

DESPITE RECURRING prophecies from automotive soothsayers, the Mini refuses to lie down and die. Worldwide sales are actually growing, the reborn Cooper has been such a runaway success it accounts for 40 per cent of production, and now there's even a brand new Mini derivative.

A mere 34 years since the launch of the best small car the world has ever seen, you can now buy a Mini Cabriolet designed and built by the factory. The work of Rover's Special Products division, the new Mini is a beautifully executed conversion, even if its looks raise eyebrows.

Rover hasn't designed the Mini Cabriolet for shrinking

violets. With body add-ons of extended wheel arches, boxy sills and deep valances, it looks like a grown-up Tonka toy. Folded flat, the hood sits on the back like a massive tea tray, while the interior is festooned with half a walnut tree.

The Mini Cabriolet gets noticed, that's for sure. You either like the way it looks or you don't. Personally, I don't — but Rover insists that the majority will.

I admit I felt a bit grumpy when I first drove it, hood up, sitting in this silly-looking object with rain pouring down. Then I travelled a few miles, the sun broke through, the hood came down — and it dawned on me that I was



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Neater hood stowage would have meant losing rear seats

getting to like the thing. A couple of days later, after some joyous moments belting along favourite roads, I decided it is the best Mini I've ever driven. Looks aren't everything.

You don't expect a car to become more refined after its roof has been chopped off, but the Mini actually sheds some of its age in convertible form. It is quieter, the old A-series ►

