

Can new Ultrabook PCs catch Air?

November 24 2011, By Brier Dudley

Everybody loved the sleek design of Ferraris in the late 1960s, back when cars were the coolest gadgets around.

So it was monumental when Datsun introduced the 240Z in 1969 - a Japanese sports car with Italian looks for less than half the price. It wasn't as exquisitely handcrafted, but the 240Z looked great, ran well and a lot of people could afford one.

That helped convince Americans that Datsun - now Nissan - and Japanese carmakers really could build sexy machines and not just boxy, cheap sedans.

There's a new generation of laptops appearing this holiday season that may have a similar effect on the Windows PC industry, which in recent years has fallen under the shadow of Apple's glamorous new hardware.

These laptops blatantly lift design cues from Apple's MacBook Air, an elegant, impossibly thin wedge of aluminum that first appeared in 2008, and they're approaching half the Air's price.

Intel calls them Ultrabooks, a brand PC makers can use if they meet Intel's criteria. Ultrabooks basically have to be thinner than a finger; run five to eight hours on a [battery charge](#); use Intel's latest mobile processors; and have a solid-state hard drive, or [SSD](#).

The SSD, which is like a big version of the memory card in a digital camera, is crucial because it improves performance and startup times.

I've been testing one of the first Ultrabooks, the Acer Aspire S3, which takes only a few seconds to wake from sleep and less than a minute to reboot.

It's a beautiful laptop with a brushed aluminum cover, a 13.3-inch screen and a total thickness of about a half an inch. Closed, it looks like it could be a [Web tablet](#), and it makes mini-netbooks look chunky. At 3 pounds it weighs about the same as a MacBook Air.

Inside the S3 runs Windows 7 Home Premium on a second-generation Intel Core i5 processor.

There's also a dual drive system - a 20 gigabyte SSD plus a 320 gig standard hard drive.

Blended drive setups will appear on several new Ultrabooks. It's a way for PC makers to provide the performance boost of an SSD without the crazy expense of a full-sized Flash hard drive. A spokesman for drive-maker Seagate said its new hybrid drives add only \$30 to \$60 to the cost of a standard laptop drive at retail.

There are other ways that PC makers are trying to keep Ultrabook costs down.

The S3 has "chiclet" style keys similar to the MacBook Air. There's a bit of wiggle in the keys and I was concerned about the small space bar and Enter key, but I could type reasonably fast without misfires. The keyboard felt just right to my wife and daughter, who have smaller hands.

With more plastic parts, it doesn't have the exquisite, machined feel of the Air. It also lacks the fast, new USB 3.0 ports (it has two USB 2.0 ports and an HDMI port) and full SSD drives used on some other

Ultrabooks.

But these things depend on your perspective. If you're upgrading from a thick, standard laptop, the S3 or other Ultrabooks may be thrilling.

Keep in mind, though, that the S3 and other ultrathin laptops don't have DVD drives. If it will be your only computer, you may need to connect an external DVD drive at some point.

The S3 lists for \$900, but I've noticed some discounters are already selling it for just under \$850. That's expensive, especially when you can get really powerful laptops for \$400 to \$700, and Thanksgiving sales are just around the corner.

Still, the S3 looks like a deal if you've been pining for an ultrathin laptop and unwilling or unable to pay for one. Windows PC makers have made gorgeous, thin laptops for years, but they're usually aimed at executives and cost \$1,500 or more.

A 13-inch [MacBook](#) Air costs \$1,299 to \$1,599, for models with 128 or 256 gigabytes of SSD storage.

You could say that the S3 and other Ultrabooks are just copying the Air.

That's partly true.

Also at play is the cost curve. Premium components that Apple used to build such a thin machine are coming down in price. That's enabling other PC makers to build similar systems and sell them for \$1,000 or less. If component prices keep falling, most laptops eventually may look like this.

Intel expects 40 percent of consumer notebooks sold by the end of 2012

will be Ultrabooks. But research firm IDC says that's optimistic; it's predicting they'll take 16 to 19 percent of the consumer laptop market next year.

With consumers paying an average of \$686 for laptops nowadays, according to IDC, Ultrabook prices need to fall before they take off, said IDC Vice President Bob O'Donnell. "The issue is this first batch is really expensive, unfortunately - too expensive," he said. "In my view it needs to be \$799 or less before it really gets attention from people."

O'Donnell said the combination of Ultrabooks and Windows 8 will be appealing, in part because the new operating system will further improve startup times.

Another research firm, HIS iSuppli, projected Ultrabook sales will grow from 1 million this year to 136.5 million in 2015.

For now, Intel's requirements for Ultrabooks - especially the SSDs - are a challenge for PC makers trying to lower prices, O'Donnell said. He met last week with Taiwanese manufacturers who are working on "Ultrabook class" systems with less expensive components that don't quite meet Intel branding standards.

Perhaps Intel will be more flexible with processor prices. It's about to introduce the next generation of the "Core" processors that are the basis of its Ultrabook strategy. These processors, code-named "Ivy Bridge," are supposed to have better performance, power savings and improved graphics.

Ivy Bridge PCs will go on sale in the first half of 2012. It's a safe bet that laptops and tablets built on the platform will be shown in January at the Consumer Electronics Show. Apple's also likely to upgrade its computers to the new processors.

Having "old" and "new" processors on the market could lead to a broader range of prices for Ultrabooks and they'll all be upgradeable to Windows 8.

Meanwhile, the S3 is worth a look if you're in the market for a laptop, especially if you need a fast, light, full-powered [Windows PC](#). It's not the Ferrari of laptops, but it's still a pretty nice ride.

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