Samsung’s latest flagship laptop brings the premium feel back

Samsung’s last few entries into its flagship Notebook 9 lineup have all been plagued by a similar problem: they looked and felt really, really cheap. The computers were fine, even great, with top-tier specs and performance, but recent models like last year’s Notebook 9 Pen felt and looked more like a $400 Chromebook than a $1,400 professional PC. At CES 2019, Samsung is trying to change that with the new Notebook 9 Pro, which actually looks and feels like a flagship laptop again.

The aluminum looks and feels like aluminum
The Notebook 9 Pro looks like a more premium product than past generations. The sloping curves, bubbly corners, and painted plastic look have disappeared in favor of tighter corner radii, sharper edges, and aluminum that, unlike Samsung’s Metal 12 magnesium alloy, actually looks and feels like aluminum. It’s a big step forward from Samsung’s previous offering, and it goes a long way toward making the Notebook 9 Pro feel like a flagship.

The Notebook 9 Pro doesn’t exactly have a distinctive style — with the thinner bezels, larger shallow keys, and an aluminum case, it’s practically a reference design for a 2019 laptop, but I’ll take generic over actively bad at this point. The most unique part of the look are the diamond-cut ridges along the edge of the case, which help the Notebook 9 Pro subtly stand out from the pack.

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I had the chance to try out the Notebook 9 Pro at CES, and while it’s far too early to determine things like performance or battery life, Samsung has definitely succeeded in making a nicer laptop. There’s a solidity and weight to the Notebook 9 Pro that it didn’t have before (at 2.84 pounds, Notebook 9 Pro is more than half a pound heavier than the Notebook 9 Pen), and there’s no weird flexing when typing.

There’s less to say about the specs, which are more or less in line with what you’d expect of a laptop of this caliber: there’s a quad-core 8th Gen Intel Core i7-8565U processor, 256GB of PCIe NVMe SSD storage, a pair of Thunderbolt 3 USB-C ports on one side of the case, and a regular USB-C port, a headphone jack, and a microSD card slot on the other side. A Windows Hello fingerprint reader is built into the power button on the side of the case as well.

Like many of Samsung’s laptops, the Notebook 9 Pro also has a 2-in-1 design with a touchscreen that can flip around to convert into a tablet, stand up on its side, or any other configuration in between. And while Samsung isn’t offering a built-in S-Pen in a slot, it is including an “Active Pen” in the box for writing or drawing.

Less impressive is the 13.3-inch 1080p display, which is a little low-resolution for a 2019 computer, especially given that gaming isn’t really a concern to justify the lower pixel count. Samsung is also only offering 8GB of RAM, which is a little disappointing. Even an optional 16GB upgrade would be welcome here.



The big question here is, as always, cost: Samsung hasn’t announced a price or release date outside of an “early 2019” window, and that, more than any other factor will likely determine the Notebook 9 Pro’s fate.

The Notebook 9 Pro isn’t Samsung’s only new laptop at CES, though. The company also announced that it’s bringing the Notebook Flash to the US, a $349.99 budget model that Samsung released internationally last fall that’s practically the antithesis of the Notebook 9 Pro. There are some interesting things here. The retro, round keycaps are fun, complete with a

fingerprint sensor that’s cleverly hidden with the rest of the keys. But the rest of the Notebook Flash is about as cheap as the price tag suggests. It has Intel Celeron and Pentium processors, 4GB of RAM, and a remarkably off-putting material on the inside that’s somewhere between textured plastic and painted fabric. If the Notebook 9 Pro is the future of Samsung’s laptops, the Notebook Flash is firmly in the past.

Notebook Flash

But even if all of the pieces aren’t quite there yet, it’s encouraging to see that Samsung is starting to take design seriously again. And whether or not this year’s Notebook 9 Pro is ultimately a success may be less important than the foundation that it’s hopefully laying for future designs.

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