Apple HomePod mini review: playing small ball

Two and a half years ago, Apple finally entered the smart speaker market with the HomePod. It was a unique device — instead of prioritizing an accessible price and smart assistant features, it was laser-focused on audio quality and considerably more expensive than its closest competitors from Amazon and Google, while being less capable as a smart speaker. As a result, the HomePod didn't really take off. Apple was forced to lower its price, and other retailers had to discount it aggressively in order to get anyone to buy it.

Fast-forward to now and Apple's new smart speaker, the $99 HomePod mini, takes a different approach. It's smaller, simpler, and way less expensive than its bigger sibling, and thanks to Apple's work on Siri over the past few years, it can actually do more than the original when it launched. It's clear that Apple designed this to complement the larger HomePod. If you have an original in your living room, you can put the mini in various other places in your home without having to invest as much money or take up as much shelf space.

But the rest of the smart speaker world has obviously not stood still, and Amazon and Google have released the most compelling options in their respective lineups this year. While Siri has gotten better, it's still the HomePod mini's Achilles' heel — well, that and the fact that you still need to be fully embedded in Apple's ecosystem to get the most out of it.

Verge Score 7.5 out of 10

Good Stuff

- Compact design
- Accessibly priced compared to big HomePod
- Good sound for its size
- Siri is fast

Bad Stuff

- Still hugely dependent on Apple devices and services
- Doesn’t sound as good as similarly priced competitors
- Volume controls on top are fiddly
- Siri is still behind Google Assistant and Alexa in features and capabilities

The top of the HomePod mini has a touch-sensitive panel that lights up when Siri is listening or responding to commands.

HomePod mini Design

The HomePod mini has a different look than the larger HomePod, but you can tell they were cut from the same cloth. Instead of a squishy-looking cylinder, the mini is a squat ball with a flat top. It reminds me of a scented candle or an upside-down Magic-8 Ball wrapped in mesh. Just like the original, you can get it in light or dark gray, and it has a similar soft fabric.

On top of the mini is the only interface on the device itself, a flat plastic touch-sensitive pad that you can use to invoke Siri, play or pause music, or adjust volume. It has the same multicolored LEDs under it that light up and swirl around whenever Siri is listening or responding. It will glow white when music is playing or green when you’re using the mini as a speakerphone for calls.

The USB-C power cable is permanently attached to the HomePod mini.
The HomePod mini's light-up panel is harder to see than the Echo's light ring
In my testing, I've found this light-up panel to be harder to see from across the room than the Echo's glowing ring. Unless you're right next to the HomePod mini, it's hard to tell when Siri has heard your voice command and is responding. It's also much more fiddly to use to adjust volume (especially when nothing is playing), and there's no visual confirmation for how loud the speaker is set when you do adjust the volume, like you can see with an Echo or Nest Audio. In all, it's just less accessible than the buttons on Amazon's speakers or even the touch-sensitive areas on Google's — a rare miss in this department from Apple.

There's also no physical switch to disable Siri's always-listening feature. You have to either ask Siri to "stop listening" or dive into the HomePod settings in the Home app in iOS to toggle the feature, a slow and clumsy process.

Like the larger HomePod, the mini has a permanently attached power cord, though this time, it ends in a USB-C port. (A 20-watt charging brick comes in the box.) The cord is about six feet long, though I wish there was the option to just swap it for another if you want to put the speaker far from an outlet.

The HomePod mini has four microphones for picking up voice commands, but it does not have the room-tuning capabilities the original HomePod has. Instead, Apple says the processor in the mini (an S5 chip, the same as you might find in an Apple Watch) analyzes the music being played and adjusts the speaker's output for the best quality.

The microphones do an admirable job of hearing my voice commands, even from across the room and while something is

playing, and the processor is quick to take action. In my experience, Siri is typically faster to respond and do something than either Alexa or the Google Assistant, whether that’s to play music, answer a question, or control a smart home device.

The HomePod mini is about the same size as the new Echo Dot but considerably smaller than the full-size Echo.

HomePod mini sound quality

With the first HomePod, Apple prioritized sound quality above all else. That’s not quite the same with the HomePod mini, but you can still hear the effort that went into making the mini sound relatively good.

I say “good” because, for its size, the HomePod mini sounds quite nice. It’s considerably better-sounding than the similar-sized fourth-gen Echo Dot, and it puts out more bass than other small smart speakers.

The key thing to notice is that the HomePod mini outperforms other “small” smart speakers like the Echo Dot and Nest Mini, but it can’t compete with larger speakers like the regular Echo, Nest Audio, or Sonos One. The HomePod mini is priced closer to those larger speakers, although it really belongs in the small speaker class when it comes to the sound it can produce.

At 3.3 inches tall, the HomePod mini is about the same size as the fourth-gen Echo Dot and considerably smaller than the full-size Echo or Google’s Nest Audio. As a result, it has just one speaker: a downward-firing full-range driver that is designed to evenly spread sound in all directions. Two passive radiators help to accentuate lower bass tones, but they shouldn’t be confused with the multiple active speakers that

are in the Echo and Nest Audio.

The HomePod mini doesn’t provide a visual confirmation of volume levels, which is frustrating.

So it sounds good, but I can’t say the HomePod mini sounds *great.* And next to the larger Echo and Nest Audio, both of which cost the same, it simply can’t keep up. It doesn’t have the presence, volume, or sound stage of either, and it certainly can’t match the Echo’s bass output. As they say, there’s no replacement for displacement.

Unfortunately, there isn’t much you can do to improve that, either. Two HomePod minis can be paired in a stereo configuration, but that doesn’t dramatically increase the amount of volume you get, and it does nothing for improving bass or punch. Unlike the Echo or Nest speakers, you can’t pair the HomePod mini to a subwoofer or larger speaker system. You are stuck with what it does out of the box.

The mini sounds better than other small speakers, but it can’t keep up with the new Echo or the Nest Audio

Despite not being quite up to the Echo’s sound performance, the HomePod mini does sound pleasant for most any genre of music and for podcasts and other vocal performances. It has good balance in the mid-tones and a very vocal forward sound profile. You’ll hear the lyrics to your favorite song easily, without them getting overwhelmed by bass. The bass that’s there can be heard but not felt.

The HomePod mini’s 360-sound works as advertised, too. I can walk around the speaker, and the sound of the music just doesn’t change. This is great if you plan to put the mini in the middle of a room, but realistically, it will be on a shelf or closer to a wall, where it has less of an impact. That’s why both Amazon and Google switched to more directional speaker designs this year, after years of using 360-degree

speakers.

In all, the HomePod mini excels at casual listening and background music. It’s great for playing music during dinner when you don’t want to drown out conversation or just to have some audio playing in the background as you work from home. The mini is nice to listen to at low volumes or higher settings and doesn’t distort at all. It won’t soundtrack a party, and it certainly doesn’t replace a proper sound system — but for its size, it is good.

The HomePod mini sounds good for its size.

The Ecosystem of the HomePod mini

It won’t come as a surprise to many, but unless you are fully bought into Apple’s iOS ecosystem, you shouldn’t even consider buying the HomePod mini. In fact, I’d go even further: *everyone* in your home really needs to be using iPhones and Apple services to make the HomePod mini worth buying.

Setting up the mini requires an iPhone or iPad. For any smart home control, you need to be using Apple’s Home app and HomeKit-compatible devices. Asking the HomePod mini to place a phone call, read messages, or give you calendar updates requires you to use an iPhone.

The HomePod mini doesn’t support cross-platform audio streaming like Google Cast or Spotify Connect, so the only way to send audio to it from a device is via Apple’s AirPlay. You need an iPhone or a Mac to do that.

You need to be fully bought into Apple’s ecosystem and services to get the most from the HomePod mini
You can tap an iPhone to the top of the HomePod mini to transfer whatever you’re playing on your phone to the speaker

and then tap it again to transfer the audio back to your phone. Apple will be expanding this with a new interface and more features for iPhones with the U1 chip (any model released in 2019 or later, except for the SE) in the future, but I wasn't able to test that for this review.

Apple has made some small strides toward allowing the HomePod to directly play music, podcasts, and audiobooks from sources other than Apple Music, and there's now an API that apps can tap into to become the default option on the HomePod. That allows you to use voice controls to play music and have it play from a different service than Apple Music. But right now, the only app that's taken advantage of it is Pandora, and there's no word when others, such as Spotify or YouTube Music, will hop on board. (Given Spotify's frequent lawsuits and criticism of Apple's locked-down platforms, I wouldn't hold my breath for it anytime soon.)

Another thing I'd like to see is the ability to set separate default services for music, podcasts, and audiobooks, for example, using Spotify for music, Pocket Casts for podcasts, and Audible for audiobooks. Right now the default service setting limits all three categories to one app.

None of this is a problem if you're fully bought into Apple's world, but the reality is that few individuals (and, by extension, families) are. Both of Apple's major smart speaker competitors have services and ecosystems of their own, but they also allow for much more freedom of choice for preferred services and work with both iOS and Android devices.

Siri has gotten better since the original HomePod mini, but it's still behind Amazon and Google's virtual assistants.

Siri on the HomePod mini

Back in 2018, my colleague Nilay Patel rightly pointed out that the state of Siri on the original HomePod can be summed up by the fact that it cannot handle multiple timers. I'm happy to say that the HomePod mini *can* support multiple timers, and you can even label them now.

Siri has gotten other improvements over the years as well. It can now differentiate between voices, so I get a different answer for "what's on my calendar" than my spouse does when they ask the same question. It also prevents a random person from sending messages or placing phone calls from my iPhone using the HomePod mini, a problem we ran into when reviewing the original HomePod.

You can also run Siri Shortcuts from the HomePod, provided you've gone through the legwork to program them on your iPhone. Siri can also do a bunch of things with Apple's apps, such as notes, calendar, reminders, and Maps, and some limited actions with third-party apps that have added support for SiriKit commands.

A new feature as of software version 14.2 is the ability to give you an itinerary at the start of your day, including a weather report, upcoming appointments, commute traffic, and a news blurb from NPR. You can ask for a different news source, such as Fox or CNN, but that's about as far as you can customize this feature. Either way, it's nice to see Siri catch up to something that Alexa and the Google Assistant have offered for years.

I ran into a number of weird bugs with Siri during my two weeks or so testing the HomePod mini. When asking Siri to play an album from Apple Music, it would play songs out of order instead of how they appear on the album. When I use the HomePod mini to place a call, neither myself nor the other party could hear anything until I transferred the call to my

iPhone and then back to the HomePod. While Siri is able to distinguish between my voice and my spouse's and provide personalized answers, it didn't know my spouse by name and referred to them as "secondary user 1," despite Siri having all of their information on the iPhone.

Some of these bugs, such as the Apple Music one, were resolved during my testing period or didn't happen every time. But collectively, they are demonstrative of why many people still have a negative perception of Siri.

Bugs aside, Siri is still behind where Amazon and Google are with their virtual assistants. It does the basics mostly fine, such as playing music, giving weather reports, and setting timers and reminders. But Google still reigns supreme when it comes to answering random facts and Alexa is constantly being improved with proactive features that make it feel more like an actual assistant than a voice-controlled remote.

HomePod mini Smart home

The smart home capabilities of the HomePod mini are largely unchanged from the HomePod. It can control smart home devices that are set up in the Home app on the iPhone and can be integrated into Home automations. It can also act as a Home hub, which allows you to control your smart home devices with your iPhone from anywhere you have a data connection.

The mini does support a new smart home protocol called Thread, which allows devices to connect to it over longer distances and using less power than Wi-Fi or Bluetooth. (Smart home nerds will remember Thread as the standard that Google originally pushed and adopted by Eero routers before effectively stalling and going nowhere for years.) A handful of smart lights have been announced with support for Thread in HomeKit (Apple's smart home platform), but for now, the Thread ecosystem is quite small. HomeKit itself does have a wide range of compatible smart home devices, including lights,

contact sensors, cameras, thermostats, door locks, smart plugs, and more, all of which can be controlled by voice through the HomePod mini. It’s not as broad an ecosystem as Alexa and Google offer, but it’s still comprehensive.

The mini adds support for Thread, but there are few devices yet that take advantage of it

Also new for either HomePod is an intercom feature that lets you broadcast messages from a HomePod to another HomePod or Apple device. You can have it sent to a specific HomePod or blast it to all of the HomePods in the home as an announcement. You can even intercom using Siri from your phone or Apple Watch to broadcast messages to anyone that is at home.

But despite its name, Intercom isn’t really a two-way intercom. It’s effectively sending recorded audio messages to the devices instead of opening a live audio. It’s fine for letting the family know you’re on the way home from the grocery store or telling the kids it’s time for dinner from another floor of the house, but I didn’t find it particularly necessary in my home. Both Google and Amazon offer similar features on their smart speakers, but they have more two-way live communication options than the HomePod.

The HomePod mini is small enough to fit in most places in your home.

When the HomePod originally launched, it felt like Apple was operating in a completely different world from the rest of the smart speakers, one that didn’t make sense for a lot of people. The HomePod mini at least feels like it’s in the same ballpark as the rest.

At $100, compared to the original HomePod’s $350 launch price, the mini is priced low enough that you can envision buying more than one and spreading them throughout your home. It does

most of the things you expect a smart speaker to do and sounds good when doing them. If you're already fully bought into Apple's ecosystem, including services, it's hard to fault the HomePod mini's price or capabilities. It also provides an escape from some of the privacy concerns and baggage that come with the Echo or Nest smart speakers, including the increasingly common ads that show up in Alexa's responses.

The HomePod mini is good but still behind the pack
But it feels like Apple is still two years or more behind Amazon and Google when it comes to smart speakers. And compared to the equally priced Echo and Nest Audio, the HomePod mini struggles to keep up in both sound quality and features.

Apple has shown that it's willing to improve things and listen to feedback when it comes to smart speakers, so I'll be interested to see how it continues to develop. Hopefully, now that the HomePod mini is here, it starts to move a little faster.

Photography by Dan Seifert / The Verge

Correction: *An earlier version of this review said it wasn't possible to use third-party apps as default sources for podcasts or audiobooks. That is incorrect, you can set a third-party app as the default to handle requests for music, podcasts, and audiobooks, but you can't set separate apps for those categories. We regret the error.*

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