

Review: Better Mac screens tempting with price cut

October 31 2013, by Anick Jesdanun



The choice was simpler when I was shopping around for a new Mac laptop a year ago: I could have spent \$500 more for a nicer screen and less weight, or I could have put some of that toward a faster processor, more storage and more internal memory—and still have \$200 left over. I chose power over style.

With new models and price cuts, Apple is making it tougher for

customers to choose—in a good way.

A MacBook Pro laptop with a high-resolution screen measuring 13.3 inches (33.5 centimeters) diagonally now starts at \$1,299, or just \$100 more than the heavier version with the regular screen, the one I ultimately bought. That's the result of a \$200 price cut in February and another \$200 cut last week.

Last week, Apple also slashed the starting price of its 15.4-inch (39-centimeter) high-resolution model by \$200, to \$1,999.

Apple also made the new laptops faster and extended their battery life, thanks to new, power-saving chips from Intel Corp. and a new operating system, Mavericks, designed to fully take advantage of those chips. These new Pros are the first Macs with Mavericks built in.

Without getting too technical, Mavericks is better at grouping little tasks into larger bursts, so that the processor can stay in a low-power mode for longer.

I got more than 12.5 hours of word processing and spreadsheet use on the new 15-inch model and nearly nine hours of iTunes video. Officially, Apple promises eight hours on the 15-inch model and nine hours on the 13-inch (33-centimeter) one, compared with seven hours before on both. (Streaming video doesn't fare as well, as is typical with laptops; I got about six hours of Hulu on the 15-inch (38-centimeter) unit I tested.)

Apple didn't change the screens on the high-resolution models, which the company terms "Retina." It didn't need to.

Video looks great, as the screen resolution is more than enough for high-definition video. But text is where I noticed the most difference: Letters are clearer and sharper, appearing the way they would in a paperback

book. On my non-Retina MacBook Pro, I notice the individual dots, or pixels, that are put together to form characters. The Retina models have four times as many pixels as the standard models, enabling smoother characters.

Inside, there's faster graphics technology from Intel. And Apple offers a \$2,599 15-inch (38-centimeter) model that also has an Nvidia graphics processor for even better performance. All of the new Retina models have an emerging Wi-Fi technology called 802.11ac. It promises up to three times the speed and wider range than before, though you need newer Wi-Fi routers that support that standard to get the full benefits.



This undated photo, provided by Apple shows a the new MacBook Pro laptop. The laptop with a high-resolution screen measuring 13.3 inches diagonally now starts at \$1,299, or just \$100 more than the heavier version with the regular screen. That's the result of a \$200 price cut in February and another \$200 cut last week. Last week, Apple also slashed the starting price of its 15.4-inch high-

resolution model by \$200, to \$1,999. (AP Photo/Apple)

Before you run off to buy a new MacBook, though, consider these trade-offs:

— Mac computers are generally more expensive than their Windows counterparts. You can get a Windows laptop for a few hundred dollars. The cheapest Mac laptop is \$999. But you get quality at that price. Comparable Windows laptops, known as ultrabooks, cost more than \$1,000. These are slim and light, like the Retina Pros. They also have touch screens, which Macs lack. Some Windows laptops also have better exteriors. The aluminum casing on all Mac laptops is prone to scratches and dents, though Apple promotes it as "highly recyclable."

— Apple will still sell a non-Retina 13-inch MacBook Pro for \$1,199, though it is discontinuing the 15-inch version. The 13-inch (33-centimeter) Retina version weighs a pound less than the standard one, at about 3.5 pounds (1.6 kilograms). It's also thinner, at 0.71 inch (1.8 centimeters) rather than 0.95 inch (2.4 centimeters) on the standard model. But the Retina model lacks an Ethernet port for wired Internet connections. It also doesn't have a drive for CDs and DVDs. So there's less weight, but also fewer options to plug or insert things in.

— The Retina model gets thin and light partly by ditching a spinning hard drive. It uses flash storage instead, but that costs more. The base 13-inch Retina model comes with 128 gigabytes, or about a quarter of the 500 gigabytes for the standard model. You can pay more to get as much as 1 terabyte of storage on either machine. The cheapest Retina option with that storage is \$2,299, while the cheapest standard option is just \$1,299. Keep in mind that flash storage is faster than traditional drives. For the 15-inch model, you get 256 gigabytes to start and can

need to spend at least \$2,799 for a 1 terabyte laptop.

— You can still go light for less money by sacrificing the better screen. A 13-inch MacBook Air costs \$1,099 and weighs less than 3 pounds (1.3 kilograms). So that's a half pound and \$200 off the Retina model. Apple also has an 11-inch (28-centimeter) MacBook Air for \$999. The Airs have the power-saving chips found in the latest Retina Pros, so you can get a full working day of battery life on a single charge. The processors in the Air aren't as fast as those in the new Pros, but I've found the Air rather speedy—much faster than my standard Pro from last year.

Your head is probably already spinning from all these options.

It boils down to this for Mac laptops:

— If you want a 15-inch MacBook, you need to get the Retina model (unless you find an older one at a discount warehouse).

— You have three choices for the 13-inch model: \$1,099 gets you the Air; \$1,199 gets you the standard Pro, with more storage but also more weight than the Air; and \$1,299 gets you the Retina Pro, which has a nicer screen and less weight than the standard Pro, but the same amount of storage as the Air.

— The Air is your only option at 11 inches (28 centimeters).

The new MacBook Pros, with their price cuts, complement the rest of the Mac lineup nicely. The new prices make trading off power for style much more tempting.

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