

Review: Apple's new MacBook Pro looks the same, but inside it's much improved

July 14 2017, by Jim Rossman, The Dallas Morning News



In the flurry of announcements at Apple's recent Worldwide Developer's Conference, Apple CEO Tim Cook and his colleagues showed off new versions of the operating systems for Macs, iOS, Apple TV and Apple

Watch.

There was also a bit of updated hardware, including new versions of the MacBook Pro laptops.

I've been using the latest 15-inch MacBook Pro with Touch Bar, which looks exactly like last year's MacBook Pro.

Since I didn't do a review of last year's model, this was a great opportunity for me to get to know the Touch Bar, which is a small LED touchscreen that takes the place of the top row of keys on the laptop's keyboard.

BOLD DESIGN CHOICES

The current MacBook Pro designers have done a good job making the computer smaller and lighter than the 2015 version I use at work.

A big part of being able to make the MacBook Pro thinner (it's a 10th of an inch thinner than the previous model) has to do with the ports.

Or perhaps I should say it's the lack of ports that should get the credit.

Last year, Apple introduced the redesigned MacBook Pro with only the USB-C connector for all external peripherals.

Actually the ports are Thunderbolt 3, but they use the USB-C connector.

It was not a change that was universally loved.

In my daily work, I pull my MacBook Pro out of the bag, set it on a small stand and connect it to power, a Thunderbolt dock and an external monitor via HDMI.

I do this every day without even thinking about it, but after unboxing the 2017 MacBook Pro, I had to stop, because none of my peripherals use USB-C connectors, so I was out of luck unless I made a trip to the store for some dongles.

Apple has pushed MacBook Pro users into becoming collectors of dongles, which are small adapters that convert those USB-C connectors to more traditional ports.

This is great for making a smaller laptop but not so great for users who now need to go buy half a dozen dongles that cost between \$20 and \$70.

Or you can go buy a Thunderbolt dock, but make sure it's compatible with the 2017 MacBook Pro models - not all are just yet.

The ports (two on each side) can be used to connect any peripheral, such as Ethernet, monitors, and USB devices such as external hard drives. They're even used for power. The nice thing is that you can plug in any peripheral or the power cord into any of the four ports.

TOUCH BAR AND KEYBOARD

So besides the size and the ports, to me one of the biggest changes is to the keyboard, which was redesigned to be flatter, with much less travel to the keys as you type.

A lot of reviewers were vocal about hating the new-style keys, but I was able to type comfortably at my usual speed, which isn't exactly lightning fast.

The Touch Bar grew on me.

I have to admit that when I saw the Touch Bar for the first time, I

thought it was a gimmick that wouldn't have much real use for me, but the tiny screen does more than just provide soft buttons for different functions.

The layout of the Touch Bar changes depending on the app you are using, provided the app has been optimized for the Touch Bar.

I found the best Touch Bar integration with Apple's own apps like Safari.

Think of the Touch Bar like an ever-changing toolbar that brings some frequently accessed preferences to your fingertips, where you can access them quickly without your hands leaving the keyboard.

Before I had my hands on the 2017 MacBook Pro, I'd have told anyone I'd just as soon not have the Touch Bar, but I've come around.

Users of the 13-inch MacBook Pro have an option of buying the laptop with or without the Touch Bar.

I think it's worth the money.

Users of the 15-inch MacBook Pro don't have a choice; the Touch Bar is included.

Also, there is a small Touch ID sensor (fingerprint reader) on the right end of the Touch Bar. This is quite handy for unlocking the computer or for making purchases via Apple Pay.

SPECS

The 2017 15-inch MacBook Pro has the Intel Kaby Lake processors that replaced the Skylake CPU from last fall's MacBook Pro.

The laptop I reviewed had a 2.9 gigahertz processor and 512 gigabytes of storage and costs \$2,799.

You can top out the configuration with a 3.1 Ghz CPU and a 2 terabyte SSD for \$4,199.

The entry-level 15-inch MacBook Pro has a 2.8 Ghz CPU and 256 GB SSD for \$2,399.

All the 2017 15-inch MacBook Pros come with 16 GB of RAM.

The cheaper model comes with a Radeon Pro 555 graphics card with 2 GB of graphics memory, while the higher-end models have a Radeon Pro 560 with 4 GB of graphics memory.

The MacBook Pro is available in silver or space gray and has a 15.4-inch Retina display with a resolution of 2,880-by-1,800 pixels

Apple has really jumped into the large trackpad pool. The trackpad on the 2017 MacBook Pro is larger than my iPhone 6S.

Apple says the Force Touch trackpad can handle Force Touches, like on the iPhones. The trackpad is stationary. When you press it to click, it doesn't move at all. Rather, you'll get a slight vibration that feels like a button is being pressed down.

The MacBook Pro has 802.11ac Wi-Fi and Bluetooth 4.2.

There is a 720p FaceTime HD camera for video conferencing.

The internal graphics card can run up to two external displays with resolutions of up to 5,120 by 2,880 pixels or up to four displays with resolutions of 4,096 by 2,304.

There are three microphones and a set of stereo speakers that provide nice sound.

The MacBook Pros also have a headphone jack.

Battery life is up to 10 hours from the built-in 76-watt-hour lithium polymer battery.

The MacBook Pro measures 13.75-by-9.48-by-0.61 inches and weighs 4.02 pounds.

CONCLUSIONS

I like most of what the MacBook Pro has become.

Who wouldn't like a smaller, lighter computer? I sure do.

But realizing that I had just unboxed a computer and had no way to connect any of my wired peripherals was a jolt.

There are no dongles included in the box, so be sure you do some research and buy the ones you need so you can set things up.

The screen is fabulous, and the keyboard and Touch Bar are nice upgrades from my previous-generation MacBook Pro.

Overall I won't have any qualms about upgrading to this generation MacBook Pro when the time comes. It's a very worthy successor.

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Pros: Smaller, lighter, faster than the previous generation.

Cons: Expensive, needs dongles for connecting almost anything.

Bottom Line: Apple users may balk at the dongle situation, but that won't stop anyone from buying this machine to get the fastest Mac laptop.

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