For many, the allure of ‘pocket rockets’ such as these is the ‘look-fast’ factor and here both come licensed to thrill.

The VW boasts 225/40 Pirelli P Zero tyres and 18 inch alloy wheels, a body kit, alloy sports pedals, upgraded seats with funky, simulated Pirelli tread pattern, along with signature badging and lettering.

The MINI also comes with signature badging and other goodies such as alloy sports pedals, cross-drilled brake discs, 205/45R17 Dunlop sports tyres on alloy wheels and an aero wing and rear diffuser.

A little more than $1300 separates the cheaper three-door Pirelli (there is a five-door) from the JCW.

In terms of depreciation, Glass’s Guide has the pair nearly identical.

Overall running costs (insurance, servicing to 75,000 km, standard basket of consumable parts) also favour the MINI, by around $300.

MINI’s three year/unlimited km warranty shades VW’s three year/100,000 km offering.
Both engines are smooth and linear in their power delivery and are coupled to very different, but equally impressive transmissions.

On test, the JCW averaged fuel consumption of 9.8 litres/100 km, with a best of 8.6, compared with the VW’s figures of 11.9 and 8.5. The former will also run happily on 95 RON premium fuel, as opposed to the Pirelli’s recommended brew of 98 RON.

Interior and boot space is the same on these performance variants as their standard model siblings, although the MINI is purely a four seater, while the VW will carry five adults at a pinch.

Ergonomically and comfort wise, testers agreed that the Pirelli is superior. They praised its front sports seats with four-way lumbar adjustment and rotary adjustment to the back, along with easy to read and understand instrumentation and switchgear.

The JCW’s seats, while supportive, lack such levels of adjustment and the interior presents as fussy and overdone.

Both engines are smooth and linear in their power delivery and are coupled to very different, but equally impressive transmissions. The VW’s six-speed DSG, which can be operated in auto or manually (gear or paddle shift), is blindingly quick and responsive.

Likewise, the MINI’s six-speed manual is slick and nicely mated to a clutch with ideal travel and a well-weighted action.

Although heavier, the Pirelli’s 14 kW power and 40 Nm torque advantage should give it a straight-line performance advantage, but the JCW rose to the challenge and proved fractionally quicker in four of our acceleration tests.

Having an over-boost function that unleashes an extra 20 Nm between 2000 and 5300 rpm obviously helps the 1.6-litre’s cause.

The MINI also grips confidently, despite the tyres sometimes howling in protest. But ‘torque steer’ is this car’s big problem. Under power, the JCW is confronting, demanding constant and instantaneous increments of correction to the wheel as it pulls first one way, then the other. "You’re constantly chasing it,” is how one tester described it.

The Pirelli has the ride quality to complement its outstanding handling. While unmistakably firm, it boasts excellent rebound control. The JCW is a harsher ride, which could be put down to shorter suspension travel and run-flat tyres.

Both demonstrate confident, progressive braking prowess, there being just 0.1 m difference in the average of braking tests from 80 km/h.

The MINI is a far noisier drive, suffering from tyre road roar and wind rush from around the sunroof. Both emit an appropriate note to spruik their performance, the Pirelli a ‘boom’ on up changes and the JCW a satisfying burble.

Against such a brilliant package, the retro cult hero JCW is a feisty but flawed character.

**VW GOLF GTI PIRELLI**

**PRICE:** $47,490

**SAFETY:** Six airbags, anti-lock brakes (ABS), electronic brake distribution (EBD), brake assist (BA), traction control (TC), electronic stability control (ESC).

**KEY FEATURES:** Performance tyres, sports styled body and interior.

**ENGINE:** 2.0-litre turbo FSI 4-cyl.

**MINI JOHN COOPER WORKS**

**PRICE:** $48,800

**SAFETY:** Six airbags, ABS, EBD, BA, TC, ESC.

**KEY FEATURES:** Performance tyres, sports styled body and interior.

**ENGINE:** 1.6-litre turbo 4-cyl.