MEN BITTEN BY THE BEETLE BUG

The VW Beetle is perceived by many to be a car for women. MICHELLE TAY speaks to two guys who would disagree

Like many young car enthusiasts, Kenneth Lai (left) drives a modified vehicle — except that his ride is not a souped-up sports model like a Mazda RX8 or a Honda S2000. Instead, he spent a whopping $12,000 to boost the performance of a Volkswagen Beetle convertible.

The car is perceived by many to be a chick mobile, but the 22-year-old business student at Singapore Management University is not perturbed.

"The iconic Beetle from the 1960s was popular with both men and women. This is just the revamped version," he says.

Admittedly, the Beetle was not his first choice. He inherited the three-year-old car from his mother, who died of cancer in 2004.

One of the first things he did was to take the car to a workshop to spruce up its engine and make it look more sporty. After the facelift, the car now has front and back spoilers, a lower suspension, larger rims, a more powerful engine and a carbon fibre bonnet.

The black bonnet, flown in from California on Singapore Airlines, no less, has become the distinguishing feature of his car.

When the black roof is up, the car looks more like a fierce Egyptian scarab than a dainty ladybird.

He says with a laugh: "My car is no longer cute. My girlfriend and I call it the Evil Beetle."

And, yes, all his modifications are legal.

He is not the only car fanatic in his family. His older brother, 28, owns two Japanese-made sports cars, while his father took part in race rallies in the 1970s and owns a prized Ferrari 328 GTB manufactured in the late 1980s.

Lai says he is "technically allowed" to take the Ferrari out for a spin, even though his father frowns upon him doing so.

It seems the young man is already itching for faster wheels.

"I'll likely drive the Beetle for one more year, then get a new sports model. We'll never sell this car. It's a keepsake," he says.

Any idea what his new ride might be?

"I think my Dad mentioned something about a Porsche 911 Carrera," he says.