

Cherry vanilla BY JOE SAGE

Midsize sedans are the biggest-selling automotive segment, and vanilla is the biggest-selling ice cream flavor, so we use that term as a compliment, reflecting this broad popularity. And the Hyundai Sonata—proudly carrying the DNA of its larger sibling, the universally praised and endlessly prize-winning Hyundai Genesis—is quite flawlessly executed in most ways, so when it comes to midsize sedans, this one is pretty cherry.

The Hyundai Genesis is widely proclaimed as the nearly perfect car. Meet the midsize Sonata. It's a slightly smaller sibling, it's front-drive, and it goes up against significant competitors—Accord, Altima, Camry, Fusion, Malibu, Passat and more. Genesis goes up against plenty of competitors, too, including some very well-established high-dollar makes, and it wins. That's enough right there to establish that Sonata has the chops.

Hyundai has the savvy to offer the Sonata in a wide variety of versions, enough to hope to keep your midsize sedan decision within their dealership. Limited and Sport trims go for volume, with a 185-hp 2.4L engine, 35 MPG highway ratings and prices starting at \$23,175 for Sport and \$26,525 for Limited.

There are models for the efficiency-minded. A 1.6-liter Eco version, starting at \$23,275,

saves at the pump, with a 38 MPG highway rating, while a 2.4L SE trim saves at purchase time, priced at just \$21,150 and closely matching the Eco at 37 MPG. (There is also a Sonata Hybrid model, \$26,000 and 40 MPG highway, which for now is a carryover of the prior generation, for those who specifically want that powertrain.)

Then, despite the Sport and Limited names having been used in the 2.4L lineup, there are 2.0T turbo versions of both, aimed at the performance-minded buyer. Blowing past the others, with 245 hp to their 185, the 2.0T models live up to their performance aim within a bit higher price range. The Limited 2.0T is the range-topper, starting at \$33,525, if you tend toward luxury with your sport. At about \$5k less than the Limited, bearing that power and getting 32 MPG highway, the Sport 2.0T we have here is a great best-of-all trim.

The Sport 2.0T has its own interior, with sport-bolstered leather seats, contrast stitching and piping, zeroed-out active analog gauges, a D-cut steering wheel with paddle shifters, sport shift lever, aluminum pedals and other distinctive sport trim.

The car handles beautifully—tight and smooth on corners, strong and decisive on the highway. We don't always get into using

paddle shift (we tend to prefer manuals, those rare times they're available), rather tending to treat automatics as just that. But both the paddles and manual features added to our driving experience in this one.

The car's turning circle is within a few inches of a MINI Cooper, while some of the competitors are pushing 40 feet.

If you chart every factor of every model in the segment, somebody will win each category, some more than others, some might tie—but the overall balance of attributes in this performance Sonata makes it belong on any midsize sedan shopping comparison list. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE ...2.0L twin-scroll turbo dual-CVVT GDI 4-cyl	
TRANSMISSION ...6-spd auto w Shiftronic & paddles	
DRIVETRAIN	front-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE	245 hp / 260 lb-ft
TURNING CIRCLE	35.8 ft
FUEL CAPACITY	18.5 gal
MPG	23/32/26 (city/hwy/comb)

INCLUDED: Blind spot and rear cross-traffic systems, 18" alloys, Drive Mode Select, quad exhaust tips, HID headlights, LED taillights, LED DRLs, keyless entry and start, hands-free smart trunk, dual auto climate, aluminum pedals and sill plates, spot leather seats, heated front seats, much more.

BASE PRICE	\$28,575
ULTIMATE PACKAGE: Pano tilt/slide sunroof, full range of driver assist electronics, 6-way power passenger seat, vented front and heated rear seats, rear side sunshades, 8" touchscreen nav, 400-watt Infinity amp-speakers-subwoofer, LED interior lights and more	4950
CARPETED FLOOR MATS:	125
DESTINATION CHARGE:	810
TOTAL	\$34,460

If there are a lot of shades of grey, and there are, this Shale Gray Metallic is one of the nicest. The car looks even sexier when ordered for Arizona, without the front license plate frame this one bears.

