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TEST DRIVE

Blurring the Lines

2019 Toyota Avalon Touring

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Special to the Times Union

Avalon is all new for 2019. Riding on the latest (TNGA) platform, the fifth-generation models are slightly longer, lower and wider than previously. The design updates for Toyota's full-size flagship are most noticeable head on. The new front view features a set of long, squinting headlights, hunkered over a supersized, aggressive grille. Views on styling are always subjective, so Avalon's fresh face will strike some as bold and edgy, and others as grille overkill.

Depending on your choice of powertrain, the Avalon can go in two distinctively different directions. The base drivetrain features a 3.5L six-cylinder engine, paired with an eight-speed automatic transmission. While last year's model also had a six packed under the hood, the 2019 edition posts 301 horsepower and 267 lb.-ft. of torque. That compares with 268 and 248,

2019 Toyota Avalon Touring

MSRP: \$35,500 (base XLE); As Tested: \$44,913

respectively, in 2018, and that car also had two less cogs in its transmission. Needing about six seconds to reach 60 mph from a standstill, the six offers the comfortable excess of power that drivers come to expect in near luxury cars, which — particularly in upper trim levels — is the neighborhood that Avalon lives in. Power flow is smooth and even, and the car cruises easily. EPA says that Avalons so specified will return 22 miles per gallon city, 31 highway and 25 overall, and I recorded 20 mpg's during my test week.

Hybrid versions of Avalon have been offered since



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MANUFACTURER

THE 2019 AVALON is Toyota's luxury sedan, offered with a 3.5L, six-cylinder engine (301 h.p.) or a hybrid version with a 2.5L Atkinson cycle four-cylinder (215 h.p.). Avalon is front-wheel-drive, with no AWD option.

2013. The latest edition combines a 2.5L Atkinson-cycle four-cylinder gas engine with an electric drive motor for a total output of 215 horsepower. That's up from 200 h.p. in the 2018 model, which I reviewed last year. EV drive mode allows the car to be driven solely on electric power for short distances. Otherwise, it's a variable mix of gas and electric. Regenerative braking is employed to capture the kinetic energy of the wheels when decelerating or braking, storing it in the hybrid battery. In normal driving, the gas engine kicks in at about 20 mph. When you punch it, the Continuously variable Transmission adds some droning noise, though it's not overbearing. These cars are probably a second and a half slower to 60 than the six powered Avalon's, but the electric motor provides an added shove at low speed that makes it feel faster. Fuel economy is estimated at 43/43/43. I logged 38 in my drive last year. While that was below the estimates, it's still nearly twice as high as the gas powered Avalon I just drove. The cost of swapping the six for the hybrid is \$1,000, so it's an interesting option for Avalon shoppers.

Avalon is front-wheel-drive, with no AWD option. Touring level sedans like my test car are equipped with an adaptive, variable suspension system (with real time damping) and get an additional Drive Mode (Sport+). XSE and Touring models have bigger stabilizer bars than their line mates, as well as larger wheel/tire sizes (17 inches on XLE, 18 inches on Limited, 19 inches on XSE and Touring). As a result, XLE and Limited trims

have more of a comfort ride bias, while XSE and Touring lean more towards a handling bias. Avalon Touring isn't an out and out sport sedan, but it is light on its feet for its size, and more sporting in that regard than Avalons past. The giveback is a ride that's less cushioned than XLE and Limited, with some impact harshness felt on choppy pavement. Those seeking a little sport in their big sedan won't mind the tradeoff. But, I think that Avalon's traditional base of luxury minded buyers will find that XLE and Limited give them more of the feel that they're looking for.

Sporty options blur the lines between the top Avalon trims, and the bottom of the Lexus ES 350 line.

The spacious interior is a reminder of why big cars became popular in the first place. There's adult size room in both rows. A comfortable ride height and door size make for easy entry and exit. Trunk capacity is about 16 cubic feet (14 in the Hybrid), and shaped to hold a goodly amount of luggage or what-have-you.

A 9-inch touchscreen tops the center stack on all trim levels. Actual (as opposed to virtual) buttons and knobs are used for many controls, which makes for faster response time and fewer distractions. A mid-dash bank of buttons accesses HVAC functions. Toyota's Entune infotainment system adds compatibility for Apple CarPlay this year, though still not for Android Auto.

Highlights of the list of standard, safety equipment are blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert (except for XLE) and Toyota's Safety Sense package: pre-collision system with pedestrian detection, lane departure alert with steering assist, auto high beams and dynamic cruise control.

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2019 ALFA ROMEO GIULIA



2019 ALFA ROMEO STELVIO

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