Review: Toshiba brings high-res screen to Windows

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The Toshiba Kirabook, a newly-released laptop line with a Retina-level display. (Photo: AP -Toshiba)

Last year, Apple added a visually stunning option to its MacBooks: screens with ultra-high resolution. These "Retina" displays reveal four times as much detail as any Windows laptop screen … until now. Toshiba just released a new laptop line with a Retina-level display.

Does this mean Windows users can let go of MacBook envy? Sort of. The jump in resolution with the Toshiba Kirabook comes with significant compromises, however: Most notably, it's LOUD.

If you tax the processor on the machine by firing up, for instance, a 3-D game, the cooling fan at the bottom starts revving up like a jet plane about to take off. Not only is it distracting to the user, it can be heard across an office landscape. Having a private jet confers status; sounding like one does not.

The loud fan probably has something to do with how Toshiba has jammed a powerful Intel processor into a slim body. Small fans tend to be whiny when cooling a hot chip.

Like supermodel turned rapper, the Kirabook sounds bad but looks good. It's beautifully done in magnesium, a tougher metal than the aluminum found in MacBooks and some other laptops. Magnesium is rarely used in consumer electronics, but when it is, the results can be spectacular: I had a magnesium-bodied point-and-shoot camera that didn't show a scratch after 10 years of use.

The Kirabook starts at $1,600 for a model with a mid-range i5 processor and a non-touch screen (a comparable MacBook Pro with Retina costs $1,700). Two hundred dollars more gets you a touch screen. For $2,000, you get a touch screen and a top-line i7 processor. All come with 256 gigabytes of solid-state storage. The model I tested was the most expensive one.

The Kirabook has a screen that measures 13.3 inches diagonally, just like the "13-inch" MacBook with Retina display, but the screen is actually slightly wider, shorter and smaller overall. The resolution is 2,560 by 1,440 pixels, compared with the MacBook's 2,560 by 1,600 pixels.

In other words, you can fit 10 percent less detail vertically on the Kirabook's screen, but images look just as crisp and smooth as on the Retina screen. The big deal with the Retina, and now the Kirabook, is that its individual pixels are so small that they blend together imperceptibly. It doesn't sound like a big deal until you try it. After that, other screens look coarse and barbaric.

The Kirabook screen is excellent in other ways, too: It looks good from almost any angle. One of the sample units loaned to me suffered from uneven brightness, but this was rarely an issue.

The problem with quadrupling the resolution of the laptop screen is that you have to make sure that you're not shrinking the size of everything that's shown on the screen. A character that's 28 pixels high on a regular screen is a quarter of an inch high—easily legible. If you show a 28-pixel character on the Kirabook screen, it's one-eighth of an inch high, or practically illegible.

In some instances, the Kirabook will gracefully scale up text and buttons to a legible and useful size. In other cases, it won't, and it's time to bend in real close to the screen.

This problem is made more aggravating by the fact that the Kirabook comes in touch-screen variants. Touching tiny buttons is hard—you want a big fat button for your big fat finger. The problem was not acute in applications designed for Windows 8, but there aren't many of those. It was worse in the familiar "Desktop" environment, where the buttons to close or minimize a window are so small, they're tough to hit with a finger or a mouse.

Apple has a big advantage over Toshiba here, given that it has control over the hardware, the operating system and many of the most popular Mac applications. That means it can create computers with high-

resolution screens and modify its software to suit. Toshiba, on the other hand, has to work with software it gets from Microsoft.

Toshiba Corp. chose to make the Kirabook substantially lighter than the 13-inch MacBook, at 2.8 pounds rather than 3.6 pounds. In fact, it's even lighter than the 13-inch MacBook Air, which doesn't have a high-resolution screen.

The trade-off for the light weight is that the Kirabook's battery life is relatively short. I played back movies for four hours before it went dark. Unfortunately, the high-resolution screen draws more power than regular ones, which is why Apple stuffs a much larger battery in its Retina models to get about seven hours of run time.

The light weight, handsome exterior and beautiful screen should appeal to many, and it's possible that software updates will help with the screen-scaling issue. While waiting for that, you can always downgrade the resolution of the screen, though that defeats the purpose of having such a nice display. The biggest failing is the loud fan—there's just no point in having a powerful processor if using it makes it sound like you're picnicking on the airport tarmac.