



# Simplicity

This 1966 912 has served its owner well for 35 years.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID MATHEWS

SANDWICH, MASSACHUSETTS, founded in 1637, is the oldest town on Cape Cod. Provincetown is the flashiest. Hyannis is the largest. But Barnstable, situated mid-cape on Highway 6A, is the favorite of many summer tourists and year-arounders alike. Quiet, quaint and simple, it's the home of the Coast Guard Heritage Museum, Tao Water Art Gallery, Blue Plate Diner and Barnstable Pottery.

Kevin Nolan, Barnstable Pottery's owner, can almost always be found bent over his potter's wheel, shaping an earthen bowl from gray mud. Bourbon, his droopy-eared Basset Hound, frequently lies beside him. And Nolan's 1966 Porsche 912 coupe, glistening

gold from an afternoon thunderstorm, is generally parked outside the front door. A simple car. A simple life. Simple and satisfying.

This story begins 35 years ago. On April 1, 1980, Nolan becomes a Porsche owner. As a hard-working, 20-year-old bachelor, with cash in his pocket and steady employment as a machinist in his future, Nolan, hankering for a Porsche, considers both 911s and 912s. The six-cylinder cars are appealing, but they're also a bit intimidating. Not only does Nolan want to do his own maintenance, he is also put off by the premium he would have to pay for a 911. This decision requires both heart and head. 912s beckon him.

Confident that he could master the simpler mechanics of a four-cylinder, air-cooled, carbureted engine, Nolan moves past the 911 and narrows his choice to two specific cars advertised in the local newspaper classifieds: a black 1968 912 Targa and a Sand Beige 1966 912 coupe. Although the soft window Targa is tempting, it costs considerably more money. The owner demands \$6,500 and will not take a penny less. The '66 coupe is priced at \$3,700, more in line with Nolan's budget. It has factory-optional leather front seats, a leather-covered steering wheel and a five-speed transmission. Buying the coupe will give him the Porsche he wants and leave a little money for life's incidentals: gas, insurance, food and rent.

No more procrastinating. Nolan buys the '66, chassis number 456060. With the deal done, Nolan drives his Porsche to a friend's Shell station for a post-purchase inspection.

"Hey Kevin, she's a beauty," says Nolan's buddy. "Everything looks to be in good shape, but..."

He directs Nolan's attention to the rear of the car.

"Listen to that *pufp, pufp, pufp*," his friend continues, puffing air through pursed lips. "Sounds like your car may have a compression problem. And see that hazy, bluish exhaust? Nothing serious yet, but take it easy on the ole girl this summer and plan to do some engine work when you can."

## The Craftsman

When fall arrives, Nolan parks the car in his mom's garage and pulls the motor out and apart. With 57,000 miles showing on the odometer, and a murky maintenance history, the engine is pretty tired, with worn seals, broken piston rings and valves needing attention. Undaunted, Nolan prepares for the rebuild. He buys a Haynes repair manual and finagles the use of tools from a machine shop. Determined to do it the right way, he plans to blueprint and balance the engine, weighing and measuring each critical component.

"It's kind of funny when you look back at it," Nolan says. "Here I was, doing a major overhaul with borrowed tools and an off-the-shelf shop manual. I needed to replace the main bearings, so I went to the local auto parts store and ordered them. When I got them home, I checked each of them. There was too much variance to suit me, so I took them back. The owner said the parts were 'within spec.' I put up



Clockwise, from right: Dodging a late afternoon puddle. The well used and lovingly maintained 1,582-cc flat-four engine. Porsche 912, chassis number 456060. The burnished leather steering wheel and horn button glow in the fading summer sun. Restoration required total disassembly and complete organization. Basic restoration transportation, circa 1988.



a stink, so he took them back and ordered another set. Again, no dice. I ended up taking a micrometer and bore gauge down to the store to prove my point. I finally got the bearings I needed with the tolerances I expected, but it took a mix and match of three sets to do it."

Although working as a machinist pays the bills and satisfies Nolan's need for precision and exactness, he yearns to do something different. Having taken a pottery class in high school, he begins to dabble in clay. He gets good, in fact good enough to make a life-altering change. In

1983, he quits his full-time job as a machinist, drives his 912 from Fairfield, Connecticut to Cape Cod, and devotes time and energy to throwing pottery and waiting tables.

Nolan apprentices with Harry Holl, the legendary potter who runs Scargo Stoneware Pottery in Dennis, Massachusetts, just seven miles northeast of Barnstable. Nolan devotes the next five years to this endeavor, blending the basics of pottery and stoneware making with his own individual style and taste.

In 1988, after a six-month vacation in Europe that includes a visit to the Porsche

factory, Nolan returns to the Cape ready to settle down and follow his passion. His 912, driven regularly and enthusiastically for close to nine years, needs work. The engine also needs freshening again. "Just the top end that time," remarks Nolan.

Salt air has not been kind to the old Porsche. Rust has pockmarked the body; paint has bubbled on all four fenders. Restoration is an expense he cannot afford, having just started a fledgling business. Consequently, he repeats what made sense in 1980; he decides to do it himself. This time, he buys a book on auto body

repair and a wire-fed MIG welder and gets to work.

Restoration, like engine rebuilding, is an exact science. It is also an artistic endeavor. For most of us, our talent lies in one camp or the other; one can struggle with math and science, but excel in writing poetry, painting a seascape or spinning mud into a beautiful vase. Nolan is both cogent and creative. This time around, his project takes longer. Nine years longer.

"With a family and a new home, I couldn't spend as much time on the 912," says Nolan. "It was a big job. Sourcing

parts is time consuming." Once he has the pieces he needed, Nolan set out to repair the 912's curves.

Bodywork preparation is critical. Measuring, sanding, filing, more sanding, more measuring... a smooth, straight line is everything.

"The one thing I didn't tackle was the painting," says Nolan. "I didn't have the time or the equipment to do it right, and I wanted it done right."

It is challenging to find a shop willing to finish the body prep and paint the car. Either the price is prohibitively high, or the shop simply refuses to do restoration work.

"In January 1997, I found a place in South Yarmouth, Massachusetts that had a good reputation but a grumpy owner," continued Nolan. "He did not want to paint my car. He said he didn't want to 'clean up someone else's mess.' I asked him to please just take a look at my car. After I cajoled him for 30 minutes, he agreed to come by one day after work and examine what I'd done. 'Hmm...very nice,' he nodded."

The owner agrees to do the final finishing and painting for \$2,500, "when I'm not busy with my regular work."

When the painting of the car is completed, Nolan devotes two solid weeks to reassembling the 912. "It was a very gratifying, very therapeutic and a very enjoyable two weeks," he says.

The end result? Beautiful and perfect? No. Absolutely, positively accurate and authentic? No. But exactly what he envisions his 912 to be? Yep. And more.

"I loved the look of the five-gauge instrument cluster," says Nolan, "so I modified the dash to accommodate two additional gauges."

Doc and Cy's, a now-defunct Porsche parts supplier in Indianapolis, Indiana, helped Nolan with advice and hard-to-find pieces.

"They provided the gauges, including the rare VDO Ambient Temperature gauge at the far left of the cluster," says Nolan. "They also found those vintage headrests, optional for the car in 1966. Pretty darned cool, right?"

Nolan also replaces the 4.5-inch wheels with 5.5-inch steelies. "I like the Yokohama A008s," says Nolan, "but I think I'll return to my original 4.5-inch wheels and skinnier tires when it comes time for new rubber." He also replaces the original headlights with new H4 units.

In early 2014, Nolan once again puts



Above: Kevin Nolan works his magic on the pottery wheel as his 912 rests just outside the front door.

on latex gloves and gets to work, this time on the clutch and transmission.

“I replaced the clutch and release bearing and resurfaced the flywheel,” he says. “I also replaced the pinion and main shaft bearings in the intermediate plate. Oh yeah, I rebuilt those old Solex carburetors, too.”

## On the Road Again

Nolan closes the shop early so he and I can take his 912 for a spin. The engine fires after a few pumps on the accelerator pedal. Nolan notches the shifter tight against his leg, releases the handbrake and pulls away. We head down Main Street, through the village, past the courthouse, beneath the rusting girders of a railroad overpass and out of town.

Like an old gaff-rigged sailboat, the 912 swoops and dips smoothly through the corners. There is a gentle lean to it. The four-cylinder engine pushes us right along. No drama. Not fast. Not slow. Simply comfortable.

The voice of the engine is much different than that of a 911. Less urgent. More patient. It whirs and purrs. The Blaupunkt AM/FM radio works, but we do not turn it on. The 912 sings a better song.

We angle left onto Parker Road, past Our Lady of Hope chapel. Third gear becomes fourth. The rain has stopped, yet the air has a heavy feel to it. Up into fifth gear and accelerating ambitiously, we drive past farms, picket fences and a vegetable stand laden with baskets of garden-grown tomatoes.

At the intersection of Church and Parker, Nolan downshifts to second, bears left and slows to a crawl. The road is a crumble of broken pavement and rain-filled potholes that is more suitable for a John Deere tractor than a 912. We bump and wobble past cranberry bogs and faded barns, merging onto Pine Street where the road smooths.

We stop for a breath by the most beautiful farm in Barnstable County, Jenkins Farm. It is a cedar-shake homestead with solid barns and strong fences. Ancient stone walls, constructed by calloused hands two centuries ago, line each side of the road. A pond, mirror-still and steaming from the humidity of a summer rain, reflects trees and cattails.

The Porsche seems at home here. Its interior has that musty smell of old leather, tired carpet and exhaust from a motor running rich. Nolan’s 912 is a time machine, transitioning between the 356 and the more powerful 911. Each door panel has a map pocket that runs its entire length. The wing windows provide a slight hint of ventilation. The interior door latch? A push-button contrivance that leaves me scratching my head when it is time to open the door. The 912’s suspension and brakes are strictly 911 units, as is the five-speed transmission, but its engine is from an earlier era.

We drive on a little more, crest a hill and stop. Nolan turns off the motor and we talk. I ask what it is about this car that makes it so special to him.

“More than just a car, this old girl is my friend. We understand each other. I think about the craftsmanship that went into building her. We’ve grown up together. She accompanied me on my first date. She was with me when I met my wife. She requires patience and a tender hand, but she gives me so much in return.”

A simple pleasure, this 912. ■

## The 912

WHEN PORSCHE PROVIDED a sneak preview of its newest model, the 911, at the Frankfurt Auto Show in September 1963, it created quite a stir. Its shapely styling, improved suspension and flat-six engine departed significantly from the venerated 356 it was destined to replace and made sports-car enthusiasts drool and automotive journalists emote ad nauseam.

There were naysayers, however. The six-cylinder engine, although powerful, was more complicated to maintain and more expensive to feed. Yes, the 911 had about 40 more horses pushing it, but the it also weighed nearly 250 pounds more. More horsepower and more torque are generally good things. On a short-wheelbase, rear-engine car with

skinny, 165-15 tires, though, handling was frequently challenging.

When Porsche offered the four-cylinder 912 just a few months after the 911 made its debut in 1965, it was embraced as a sensible alternative. It shared the 911’s sultry styling, four-wheel disc brakes, independent suspension, torsion bars and rack and pinion steering, yet it featured the dependable and time-tested 1,582-cc Boxer four-cylinder from the 356SC, tuned to 90 hp.

The price differential did not hurt, either: The base price of the 912, at a nick under \$4,800, was about \$1,700 less than its six-cylinder sibling. It is not surprising that the 912 outsold the 911 nearly two to one in 1966.