

Big news comes in all sizes

by Joe Sage with Jim Prueter

If there is a common thread to these five Chevrolets, it would be innovation. Each one represents this to a different degree and in a different fashion. Some are complete redesigns, some are technical adaptations of prior models, some have style and feature adaptations, some have existed worldwide but are new to the United States, and all are intended to satisfy market niches looking for exactly what each one has to offer.

Speaking of a common thread of innovation, each of the five is available with Chevrolet's new MyLink information interface. We traveled to San Francisco, then north to Marin County, to drive them all in one day.

2013 Chevrolet Malibu Turbo

The core of this new model is its engine. Two-liter turbos have been appearing in a variety of vehicles over the past year or so, and they're providing a commendable mix of horsepower and fuel economy, even in vehicles bigger and heavier than the Chevy Malibu.

For a vehicle the Malibu's size and weight—already available in standard 2.5-liter Ecotec (LS, 1LT, 2LT and 1LTZ) and "Eco" 2.4-liter Ecotec® (1SA and 2SA) models—turbocharging a 2.0-liter should create one of the best applications of all. Meet the 3LT and 2LTZ Malibu Turbos. The presence of a "T" in multiple trims doesn't indicate turbo, although the two turbos do happen to include it. Save yourself the brain strain: just show up at the dealership and say, "show me the turbos."

The Eco's 2.4L powerplant puts out 182 hp, while the 2.5L standard Malibu boasts 197 hp. The new, smaller 2.0L turbo pumps out an impressive 259 hp, and it hits its peak sooner, at 5500 rpm (vs 62-6300 for the others). Torque is also up, at 260 lb-ft vs 172 and 191 for the Eco and standard Malibus, respectively. The turbo power is good for a 0-to-60 mph time of 6.3 seconds. Plenty impressive for a midsize family sedan starting at \$27,710 for the 3LT (a price premium of just \$1700 over the non-turbo 2LT). The new turbo engine has a lower compression ratio than the others—9.5



instead of 11-plus—but comes with a recommended (though not required) premium fuel diet. The other two run on regular fuel, period.

Fuel mileage is the other half of the target equation for the new Malibu Turbo. While the existing standard Malibu achieves 22/34 MPG city/highway, and the Eco achieves 24/37—all respectable numbers—the Turbo is rated at 21/30 MPG city/highway. Granted that's about 12 percent lower on the highway than the standard Malibu (and negligibly different in town), but you are getting a 31.5 percent boost in power. The latest technology may not surpass all possible ends of the scale, but it's certainly taking huge strides in those directions.

We drove the Malibu Turbo extensively throughout Marin County, with a chance to test its acceleration and braking on two-lane straightaways, push its cornering and handling on winding country roads, and even try a fair amount of freeway time on the return. The car's light weight and power make a very satisfying combination, and the twin scroll turbo has done an effective job of eliminating turbo lag.

Our tester was the top-of-the-line 2LTZ, with a base price of \$30,165. Total sticker was \$34,810, with sunroof (\$1000), navigation (\$795), an advanced safety package (lane departure and forward collision alert) for \$395, a \$1350 entertainment package and an \$1175 electronics and entertainment package (which also includes unrelated items such as a cargo net and body-side moldings). Final pricing may vary a bit from these early numbers.



Our California intro included the 2013 Chevrolet Sonic RS (above) and (left, top to bottom) the Malibu Turbo, Equinox, Spark and Traverse—a wide range of sizes and uses, each with its own new attitude to show off.

2013 Chevrolet Traverse

With hotter cars like the Malibu Turbo and subcompact Sonic RS at hand, as well as the tiny Chevy Spark, we approached the relatively traditional big eight-passenger Chevrolet Traverse expecting it to be less noteworthy than the others. There was no reason for that. This beauty is going to be a huge contender in the high-passenger-count crossover segment (and probably even in segments that do not per se require that many seats).

Did we say beauty? This was one of the Traverse's biggest surprises. If you've seen early photos of the 2014 Chevrolet Impala, you know it's going to be a knockout, with styling about a thousand levels above its predecessor. Unexpectedly, this year's 2013 Traverse picks up a lot of its cues. It makes for one handsome utility vehicle, though we hope it doesn't steal any thunder from the new Impala's image before that launches.

Three rows of seating are standard. The second row can have two captain's chairs or a three-seat bench, either one with SmartSlide one-handed access to the third-row bench seat. SmartSlide is simple enough even for a child, while that third row is spacious enough even for three adults. With all seats up, cargo volume is 24.4 cubic feet. Drop the third row, and volume is over 70 cu.ft. Drop the second row and it tops 116 cu.ft.

The Traverse is powered by a direct-injection 3.6L V6 (288-hp with dual exhaust; 281 hp with single exhaust). Its six-speed automatic transmission has improved mapping, for power bursts while passing or on freeway ramps. Fuel mileage is 17/24 MPG city/highway, respectable for the segment, all the more so if you prorate it against eight seats. And it runs on regular gas. Towing capacity is 5200 pounds.

We took the Traverse on much the same route as the Malibu, as sporting a route as that was. All in all, it handled the conditions just as well, more closely to a midsize sedan than you would expect for a tall 4700-plus-pounder. Rebound springs in the front struts and new shock valving are engineered for better roll control and smoother low speeds, surely both factors in the big vehicle's very comfortable handling, not at all trucklike.

Our test Traverse was a front-wheel-drive 2LT with a base price of \$37,405. With power front sunroof and fixed rear skylight, rear-seat entertainment package, MyLink Touch navigation, a trailer package and an All-Star Package including heated seats, 20-inch wheels and other perks, the total is about \$47,000. That's starting to add up, but we could draw a comparison between the Traverse and some of our favorite German utility vehicles, which approach twice the price. It's no wonder the Chevrolet Traverse has been such a huge hit, selling almost 400,000 units in just four years. This new model is sure to accelerate that phenomenon.

2013 Chevrolet Sonic RS

As the old Chevrolet Aveo subcompact changed nameplates over the last year or two, to Chevrolet Sonic, it also changed its look and feel, and certainly its image and personality. The car has changed along with the category. No longer a low-budget bottom rung, the category is now a sporty, fuel-efficient performance group. Or it



(Above) The 259-hp 2013 Chevrolet Malibu Turbo and the eight-passenger 2013 Chevrolet Traverse.

(Right) The Dumbarton Bridge and south San Francisco Bay salt ponds, on final approach to SFO. San Francisco skyline and traffic on US 101. A cold fog rolls into downtown San Francisco toward evening.



KEEP RIGHT >>



(Above) The 2013 Chevrolet Sonic RS adds performance elements; and welcome, Spark, to the US.

(Left) The Golden Gate Bridge, headed north in the morning fog. The distinctive Waldo rainbow tunnel on US 101, Sausalito. Arizona's own Frank Lloyd Wright's last project: the Marin County Civic Center.

same transmissions as a base Sonic, but with more aggressive gear ratios for the manual and modified final drive for the automatic. All this hits the pavement through distinctive 17-inch five-spoke wheels bearing another Sonic first: four-wheel disc brakes.

You can see the Sonic RS coming, by its front fascia, fog lamps, RS-specific grille, badging, mirror caps and a few other details. The redesign makes you want to get in and grab the wheel. Inside are suede and leather seating surfaces with red RS accents, shift knob and a flat-bottomed sport steering wheel. Plant your feet on aluminum sport pedals, and hear the turbo's note through the Sonic RS's bright metallic exhaust pipe.

No, it's not a Camaro ZSS. But it is related. At this price, and with this fuel efficiency—27/34 MPG with manual and 25/33 automatic, city/highway (which in

fact beats the base models for city with manual)—we found a spirited and enjoyable driver. One thing is for certain: this is not your older sister's old Aveo.

A basic Sonic sedan starts at \$14,200, \$14,800 for the hatchback. Prices run up through several trim levels to an LTZ at \$19,180. From there, it's not a huge leap to the Sonic RS, at \$20,200 with manual or \$21,485 automatic. And, again, that RS has all features standard. As Buttermore said, others "can match our price, but they can't match our product. We do care about the details."

2013 Chevrolet Spark

The Chevrolet Spark was born as South Korea's Daewoo Matiz, a highly successful minicar built since 1998. Since 2010, its styling is heavily based on the Chevrolet Beat concept car, introduced with the Trax and Groove at the 2007 NY Auto Show, and now sold globally as the Chevrolet Spark. The Spark was designed for buyers in Europe and Asia, but with skyrocketing gas prices, GM quickly adapted it for North America, loading it with 10 airbags, ESC, antilock brakes, and even hill start assist, a nice feature for young drivers. The Chevy Spark marks the company's first minicar in the US and Canada.

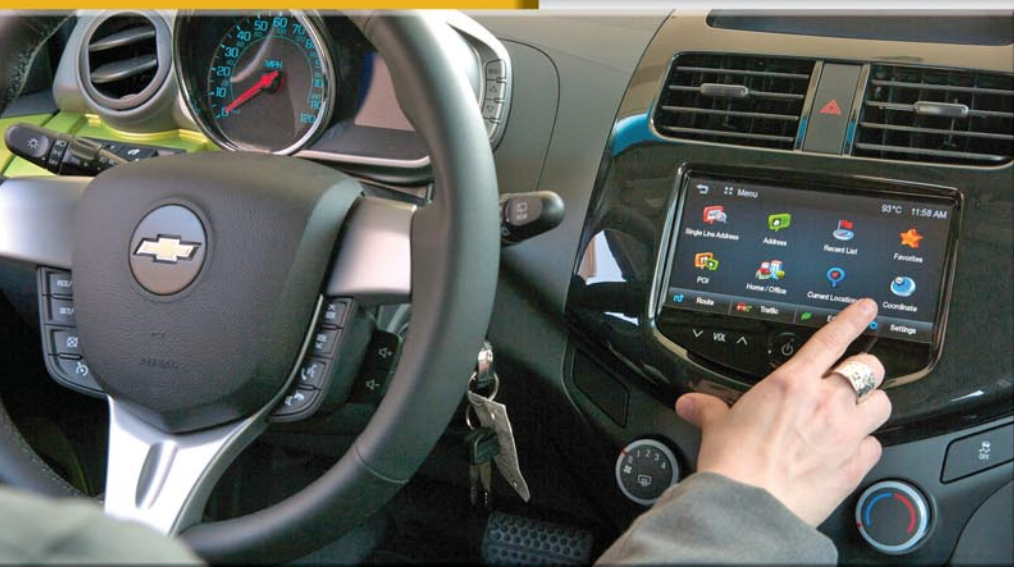
Targeted at first-time buyers in the millennial generation, Spark is inexpensive, fun and technically oriented. A five-door hatchback, it competes with a growing number of minicars such as the Smart ForTwo, Fiat 500, Ford Fiesta, Mazda2 and Scion iQ. With bold colors like Salsa, Jalapeno, Lemonade, and Silver Ice, buyers may not be sure if they're ordering a new car or lunch. Non-foodies can have it in Techno Pink, Denim, white or black. Those same cheerful body colors sweep over to the plastic interior door trim and lower dash, adding a youthful, fun effect, complementing the motorcycle-inspired tachometer and instrument cluster. All nicely done for an economy car.

Chevy's newest car is also its smallest—just 12 feet long, exactly three feet shorter than the Cruze compact and a foot shorter than the Sonic subcompact. Small as it is, the Spark still seats four comfortably and is the only four-door in its class. Our co-driver noted, "thanks to Spark's upright profile, my six-foot-six-inch frame fit comfortably behind the wheel, with enough room for two average-sized adults to occupy the rear bench seat, more than I can say for the Fiat, Smart or Scion iQ. Fold the rear seat and there's a full 31.2 cubic feet of cargo space."

All Spark models come with a standard seven-inch LCD display screen for Chevy's MyLink infotainment system. For the first time, buyers can also add a \$50 smartphone app called BringGo to send the navigation capabilities of their phone to the vehicle's screen for directions and routing. Chevy says millennials want navigation but don't want to drop \$2,000 for an in-car system.

The Spark is powered by an 84-hp four-cylinder engine with 5-speed manual, rated at 32/38 MPG city/highway (on regular unleaded gas). We found it has enough oomph to zip around town, but you'll notice a lack of power getting up to highway speeds or attempting to pass another vehicle. We recommend skipping the \$995 optional automatic transmission; that completely robs the vehicle of what little power it has.

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2013 Chevrolet Equinox

The Chevrolet Equinox adopted its current handsome family face three years ago, in 2009 as model year 2010. Model year 2013 sees a boost in the engine, from a 3.0-liter to a new 3.6L V6 for LT and LTZ models. With 301 hp and 272 lb-ft of torque, Equinox leads the midsize utility class in power, while achieving the same fuel mileage it had with the smaller V6—24 MPG highway with front-wheel drive. Models with a 2.4L Ecotec four-cylinder and FWD rate 32 MPG highway. The Equinox rides on four-wheel independent suspension, with a new FE2 package for the larger V6 and available 18- or 19-inch chromed wheels for the top-tier LTZ model.

Hop inside. The front includes a new eight-way passenger seat. A standard MultiFlex sliding rear seat has the most rear legroom in this class—up to 39.9 inches, with almost eight inches of travel. With the 60/40 rear seat all the way forward, the Equinox has 31.4 cubic feet of cargo space. The rear seat has an available dual-player entertainment system, while the front has MyLink radio, with MyLink navigation optional.

The base Equinox LS starts at \$24,580 and moves up about \$1600-1800 each step through 1LT and 2LT models, to the LTZ at \$31,340. Add \$1750 for all-wheel drive (we would). Do it up with everything from sunroof to a tow package, plus nav and entertainment systems, and you can top \$41,000. At this point there is a lot of competition—but this Equinox is highly equipped.

Chevrolet MyLink

Electronics reign in current vehicles—the more each manufacturer can do with a chip or two, the higher-tech your driving experience. Some systems literally drive you to distraction. Others are simple and straightforward. The best are complex but seem simple and do not interfere with safety or driving focus. GM's Cadillac User Experience (CUE) voice-activated system is surely one of the best. Now much of that comes to Chevrolet.

The five vehicles driven here all offer Chevrolet MyLink, a system that evolves from GM's well-known OnStar safety and security system, adding customized infotainment and wireless connectivity. MyLink brings Pandora and Stitcher SmartRadio to your virtual fingertips via voice commands, or to your real fingertips using touchscreen controls driven by your smartphone via Bluetooth. Wireless connectivity works with Android and BlackBerry, but iPhone needs a USB cable (an odd prioritization from a manufacturer whose interfaces are more Apple-esque, i.e. user-friendly and intuitive, than most).

MyLink brings something many have been clamoring for: instead of a completely proprietary system, it works with your own familiar (and preferred) mobile device and therefore your own familiar and preferred applications. It updates as your own device updates. MyLink does display its own touchscreen interface, with Audio, Pictures & Movies, Telephone, Smartphone Link and Settings. Phone calls can be initiated with one touch, and the car's speakers provide hands-free conversation. Some applications will work only when the vehicle is parked, and functionality varies by model (e.g. Sonic RS and Spark systems do not include voice recognition).

MyLink should be available in most Chevrolet models by the end of this coming year. The five vehicles we drove in Marin County are among the very first. ■

(Above) The five-passenger 3.6L V6 2013 Chevrolet Equinox; and MyLink shown in the Chevrolet Spark.

(Left) One of many great test roads in Marin County, our grounds for driving all five of these vehicles. The San Francisco skyline from the Golden Gate Bridge. Outbound passing over SFO headed south.

A base Spark starts at just \$12,995 and is pretty basic, but does include A/C and power windows. If you want power door locks, power mirrors and more audio and tech gadgets, you'll need to opt up to 1LT and 2LT models with higher prices that encroach into Sonic turf.

For those who live and drive in an urban setting and take very few long-haul trips, the Spark is an excellent choice. The Fiat and iQ are generally pricier, and neither carry four passengers nor ride and handle as well as the Spark. Base price for the 2013 Chevrolet Spark ranges from \$12,995 to \$16,720. Our test Spark stickered at \$14,495. An all-electric Spark is expected by spring, as a 2014 model.

The Spark is inexpensive but doesn't feel cheap, and includes nice high-tech features. Overall, the Chevrolet Spark is a fun way to save gas. —with Jim Prueter

