

Tasty Leftovers

three very flavorful second-tier 600s

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THERE ARE TIMES when you feel like shopping around town for what you hope is a great new restaurant, and then there are the times you just want to raid the fridge for a sure thing. So it goes with motorcycles—especially in the heavily populated middleweight sport class. The incredibly competitive nature of AMA and world Supersport racing puts huge demands on the manufacturers to one-up each other on a nearly annual basis. This, of course, causes their leading-edge bikes to be ever more sharply focused as race, not street machines. It also drives the prices up. But luckily for those of us who have hung up our knee pucks, three of the four Japanese builders are still turning out some great bikes that are the functional equivalent of tasty leftovers. These machines sacrifice the very latest in technology, weight-saving schemes, handling and engine performance treatments in favor of older, simpler and more street-friendly systems. Each one is also \$500–\$1600 cheaper than its racy state-of-the-art counterpart.

For about 20 years now, we've enjoyed the performance of 600cc water-cooled inline-4 engines stuffed into light, stiff and relatively compact frames. There is something that just feels "right" about this configuration, and that impression is shared in both lap times and sales figures. And while the outsider might stand twenty feet away from a group of 600s like the ones assembled here and see nearly identical machines, a long ride on each quickly points out their many significant differences. And we say, "vive la difference," because the good news for smart consumers who aren't out to be number one at the next track day, is that somewhere in the disparate mix of attributes very likely lies the "right" motorcycle for you.

Genealogy

The oldest bike in this group is the Yamaha YZF600R, soldiering on in its 12th year since being introduced back in '94 as a replacement for the previous FZR series. Its suspension was upgraded in '96 and became the bike we know today with

revised engine, brakes and bodywork in 1997. It was a class-leading supersport machine for several years (Jamie James rode it to a class championship in its first year) until the R-6 arrived in '99. But even then, Yamaha knew it had a good thing on its hands and so chose to keep the YZF in the line-up with only graphics changes year



to year. As time and technological development have marched inexorably forward, the YZF is still rooted in mid-90's performance and styling and looks it. With a steel chassis, it weighs 590 lbs. wet.

The ZZR600 is essentially the same machine as the ZX-6R of 2000–2002, once Kawasaki's top-of-the-line middleweight. It was deposed by a newer-generation Ninja in '03 to return rebadged as the bargain-priced ZZR600 in 2004. Like Yamaha, it seemed a good idea to Kawi marketers to have a more street-oriented 600 in their stable as their new 600 sportbikes became increasingly track-focused. A small technological step behind the Honda F4i, it nevertheless uses an aluminum chassis and subframe and weighs just 441 lbs. wet, but still relies on carburetors, which are becoming increasingly rare due to emissions reasons. A catalytic convertor (two of them on California models) has been added to keep its tailpipe emissions legal.

The Honda F4i's lineage can be traced back to the first Hurricane in 1987, built to "blow away" the Ninja (remember those TV ads?) It was heavily revised in 1991 as the CBR600F2, then again in '95 as the F3, and once more in '99 as the F4. Fuel injection and few other improvements brought it

up to the current engine spec in 2001. The only visible change is that the 2006 F4i comes with a more comfortable seat than the 2001 F4i. Note that the F4i won our five-way 600cc sportbike comparison in 2001.

With the possible exception of the GSX-R750-series, you'd be hard-pressed to identify another model line of motorcycles that has had a greater impact on sport riding than the CBR600-series.

Gene Pool advantage (newest): Honda F4i

Engine & Transmission

As we've said, these bikes may appear similar but are, in fact, very different in feel and function. The Yamaha is right in there in the torque department (41.8 lb./ft. at peak), but is nearly 8 hp down at the top end (82.0 hp max.). It also feels buzziest at any given rpm, with high speed vibration tingling the seat at 5000 rpm and passing into the pegs and perimeter steel frame (felt through knees) starting at about 8000 rpm. One tester described the YZF powerplant as feeling the "loosest" of the bunch. On the plus side, its carburetion is clean and glitch-free from idle to redline.

As has been true of all Yamaha sportbike gearboxes up until the R1 of 2004, the YZF600's shifting has a notchy feel—especially balky from first to second under power (the Factory Pro Shift Kit solves this problem; see MCN, Jan. 2001). And the clutch suffers by comparison with the competition, too, with a less positive feel and a shuddering engagement under heavy throttle. However, the biggest difference in the powertrain is a wider-ratio gearbox than the other two, for more relaxed cruising rpm and significantly better gas mileage.

Overall, though, the Yamaha's engine makes what feels to the rider as plenty of power, it is docile and responsive at the low and mid-range rpm used most of the time on the street, and thrums along pleasantly in top gear at freeway speeds, where at 65mph the engine is turning 5513 rpm—well below the engine's buzz point and at 90% of maximum torque. There's adequate if not thrilling power up top, but the engine has to work hard to pull the bike's extra weight. Think of it this way: The YZF is a bit soft in the midsection, like any normal middle-aged adult, thus its powertrain takes 3rd place in this group.

Because this is a street-bike test and not a track-bike test, the Honda slugs in next. It feels comparatively weak and hesitant through its low and midrange rpm, waking up at about 9500 rpm where its buzziness