-inspired console was used. The front bucket seats were replaced with less "racy" units and the orange-and-brown interior was Dark Anthracite charcoal gray.

The new look, combined with the conventional powertrain, provided the Salsa with a good shot at production. Product planners looked long and hard at the versatile sub-

compact, searching for a business case to bring it to market.

However, as with many candidates, the Salsa was ultimately denied a shot at the open market. Concerns over production volume of a niche vehicle were a touchy subject at Pontiac, still smarting over the loss of the Fiero. Add to that the "regional" aspects of the Salsa's design, perceived as a possible threat to its nationwide popularity.

Though decades have passed since the Salsa hit the show circuit, it remains one of Pontiac's most producible concept cars and would likely have been as significant a design as the Chrysler PT Cruiser. Even today, an updated version of the concept would be an economical alternative to the current crop of sport-utility vehicles. It was a missed opportunity for Pontiac to actually take the lead and offer something profoundly innovative in a very bland market segment. **PP**

# DEPARTMENT X



