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RATING 7

Scion FR-S
Automotive · \$24,930 base · Scion
Reviewed by Eric Tegler · May 25, 2012



The Scion FR-S is filled with playful rear-drive character. Photo courtesy of Toyota Motor

Scion's 2013 FR-S sports car succeeds on the most important level: It's fun to drive. Too bad Toyota couldn't have had a little more fun with the name. The FR-S is known as the Toyota GT-86 in the rest of the world, and even wears GT-86 badges on its front panels. The name brings to mind the expression, "86-ed," restaurant slang meaning a menu item has sold out, a customer has been banned, or something has otherwise been eliminated.

Imagine a television commercial wherein a Gen-Y hipster driving a GT-86 bests a competitor on a twisty road. At the end, we cut to a close-up of the winner as he looks straight at his nemesis in a VW or Hyundai and says, "You've been 86-ed!"

The actual TV ads for the Scion FR-S aren't as much fun, so it's a good thing the car is. It has a playful rear-drive character and curvaceous styling that should make it a hot commodity among Scion's under-30 target market.

The design represents a revisiting of the past for Toyota, evoking a time when the company turned out affordable, rear-wheel-drive performance cars like the 1980s enthusiast-favorite AE86 Corolla. Toyota's 1960s Sports 800 and 2000 GT are also cited as ancestors. The FR-S, which starts at \$24,930, is also Scion's first proper sports car, augmenting the less expensive, merely "sporty" tC.

The FR-S ("front-engine, rear-drive, sport") was reportedly drawn up to appease Toyota president Akio Toyoda, who asked, "Where is the passion in our lineup?"

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Scion's emphasis here is on driving character, not big performance numbers.

So absent was the passion that Toyota looked outside its corporate boundaries and developed the FR-S in cooperation with Subaru. As a result, most of the FR-S' engineering and mechanicals — like its FA20 2.0-liter, four-cylinder boxer engine — come from Subaru. Subie will sell its own, nearly identical version — [the BRZ](#) — at a slightly higher price point.

The car's styling is determined by functional elements under the sheetmetal. For example, the engine is a flat, horizontally opposed four-cylinder, enabling a low hood line that highlights the front wheel arches.

From the driver's seat, the benefits are a low cowl and the ability to place the car visually using those bulging arches. Also, the gaping grille is flanked by intakes with integrated fog lamps, ensuring adequate engine and brake cooling with minimal aerodynamic penalty. With these low-slung curves, the Scion's silhouette is vaguely Toyota 2000-esque. Its trapezoid-shaped rear incorporates a diffuser, dual exhaust and 12-element LED tail lamps.



This functional approach continues in the cockpit, where the black instrument panel is dominated by a big tachometer, a relatively simple center stack and a flat glovebox area. Imagine the central satnav/audio display pulled out, wires casually hanging, and it smacks of a stripped-out race car interior. The fabric seats are comfortable and bolstered enough for serious track work with attractive double-stitching. The steering wheel is, appropriately, Toyota's smallest, measuring just 14 inches in diameter.

A standard 300-watt Pioneer audio system can be upgraded to Toyota's 340-watt [BeSpoke app-based multimedia system](#), whose 5-inch display can be used to call up Pandora, Facebook or Twitter, and includes points-of-interest and routing functions through satellite navigation. There are also the usual USB inputs and extra RCA outputs for external amps.

The FR-S' sporting intent is signaled by a refreshingly light curb weight (between 2,700 and 2,800 pounds, depending on options) with a 53/47 percent front/rear weight distribution, a rigid chassis, and an independent suspension with MacPherson struts up front and double wishbones in the rear. Add a reasonable 200 horsepower, put power down at the rear wheels, and you've got a zippy handler.

Scion's emphasis here is on driving character, not big performance numbers. The direct-injected 2.0-liter boxer keeps the FR-S' center of gravity lower than a Porsche Cayman's, and power delivery is linear up to the 7,400-rpm redline. The FA20 engine is also tuned for sound: A "Sound Creator" channels audio from the engine's air intake into the cabin. Unfortunately, the note isn't that appealing, and my guess is that aftermarket exhaust makers will step in profitably.

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The rear is dominated by a diffuser and a pair of large LED lamps. *Photo courtesy of Toyota Motor*

The engine mates with either a six-speed manual or six-speed automatic transmission with paddle-shift mode. Manual shift throws are direct and definitive. I never mis-shifted during a day at the track, and clutch take-up is not too heavy or light. The automatic pops off quick, rev-matched downshifts with surprisingly clever anticipation. The steering-wheel-mounted paddle shifters earn a minor demerit, since they're too small for easy use when the wheel is turned beyond 90 degrees.

Given the FR-S' power-to-weight ratio, I'd guess the zero-to-60 time to fall somewhere in the mid-six-second range. Not blazing, but stoplight drags aren't its mission. Backroad twisties, hot-lapping and drifting are.

Those strengths are abetted by some quick steering. Working in concert with the suspension, it allows you to easily adjust yaw. Steering feel isn't great, but you forget about it. Jump off the throttle mid-corner and the FR-S oversteers like a front-drive car. Catching the tail is easy and fun. Drifting simply requires a little practice. The three selectable driving modes ("normal," "sport," and a third setting that disables the traction and stability controls) allow for progressively less intervention in that regard.

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The 2.0-liter Boxer is light on torque (151 pound-feet) which you do notice on the street. Conversely, the lack of twist gives you a certain freedom on the track. Rather than wait anxiously to pick up the throttle as you would in a big power sports/muscle-car, you can simply slap the gas pedal past a corner apex. It makes you smile.

The engine doesn't elicit the same response. I expected the 2.0-liter to rev more freely than it does. The Boxer winds relatively slowly, feeling a bit truck-like. Its character doesn't match the playful nature of the rest of the FR-S.

But there's a lot of good stuff, including ventilated front and rear brake rotors that stopped the car without fade during my four successive lap stints. The light overall weight aids braking performance and agility, even on the FR-S' hard compound tires. Enthusiasts will likely go for grippier rubber once the first set wears down. Scion embraces customization, and the company will offer a range of appearance and performance accessories after launching the car.

Toyota has rediscovered accessible rear-drive performance in a market where, until recently, only Mazda's MX-5 has played. This unique quality — and its extended possibilities — brings a lot of driving fun to the table. But it also brings precisely the kind of street-cred lacking in Scion's "secretary-friendly" tC.

WIRED An affordable, lightweight, rear-drive sports car tuned for performance young enthusiasts can extract — a boon for Scion. Affordability is bolstered by average fuel economy in the mid-20-mpg range, two years of free scheduled maintenance, and Toyota reliability. It's got some pretty curves.

TIRED The Subaru-sourced 2.0-liter Boxer feels a bit lazy when revved, and could use more torque. Despite help from the artificial "Sound Creator," the engine sounds only so-so. Buyers won't care, but the rear seats are useless to anyone beyond their toddler years.



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