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TEST DRIVE

First Drive: 2018 Toyota Camry

DAN LYONS | text and photos
Special to the Times Union

Anytime you redesign a popular model, it's a big deal. Ditto and more so when the product in question has been the best-selling car in the country since 2003. So it is for the 2018 Toyota Camry, which goes on sale in mid-July.

The eighth generation Camry will be offered in five trim levels — L, LE, XLE, SE and XSE. All are powered by a 2.5L four-cylinder engine. A 3.5L V-6 is available on XLE and XSE grades. Additionally, a hybrid-powered

2018 Toyota Camry
MSRP: \$23,495 - \$34,950

Camry will be sold in three trims — LE, SE and XLE.

The base motor in the midsize sedan — a 2.5 liter four-cylinder — is new for 2018. Peak horsepower is estimated at 206 (@ 6,600 rpm), with a max torque output of 186 lb.-ft. (@ 5,000 rpm). Paired with both this engine and the available six is an eight-speed automatic transmission. EPA estimates for fuel economy are 29 city/41 highway/34 combined — a 26 percent improvement in combined mpg's compared to the previous four-cylinder model.

The optional 3.5L V-6 checks in with 301 horsepower @ 6,600 rpm and 267 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,700 rpm. Fuel economy estimates are 22/33/26 — an 8 percent increase for combined miles per gallon over the outgoing V-6. Toyota expects about 5 percent of Camry buyers to opt for the V-6.

Hybrid powered Camry's employ a combination of an 2.5L four-cylinder gas engine with an electric motor and Continuously Variable Transmission. The hybrid system net horsepower is 208. EPA estimated miles per gallon are 51/53/52 on the LE (a 30 percent increase in combined mpg's) and 44/47/46 on SE and LE trims (a 20 percent gain). The company anticipates that hybrid sales will tally about 5 percent of total Camry sales.

At the national press launch for the 2018 Camry, I split my driving time between a four-cylinder LE (LE and SE are the expected volume leaders, accounting for an estimated 70 percent of Camry sales) six-cylinder XLE and XSE models, and an SE level Hybrid.

The four-cylinder has adequate power for all normal driving situations. It pairs well with the eight-speed automatic and seems unstressed at highway speeds. With an additional 95 h.p and 81 lb.-ft. of torque compared to the four, the six has the enjoyable excess of power you'd expect. It makes quick work of high demand situations like ramp merges and two lane passes, and has a healthy engine

note when you put the spurs in. The hybrid's power flow is smooth enough that, whistling down the highway at 70 mph, you can forget that you're driving a hybrid. I averaged 43 mpg's with no special efforts made to maximize mileage.

A new, double wishbone rear suspension joins a MacPherson strut front setup that carries over from the previous generation. Ride quality is exemplary, and while I didn't detect much difference in the different wheel/tire sizes tested (16-inch for the hybrid), 17-, 18- and 19-inch for the gas models), the roads available at the product rollout were, on average, smoother than what we ex-



THE EIGHTH GENERATION TOYOTA CAMRY will be offered in five trim levels, all powered by a 2.5L four-cylinder engine. A 3.5L V-6 will be available on XLE and XSE trims, with LE, SE and XLE available as a hybrid.

perience in the Capital District. Camry is a mainstream model, not a sport sedan, but it handles confidently, and — particularly in V-6 trim — it has a fun side. We found a 10 mile stretch of twisty, freshly paved, off-the-radar roads, and used them to good advantage, with the V-6 models.

Entune 3.0 — the latest version of Toyota's multimedia system — makes its debut in the '18 Camry. Among the optional features that drivers can access from their smartphones are Remote Connect (remote start and door lock capability, vehicle finder and — attention parents - guest driver monitor) and Service Connect (vehicle information and maintenance alerts). Wi-Fi Connect will also be available, with a Verizon powered, 4G LTE link for up to five mobile devices.

For four-cylinder and hybrid cars, the Entune Suite includes a 7-inch touchscreen and provides the Connected Navigation Scout GPS link App with moving maps as standard equipment (three year complementary subscription included). XSE and XLE V-6 Camry models can also opt for a traditional, dynamic navigation system accessed via 8-inch touchscreen (three year complementary subscription). Reliance on a smartphone-based application for navigation raises a few issues. The app uses your phone's data, and its availability is dependent on your travel being in an area where service is available from your wireless carrier. Given this and Camry's demographics (the average age of buyers is 52, according to the company), it will be interesting to see how Camry's app-based navigation is received.

XSE/ XLE V-6 models have an available, 9-speaker, JBL sound system. The upgrade employs Clari-Fi technology, which decompresses digitally recorded music, for enhanced dynamic range.

Safety Sense is a suite of technologies standard on all Toyota vehicles. The list for Camry includes pre-collision braking with pedestrian detection, dynamic cruise control, lane departure alert with steering assist and automatic high beams. Blind spot monitoring with rear cross traffic alert and a sonar-based, rear cross traffic braking system are included in Safety Sense for XSE and XLE V-6 models.

Camry's new interior is roomy and fresh looking. Six-footers fit easily in both rows, and there's 15.1 cubic feet of cargo capacity in the trunk (14.1 in L trim). It's a good sized trunk, though a sedan's cargo limitations relative to a crossover are noted. Rear seat backs fold flat forward (the releases are located in the trunk), but the resulting load floor is uneven, and the cutaway opening between trunk and passenger compartment limits the height of long item storage.

The dash display features a wing-shaped design, with an asymmetrical center section. I've not yet seen the base model, but on LE level and up, materials have a quality look and feel. Collectively, the touchscreen and supporting buttons are easy to reach and use.

Exterior styling on XSE and XLE trims sets these models apart visually from their fellow Camry's. The front fascia is noticeably more aggressive, the rear end gets a low-rise, deck top spoiler and quad, chrome exhaust tips below. A package of black roof, spoiler and mirrors is also offered to further the distinction. The dual design choices make sense. The fresh styling of L/ LE/SE will appeal to a broad range of buyers, including current and former Camry owners. Meanwhile, the sportier looks of the XSE/XLE models will also attract people to the brand who may have found the styling of previous Camry's too sedate for their taste. Toyota expects that about 20% of Camry buyers will opt for these two "X" trims.

The fresh styling of L/LE/SE will appeal to a broad range of buyers.

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