HATCHES ARE A little like chilli. Now ‘hot’ do you like it? For some, only firebrands such as the VW Golf GTI, Megane RS265, Ford Focus ST and the new-to-market OPC Astra will satisfy their taste buds. But, if you prefer your small car served up spicy, not sizzling, then you need to peruse further down the motoring menu.

Each (this applies to Cruze, too) is comprehensively equipped. There is a complete suite of safety equipment, while creature comforts include dual-zone climate-control airconditioning, cruise control, tilt/reach steering, trip computer, CD player with MP3 compatibility, auxiliary input, USB and Bluetooth, front fog lights and powered/heated external mirrors.

Veloster and Astra’s inventories also boast active front head rests, satellite navigation, leather trim and premium audio.

For the former, tick off also an alarm, tyre pressure monitor, rear view camera, hill start assist, alloy pedals, sports body kit and rear spoiler, LED rear lights and proximity key, while the latter scores front park sensors, rear fog lights, daytime running lights, rear spoiler, front centre sliding armrest, rear armrest with storage, rear reading lights and keyless entry.

All come with five (out of five) ANCAP stars for safety, together with solid Green Vehicle Guide environmental ratings (4.5 stars for the Alfa and Hyundai, four for the Opel). And, for the record, all are six-speed manual, although a six-speed auto is a $2000 option on each.

ALFA ROMEO GIULIETTA 1.4 DISTINCTIVE

Who would have thought the stylish Italian would be the cheapest by well over $3000? Put that down to a February price drop across much of the Fiat and Alfa Romeo range, which slashed this entry-level Giulietta by a whopping $7640.

Unfortunately, in terms of value for money, that’s as good as it gets. High depreciation (a residual of 30 percent after five years/70,000km), no capped price servicing, costliest insurance premium (nearly $200 dearer than Veloster and close to $100 more than Astra) all contribute to evaporate much of that afore-mentioned price saving.

With an ADR combined fuel cycle average of 5.9 litres/100km, Giulietta’s 1.4-litre turbo engine imbibes the least, although it does require dearer 95 RON FULP. On test, the Alfa returned best economy of 7.8 litres/100km.

In terms of interior and cargo space, Giulietta is ‘piggy in the middle’, being fractionally more accommodating than Veloster, but losing out to Astra. The seats are comfy, though driving ergonomics are compromised by pedals being too closely placed (exacerbated by a clutch action that requires awkward application of the left foot) and no footrest.

With lesser engine capacity, we weren’t expecting the Alfa to be the quickest in all four of our acceleration tests, but it was – albeit by hundreds to tenths of a second.

The key to its free-spirited performance is a ‘DNA’ switch, which alters the drive mode to suit. ‘D’ is for Dynamic, ‘N’ is for Normal and ‘A’ is for All-weather (i.e., low grip) conditions.

‘Dynamic’ not only liberates an extra 20Nm of torque from the 125kW, 230Nm TB MultiAir engine, but acts on the brakes, steering, suspension and gearbox to allow the driver to hone the car’s responses to the conditions at hand.

And when those conditions include a ribbon of quiet, twisty back roads, the Alfa is at its best. The steering is crisp and communicative, chassis lithe and alive, engine responsive yet flexible.

Given its Euro heritage, we were expecting some harshness of ride. Not so. In ‘Normal’ setting, Giulietta ironed out the road creases, and even on the stiffer ‘Dynamic’ setting, it’s easy to live with.

HYUNDAI VELOSTER SR TURBO

Even Hyundai appears a little uncertain as to whether Veloster is a hatchback or coupe, but for the purposes of this exercise, we will claim it as a hatch.

Korean cars usually offer great value for money, and the SR Turbo is no exception. As well as being competitive...
on price, the Hyundai offers best warranty and cheapest capped price servicing and insurance premium, backed up by second-best residual (40 percent) and second-lowest ADR combined fuel consumption of 6.8 litres/100km on 91 RON unleaded (an average of 8.5 on test).

The smallest in length, width and height translates into the tightest overall on interior and cargo space, particularly in the rear. This is offset, at least partially, by Veloster being purely a four-seater. And while it might lack the ease of access and egress of its five-door rivals, having a door on the rear left is handy than you might think.

The driver’s ‘work station’ is relatively comfortable and functional, thanks to front sports seats with powered adjustment and lumbar. All controls and switchgear are easy to access and understand and, for those that like the feel of wind in their hair, there’s a powered, sliding sunroof.

As the most powerful (150kW @ 6000rpm and torque (230Nm @ 2200rpm) – yet lightest (1265kg) – on test, we are a bit puzzled why the Hyundai, carries more weight (1435kg) than the Alfa, and is a little more sedate than both when driven enthusiastically, but our acceleration tests show it can – and does – keep the other two honest.

While not as sharp a tool as Giulietta, Astra is a competent handler, with no hint of luxurionics when taken beyond its comfort zone. In many ways, it feels the most ‘grown up’ of all three cars. Astra shines when it comes to braking performance, proving comprehensively best on test in pulling up in an average of 21.4 metres from 60km/h – more than two metres shorter than its rivals. No doubt the optional wheel and tyre package (235/40R19) helped, just as it might have assisted those impressive cornering thresholds.

The result is a car that rides (firmish), grips (respectably), handles (highly competently) and responds (resolutely) to corner flat, fast and hard, but it’s less responsive to change of direction than the Alfa. The steering is well weighted, if a little artificial in feel, and for stopping performance, there’s little between it and Giulietta.

**ROAD TEST**

**COSTS & RATINGS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Price*</th>
<th>Environmental rating</th>
<th>ANCAP safety rating</th>
<th>Annual insurance costs**</th>
<th>Capped price servicing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALFA ROMEO GLEMIETTA 1.4</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>$29,350*</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>$963.10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>HYUNDAI VELOSTER 5R</strong></td>
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<td>****</td>
<td>$872.30</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OPEL ASTRA SPORT</strong></td>
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<td>$31,990*</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>$774.57</td>
<td>$129-$259 per service over 3 years/45,000km</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Prices are Manufacturers’ List Prices, not driveaway or special deal.
** Insurance cost is based on an RACQ Insurance comprehensive policy for a 35-year-old male, maximum no claim bonus, vehicle financially unencumbered, and $500 excess. Postcode 4066, Multi policy and RACQ member loyalty discounts may apply. Discounts of 2-5 percent may be available to RACQ members, depending on length of membership.

**CONCLUSION**

Firstly, don’t overlook Cruze SRi-V. While not able to be included in our comparison, the revamped Holden should be on any warm hatch buyer’s short list. Of our test trio, Veloster was convincingly on value for money, while in terms of design and function, there’s barely a point between the three with honours narrowly to Astra. On the road, Giulietta entranced us just as if we were Konco.

So, which would we take? The heart says the Alfa, head says the Hyundai.
The Road Ahead along with other state auto clubs, was invited to compete in the Mazda MX-5 Media Challenge out of Canberra that also attracted a contingent of Russian drivers and their coach. For our first-hand account of the event, go to roadahead.com.au/motoring.

**FAQs about road rules**

**Changing lanes**

**Q.** On a multi-lane road, can I drive across a continuous line to change lanes?

**A.** No. The Queensland Road Rules state that a driver on a multi-lane road must not move from one marked lane to another marked lane by crossing a continuous line separating the lanes. This applies unless the driver is avoiding an obstruction, obeying a traffic control device, moving into, or out of, a special purpose lane that they are permitted to drive in, or they need to drive in both lanes to enter an intersection or roundabout in a vehicle 7.5m or longer displaying ‘do not overtake turning vehicle’ signs.

**Q.** It gets dark earlier in winter. When should I be switching on my vehicle’s headlights?

**A.** According to the Queensland Road Rules, a driver must not drive at night or in hazardous weather conditions causing reduced visibility unless their vehicle’s headlights, tail lights and number plate light are switched on.

Under the road rules, ‘night’ means the period of time between sunset and sunrise. This varies during the year. Also remember to always check that your lights are switched on when leaving well-lit areas at night time, e.g. service stations.

**Tick the safety and green boxes when buying an SUV**

Australians love their Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs), and with good reason. Combining the benefits of a high driving position and vehicle versatility makes the modern SUV a popular choice for the family vehicle. From time to time, however, SUVs get singled out for attack, based on a perception they are unsafe and environmental vandals. Fortunately, manufacturers have responded to the demand for safe and more efficient SUVs that still provide style and comfort. There are now multiple choices available for those who want five-star ANCAP safety and low fuel use. The key is to do the research so you know how to buy safe and green, with best-in-class fuel consumption. ANCAP safety ratings can be found at ancap.com.au. Aim for five stars wherever possible. Fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions ratings are available on the car label and on the green vehicle guide (GVG) website greenvehicleguide.gov.au. One example is the Mazda CX-5 Maxx Sport, pictured, which comes as a two-wheel drive SUV with a six-speed auto, and uses 6.4 litres/100km in petrol. It has a commendable 4.5 star GVG rating. All-wheel-drive (AWD) versions are also available. For those wanting some extra off-road capability, the AWD Volkswagen Tiguan 103 TDi is worth considering. Diesel engines offer improved fuel consumption and engine torque, but tend to emit more pollutants which generally lowers their GVG ratings compared to petrol equivalents.

There is also a hybrid SUV available now in Australia. The five-star GVG-rated Lexus RX450h Sports Luxury produces spectacular fuel economy, low CO₂ emissions and a pin-drop quiet ride. Volvo is also promising plug-in hybrid technology, starting with the V60 D6 plug-in diesel hybrid wagon. With claimed fuel consumption of just 1.9 litres/100km and CO₂ emissions of just 95g/km, the pure hybrid mode will allow the car to travel up to 50km on its battery before the turbo-diesel engine kicks in. Check the reviews of popular models of SUVs in the Australia’s Best Cars magazine at RACQ branches or from newsagents. Produced by the nation’s motoring clubs, including the RACQ, the judges use a rigorous and documented testing process.

**Specialty for stop/start RACQ batteries**

To cater for the growing number of vehicles with ‘start-stop’ fuel and emission saving operation, RACQ Batteries will be stocking replacement Enhanced Flooded Batteries (EFB). EFB use a non-woven cover around the positive plate, which provides a low contact pressure, thereby reducing the loss of active material. This gives the EFB enhanced cycling abilities and improved charge acceptance by recovering energy more quickly during driving. For more information, call 13 1111 or go to racq.com/batteries.