Apple iMac 27-inch (2020) review: new webcam, new screen option, same iMac

Apple's new 2020 version of the 27-inch iMac looks exactly like it has for eight years now. The updates are all on the inside, adding improvements that bring it up to the specs you'd expect in a 2020 computer, with 10th Gen Intel processors and SSDs standard instead of spinning disk drives. It starts at $1,799 for the base Core i5 model, but of course you can price it out much higher. One very expensive option is a on the glass, which Apple says is a big improvement over traditional matte displays. (For $500, it had better be.)

But there's one spec bump that is wildly out of character for Apple, even in this pandemic year: the quality of the webcam has finally been improved. If you're videoconferencing a lot, the new 1080p webcam is likely going to be the thing that improves your day-to-day the most. I hate to tell you this, but you really do look more professional to your colleagues when your camera is just a little sharper.

After using a unit for a little over a week, it's easy to recommend to anybody who needs a new desktop Mac right now. It's fast, capable, and reliable. It's just your basic iMac, and beyond a tired design, there's little wrong with that.

But if you don't need a new desktop Mac right now, you might consider waiting. This iMac may very well be the last Mac ever made with an Intel processor instead of Apple's own silicon inside it. Apple has publicly said its transition to its own chips will take about two years, so that's a fairly good estimate for when the next iMac refresh may come. That doesn't mean getting an Intel-based Mac is a mistake — it will last and be supported for many years — but it does mean that you'll

have more options if you don’t need to spend the money right now.

Verge Score 7.5 out of 10

Good Stuff

- Notable performance increase over prior model
- 1080p webcam is a big improvement over prior model
- Bright, sharp, color-accurate screen

Bad Stuff

- Design with huge bezels is stale
- Not as upgradeable as other desktops
- Limited adjustability

The iMac’s improved webcam

Let’s start with that webcam. I don’t think it’s worth upgrading to a new iMac just to get it, but I am glad that Apple has made it better. I also don’t know that I’d say it’s the best I’ve used, but it’s no longer vaguely embarrassing like most of Apple’s other webcams.

Let’s just give you the goods. Here’s the difference, taken from a still frame out of the QuickTime recorder. I happen to have a 2017 iMac for work, so it’s a direct comparison:

Left: 2017 iMac with 720p camera; Right: 2020 iMac with 1080p camera. Since the 1080p image has more pixels (duh), it’s slightly larger than the 720p camera, resulting in the framing you may see in this slider.

The webcam isn’t just better because it has more pixels; it’s also better because Apple is finally applying some modern image processing to the video stream. The iMac has a T2 chip, which is used to control lots of the components in the Mac. Apple is using it to process certain elements of this webcam’s image. It is able to do tone mapping, exposure control, and face detection.

2017 iMac on the left, 2020 iMac on the right. The difference in webcam quality is instantly apparent.

The face detection is for prioritizing keeping your face well-lit with accurate skin tones. I can move my face around in the frame and see it adjusting the exposure in real time, ensuring that my face is never too dark or blown-out. It feels very much like what the iPhone does with faces. (Apple says it’s not doing any face smoothing, if you’re wondering.)

It works really well, and luckily, it doesn’t just work in Apple’s own apps. Since these fixes are coming via the T2 chip, the improved performance is just the webcam video stream that any videoconferencing app will get.

Not putting in Touch ID or Face ID is a whiff

One thing that doesn’t feel modern at all with the 2020 iMac is logging in. Unless you have an Apple Watch and use it to unlock your computer, the only way to get in is to type out your password like an animal. Apple’s T2 chip controls Touch ID fingerprint login on Mac laptops, but Apple opted not to add a fingerprint sensor to the keyboard or a Face ID array in

this iMac.

It’s annoying, but it’s also a function of Apple’s decision to not change anything about the design of this iMac. It has the same Thano-esque chin, the same screen, and the same ports as before.

There are some upgrades in those areas, though. The screen is identical, but that T2 chip I keep mentioning means that you can turn on True Tone to match it to the color balance in your room.

Performance on the 27-inch iMac

It’s fast! It ought to be, as the model I am testing is the Core i9 model with 32GB of RAM and a Radeon Pro 5700 XT graphics card. With the nano texture screen option and a 1TB SSD, the machine Apple provided for review would retail for around $4,500. It’s 30 percent faster at one of our standard 4K Adobe Premiere Pro exports than my 2017 Core i7 iMac with a Radeon Pro 580.

But really, the performance on an iMac shouldn’t be an X-factor. How these machines operate — even under heavy thermal loads — is pretty much a known quantity. The good news is that, so far, the new 10th Gen Intel chips fare just fine inside this very familiar chassis.

If you don’t spec out your iMac to high heaven like this one, likely the biggest performance difference you may notice is read and write speeds. That’s because Apple is finally providing SSDs as the standard option instead of Fusion Drives. If you need more storage and don’t want to pay for the SSD upgrade, you can swap over to Fusion Drives on some models for no extra charge. As somebody who uses a Fusion Drive every day, my advice is to get the SSD and avoid the weird pauses that a spinning hard disk sometimes causes.

You can spend $100 and upgrade to a 10 Gigabit Ethernet port, but otherwise, the IO is all the same as before. There are two Thunderbolt ports, four USB-A ports, an SD card slot, and a headphone jack.

The iMac's nano texture matte option

The other big upgrade is that nano texture option. It is great, but I have some reservations. But first, here's a photo showing that it does its job, reducing glare:

2020 iMac on the left, 2017 iMac on the right. The nano texture finish on the 2020 iMac all but erases glare.

My first two big reservations are, unfortunately, the sorts of things that can't be resolved with just two days of testing. One is the price: at $500, it's a super expensive upgrade, and only your tolerance for glare can tell you if it's worth the price. Another thing that might help you decide if it's worth is whether the finish is durable. That's my second reservation: I just don't know.

To explain why, I need to explain what this nano texture finish even is. Instead of just putting a matte coating on top of the glass, Apple is literally etching the glass at a nanometer scale. That process gives the nano texture finish a leg up on traditional matte screens in that images won't look fuzzified. On matte screens, the light from the pixels gets scattered *out*. Apple's finish, the company claims, mainly diffuses the light that hits from the outside and doesn't scatter the light from the pixels as much.

It's a very fancy, very expensive solution to the problem. It's very Apple. Also very Apple: the instructions that come with it that specify that you should only clean it the

included microfiber cloth and that doing otherwise could damage the finish. Yikes.

A delicate screen on a $5,000 Pro Display XDR used in professional settings by professional adults who know what they have is one thing. A delicate screen on the iMac in the family room where dirt-covered children will paw at it because they rightly assume all screens should be touchscreens is something else entirely.

The nano texture finish is better than matte screens, but maybe not $500 better

I asked Apple about the durability of the finish. I was told that they don't want to give anybody the impression that it's fragile, but that, yes: over time, using something too abrasive could mess up that finish. Unlike other screens, there's really no coating on top of the nano finish; it's just etched, bare glass.

I doubt that anybody but Apple has a critical mass of user data on how the texture has fared on the XDR that could inform you whether it's a responsible thing to pay for on a family iMac.

So, again, I can't tell you if it's a good option. But I can tell you that it works great. It fully eliminates glare to the point where, for the first time, I was able to position my computer with a window behind me in my living room. It also doesn't affect the sharpness of images or text on the screen much at all — but if you truly squint up close, you can see a little fuzziness.

This sort of thing is nearly impossible to photograph. (I've tried.) You'll just have to trust me that it's nigh imperceptible straight on and not bad at all at an angle.

The 2020 27-inch iMac.

There really are no surprises with the 2020 27-inch iMac. It looks and operates like a very fast iMac, which is exactly what it is. The standard SSDs turn out to be the best quality of life improvement day to day for me, but for my coworkers that have to see me on the other end of video calls, it's probably that new webcam.

But as I mentioned at the top, there is one more variable in the decision process of buying this iMac. At some point in the next two years, it will be replaced by another model that uses Apple's own ARM processors instead of Intel's. Presumably, that iMac will finally get a refresh that does away with the honking chin and inability to log in biometrically. But whether ARM Macs are a good buy is impossible to say today — as is guessing if you should wait for them.

Apple has given every indication that it will fully support Intel-based Macs for a long time, and I have every hope that the programs and apps you need will continue to be compatible with Intel-based Macs for a long time as well.

What I'm saying is: if you need a 27-inch iMac, this is a good iMac, and you should buy it. I'm sorry that the process is going to include 45 minutes of checking and unchecking the nano texture option while you make up your mind.

***Update, August 14th, 1:50PM ET**: This story was originally published with early impressions on August 6th, 2020. It has been updated with more impressions, testing, and conclusions as a full review.*

Photography by Dieter Bohn / The Verge

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