2019 16-inch MacBook Pro review: Bye-bye, butterfly

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- The 2019 16-inch MacBook Pro.
  Samuel Axon
- A full view of the reduced bezels and tweaked keyboard.
  Samuel Axon
- It still comes with four Thunderbolt ports and one headphone jack—no more, no less.
  Samuel Axon

The 16-inch MacBook Pro seems like the closest thing Apple might ever make to an apology tour. While it sticks to many of the principles established in the 2016 redesign for the product line, its major changes over the just-discontinued 15-inch model include an overhauled keyboard and improved thermal performance—the chief things its predecessor was criticized for.

With this new model, Apple is offering new speakers, new microphones, much faster graphics, and a slightly larger and heavier chassis. The resulting product is something like a hybrid between the 2019 15-inch MacBook Pro and the 2015 one.

Apple markets these products primarily to three sets of potential buyers: developers, creative professionals, and affluent users or users making an aspirational purchase to have the most refined, expensive laptop available. Based on our time with the machine, the last of those three is better off looking at the 13-inch model, the MacBook Air, or any

number of Windows laptops. But Apple has made some clear improvements here for the first two groups.

While the 2019 16-inch MacBook Pro is not a totally new product, a few changes do make it the best MacBook Pro and a notable step up over its forebears for performance-minded users—provided they can afford it, anyway.

Specifications

Specs at a glance: 2019 16-inch MacBook Pro	
Screen	3072×1920 at 16 inches and 500 nits
OS	macOS Catalina 10.15.1
CPU	2.4GHz 8-core Intel Core i9 (5GHz Turbo) with 16MB shared L3 cache
RAM	32GB 2666MHz DDR4
GPU	AMD Radeon Pro 5500M with 8GB GDDR6
HDD	2TB SSD
Networking	802.11ac Wi-Fi; IEEE 802.11a/b/g/n; Bluetooth 5.0
Ports	4x Thunderbolt 3, 3.5mm headphone
Size	0.64-inch×14.09-inch×9.68-inch (1.62cm×35.79cm×24.59cm)
Weight	4.3lbs (2kg)
Warranty	1 year, or 3 years with AppleCare+ ($379)
Price as reviewed	$3,899

Other perks	720p FaceTime HD camera, stereo speakers, three microphones

Apple MacBook Pro (16-inch)

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The 2019 16-inch MacBook Pro's internals closely follow the model set by other recent iterations, and the CPU configurations don't promise any performance advantage over the 15-inch, except potentially over sustained load due to the improved thermals. That said, the GPU choices are an improvement, and flash storage is cheaper, with more included in the default configurations at the same price points ($2,399 and $2,799) as before.

The $2,399 configuration comes with a 9th-generation, 2.6 GHz, 6-core, Intel Core i7 processor. For another $300, you can bump that up to a 2.4 GHz 8-core Intel Core i9. The base option for the $2,799 configuration is a 2.3GHz, 8-Core Intel Core i9. The $2,799 configuration can be upgraded to the marginally faster 2.4 GHz 8-core Intel Core i9 for an additional $200.

RAM starts at 16GB of 2666MHz DDR for both configurations, with options to upgrade to 32GB ($400 over the base) or a whopping 64GB ($800 over the base). This marks the first time the MacBook Pro has a 64GB option, and the 32GB choice was actually introduced not all that long ago. Again, Apple has addressed a common complaint here—albeit one from a pretty niche subset of users.

Recently, the $2,399 and $2,799 configurations came with 256GB and 512GB of SSD storage, respectively. That has been upped to

512GB and 1TB without a price hike. From 1TB, you can go up to 2TB for an additional $400, 4TB for $1,000, or 8TB for $2,200. That 8TB option will please video editors working in the field, but it’s likely overkill for quite a few users.

Since storage is paramount, the base configuration storage boost essentially amounts to a price drop for this machine compared to what a similarly configured MacBook Pro cost a year ago, for some users. The entry point hasn’t changed price, but if you weren’t satisfied with 256GB of SSD storage, you’re going to spend less money this time around than you would have before, since you won’t have to spend hundreds extra on upgrades to get to a reasonable amount of storage.

The last user-configurable option is video. The $2,399 model defaults to an AMD Radeon Pro 5300M with 4GB of GDDR6 memory. For an additional $100, you can go up to the AMD Radeon Pro 5500M with the same amount of memory—an upgrade that will likely be worth it for any users doing heavy video work—or to 8GB of memory for that 5500M for yet another $100.

The display has a higher resolution than that of this machine’s predecessors (3,072 by 1,920 pixels at 226 ppi). We’ll talk more about the display when discussing this laptop’s design, but just know that nothing else has changed here specs-wise besides the pixel count.

Except for the speakers and microphones, the other specs and internals closely resemble those of the 15-inch MacBook Pro, too. There are four Thunderbolt 3/USB-C ports, any of which can be used for power.

This device has a 720p front-facing camera, and wireless connectivity options include 802.11ac Wi-Fi and Bluetooth 5.0. It’s disappointing and surprising to not see Wi-Fi 6 here, especially since the target user will sometimes be transferring very large files wirelessly, and Apple included Wi-Fi 6 in its latest iPhones.

Our review unit

The configuration we reviewed has the 2.4GHz 8-Core Intel Core i9 processor, the 8GB AMD Radeon Pro 5500M, 32GB of memory, and 2TB of flash storage. I'd argue this represents the most attractive, and possibly most common, configuration for most buyers, though many will opt to settle for 1TB storage instead given the cost. You could bump it up to 64GB of RAM, or even all the way up to 8TB of storage, but those options are really intended for special use cases.

Listing image by Samuel Axon

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