

Foregone conundrum

A good four-door family sedan used to be *the* benchmark for a manufacturer's product lineup. Ask a child to draw a picture of a car, and the classic three-box would appear on paper. If someone said they were getting a Chevy, the only question was Impala, Bel Air or Biscayne? That was before the minivan, the SUV, the booming luxury and aspiring-luxury markets, the crossover, and the growth of pickup trucks as a daily driver. You might be forgiven for thinking the sedan was no longer that important as a bellwether. But sedans (small, midsize and large) still comprise 45% of the market (to 29% for SUVs; all 2007-08 statistics). And the battle for dominance in the midsize sedan market remains one of the most intense.

Ford's business actually grew last win-

ter, while the industry and economy had devastating setbacks overall, primarily through demand for its well-appointed and fuel-efficient Fusion midsize sedan (and reduced but ongoing F-Series demand). Now, Ford has given us one heck of a benchmark, bellwether four-door sedan in the all-new Taurus.

We've been officially exposed to the new 2010 Taurus three times now. First was a media event introducing the whole lineup, where we were able to nail the high-horsepower all-wheel-drive Taurus SHO (an overdue rebirth from Ford's Super High Output performance team) for several miles on the mean streets of Chandler, shown at lower right. Next was our week-long drive of the Taurus SEL, shown at upper right. And third was a multi-vehicle event at Firebird Interna-

tional Raceway and surrounding roads, where we drove the same SEL and had most of our key findings spontaneously reaffirmed by other drivers.

The Taurus lineup has a fairly wide range of pricing, but all exceedingly reasonable for such a well-appointed car, and only a fraction of any comparable German or lux-Japanese brand. The base SE starts at \$25,170, or our test SEL at \$27,170, in front-wheel drive. Add all-wheel drive to the SEL, and the price only climbs to \$29,020. Compare this with an Audi A6. The top-trim V6 Limited in all-wheel drive is \$33,020, but at that point, we'd want to jump to the absolute top, the V6 EcoBoost SHO at \$37,170. Ford Rapid Spec Packages can add \$700-3000 to the various models, and each has an \$825 destination and delivery charge. Voice-activated navigation adds \$1,695-1,995 (a bargain compared to more costly brands), and specialty paints are available at upcharge.

Standard in the SE, SEL and Limited is the 263-horsepower Duratec 3.5-liter V6 with 6-speed automatic, in either front- or all-wheel drive. The SHO has a 365-horsepower twin-turbo 3.5-liter EcoBoost V6,



While the 263-hp front-wheel-drive 2010 Ford Taurus SEL (top) was ours for a week, the high-performance 365-hp all-wheel-drive Taurus SHO (above and on lefthand page) was ours for about ten glorious minutes.



promising V8 power at close to V6 fuel efficiency. The SHO has 350 lb-ft of torque, a 6-speed SelectShift automatic with paddle shifters and all-wheel drive only.

This large, full-featured Ford is EPA fuel-mileage-rated at an impressive 18/28 mpg city/highway with its standard V6 (for the SE; the SEL and Limited are rated 18/27). The SHO uses Ford's EcoBoost technology to attain its near-40% power gain while keeping fuel mileage at 17/25.

Chassis tuning has increased roll stiffness, and steering has been made more responsive. New rear suspension is engineered to improve ride quality, add agility, save weight and enable the use of 19- and 20-inch wheels and tires. The Ford Five Hundred, which replaced the Taurus nameplate in 2005-07, had been up-engineered similarly, to create more of a "driver's car" in the mold of Audi or BMW, but was detuned when it became the Taurus again in 2008, as the marketers were identifying a more sedate audience at that point. We welcome the retuning.

This has been a time of significant adjustment in US automakers' brands and lineups. Expect continued shifts from the Ford family. Mercury will likely take on more of the segment abandoned by GM's Pontiac division, with an emphasis on performance—rather than retrimming and rebadging—not seen in decades. Lincoln will continue to ramp up its efforts to out-Cadillac Cadillac, if not so much product-by-product as in both marques' ongoing efforts to woo German and Japanese luxury and near-luxury car buyers' hearts and minds. The Ford lineup will remain broad and deep, but in the medium-to-large sedan range, the Ford Fusion is a fine medium-size car, with decent performance, excellent fuel mileage and an AWD option to mitigate its standard front-drive configuration. The Crown Victoria has locked down the large rear-drive sedan market for years (notwithstanding GM's development of a

TAURUS LOGBOOK NOTES

- The leather seats are gorgeous, nice finish, stitchwork and pattern. The dash is reminiscent of classic Mustang dual cowl, and a hood over the radio interface echoes this.
- Has keyless entry and coded keypad, but one touch and you're in. No code needed.
- The seatback has a manual lever. We note that \$595 seats with more controls are available on the Limited and the SHO.
- Rear visibility is minimal, aggravated by the third brakelight and rear headrests and further aggravated by significant blind spots from the B-pillar and in the mirrors' range.
- Forward-leaning headrest might save us in a wreck, but it might kill us every other day. You can move it up—you pretty well have to get out to move it down—but it's fixed at a ferocious, uncomfortable forward angle.
- Brakes are good, but a pavement edge grabs the wheels and imparts a noticeable front-wheel torque-steer effect. We have noted torque steer while in motion, as well.
- Shift paddles are unmarked but same for both hands. Pull from behind to shift up, push with your thumb to shift down. No red-line on the tach, odd with manual shifting ability.
- A race car driver at Firebird comments on torque steer, little road feel, numb steering, floaty feel, painful headrests, limited rear visibility and awkward paddle shifters.
- We start thinking this might be too big for what it is, or too front-wheel-drive for that.
- When you exit the car at night, a light comes on under the mirror, handy for finding the lock button on a black-on-black key fob.
- Suspension is nice, takes unexpected speed bumps firmly but not jarringly.
- Cadillac DTS and Lexus 460 L owners very obviously checking this Taurus out.
- About the right level of gadgetry. Takes no time at all to get used to the basics.
- Doesn't take long at all to get comfortable in the car and figure it's one you could keep pretty much indefinitely, quirks and all.
- It's a car you like to look at when you walk out to it and look back at when you walk away; this is one good-lookin' Ford.

KEEP RIGHT >>



The 2005-2007 Ford Five Hundred replaced the venerable Taurus nameplate (though older Taurus production continue for fleet sales), while the Ford Freestyle entered the dawning and partially defined crossover market. Although Ford played them up as very new vehicles (and there were indeed some philosophical engineering changes), the 2008-2009 Ford Taurus and Ford Taurus X (top row) were essentially the rebadged rebirth of the Taurus name, spurred by new Ford President and CEO Alan Mulally, who had great faith in the brand's lapsed equity. Meanwhile, the Ford Edge (second row, left) was launched into the crossover market in 2006, while the seven-passenger Ford Flex (second row, right), shown as a concept in 2005, went into production in mid-2008 as a 2009 model. Meanwhile, the midsize Ford Fusion took a low-key spot in the lineup from 2006-2009, until a highly redesigned Fusion (third row) hit the market as a 2010 model. This was followed by the all-new Ford Taurus for 2010 (fourth row). Nominally the top of the lineup, but bringing up the rear, is the classic rear-wheel-drive Crown Victoria (bottom), offered only via fleet sales (police, taxi, rentals) since 2008.

Holden a.k.a. Pontiac G8—RIP—police cruiser). This leaves the Taurus—an absolutely fine sedan—somewhere between the two: the Fusion should cover the needs of the vast majority of middle-market buyers, while the Crown Vic has become overkill as a daily driver. Though the Taurus is probably far better than the Crown Vic for most people's uses, to us it just begs for rear-wheel drive (though it, too, does have the AWD option). Alan Mulally made a big point of bringing back the Taurus name, which indeed has plenty of brand equity. But with rear-wheel drive, it could take over the duties of the Crown Vic pretty completely.

There seems no need for the lumbering Crown Victoria anymore, we'd be the first to agree. Yet its market remains: for police cruisers and taxis, and for people who just crave a big fairly traditional sedan. Easy enough, then: just discontinue the Crown Vic completely, and give the Taurus rear-wheel drive. If that's not in the cards, then use the all-wheel-drive Taurus in these applications.

But what about the name? Mulally already recognized the folly in abandoning a name with great equity, when he brought back the Taurus brand. (Not that Detroit hasn't abandoned a host of great names, from Ford Galaxie to Bronco, or Pontiac Catalina to Bonneville.) With the Taurus destined for the Crown Vic's spot, might we see a Taurus for the general market and a Crown Taurus for the fleet position? We should be so lucky. ■

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