

*run
through
the jungle
...and
down the
coast*

Napa Wine Country
to the Pacific Coast
via the redwoods...
the new Subaru WRX
shows its stuff.

By Joe Sage



Begotten from the Impreza and in turn begetting the STI, Subaru's well-respected WRX World Rally car and its iterations have waxed and waned over nearly a quarter century's presence in the US, begetting endless debate among theoretical purists and/or actual purchasers as to which generations are sporting enough, which will sell well, or what does or does not constitute an improvement in anything from steering and boost, to style and marketability.

The Subaru WRX—winner of six Rally America National Championships since 2006—generates fierce loyalty among its followers, who will defend to the death its superiority over the rival Mitsubishi Evolution or the Volkswagen GTI. But they may also be the first to voice an opinion if they don't think a new model is cutting every ounce of the mustard.

We have flown here to Northern California to drive the new 2015 Subaru WRX. We have not driven the new STI, because at this point there isn't one yet. However, we suspect that shortly after you read this (or shortly before, depending), there will be an STI revealed at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

This is about the WRX.

Subaru has been having some serious success in the US market. The new WRX debuts as the company hits five years of straight growth, with four years of record sales. In mid-December, with the year still short of final, Subaru's US sales volume was already up 25 percent or more for 2013 over 2012 (over 420,000 units and counting, vs 336,441 the year before). This kind of volume has boosted another key indicator, bumping their market share around twofold, from 1.4 to 2.5 percent, or 3 percent for the most recent month. This has Subaru outselling Volkswagen and BMW. Does that get your attention? It did ours. No wonder we are starting to see noticeably more Subarus in Arizona lately. Will we catch up with Colorado and Vermont? Time will tell. The company has risen from 17th or 18th place at the launch of the last new WRX, to 9th place at this launch.

Bear in mind, this feat has been accomplished with a limited product range—cars and carlike crossovers—no minivan, no pickup, no big SUV. What Subaru does have is the highest loyalty figures in the business. "We continue to fill up the bathtub, and no-one is leaving," notes Fuji Industries product manager Masuo Takatsu.

Not only is nobody leaving the brand, they

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cling to the specific Subaru they own. Nine out of ten are still on the road after 10 years, and an odometer reading over 300,000 miles is common.

Back to that image of the highly opinionated, purist WRX buyer. You may be visualizing the archetypical blue STI with a big scoop and big wing, tearing up the rally track. Actually, the typical first buyer is a well-educated 34-year-old male who likes to feel connected with his vehicle and the driving experience, and who specifically likes the car to be a sleeper—not that showy car with the wing and loud exhaust. Those are usually modifications added by the second or third buyer—giving new Subaru WRX buyers a ready-made market for their future used WRX.

Many dedicated WRX purists are devoted to the hatchback form. This next generation, at least to start, will be available in sedan form only, though “with much more differentiation from Impreza,” according to Subaru. (Interestingly, all the industry materials we’ve seen refer to the “2015 Subaru WRX,” while the consumer website refers to the “2015 Subaru Impreza WRX.”)

The WRX and STI together have represented just four percent of Subaru’s sales mix, and they see greater growth potential in the sedan format—fine news for those first-generation buyers, and it should give the subsequent big-wing-and-pipes buyers more raw material down the road.

Every piece of the WRX’s sheetmetal is different from an Impreza except for the roof, rear deck lid and some of the glass. The lights and fascias are dramatically different. Clearly, they are intent upon expanding the WRX market without cannibalizing Impreza sales.

Another way they are broadening the WRX’s appeal is through a choice of transmissions: a new Sport Lineartronic continuously variable transmission with manual mode, as well as a new 6-speed manual. These feed power from an also new 268-hp 2.0-liter direct-injection turbo boxer engine, to one of two flavors of all-wheel drive.

The manual model uses a continuous AWD version of Subaru’s Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive, a viscous coupling locking center differential that sends torque to a default 50/50 front/rear. Vehicle Dynamics Control (VDC) provides stability and traction control, transferring torque to the wheels that have the best traction, as needed.

The automatic uses a Variable Torque Distribution (VTD) system, with a planetary gear-type center differential and electronically controlled hydraulic transfer clutch, to distribute power between front and rear. Under most conditions, VTD splits the torque 45/55, giving the automatic a default edge in traditional rear-drive dynamics.

The VTD system uses input from steering wheel angle, yaw and lateral g-force sensors.

The 2015 Subaru WRX team has paid special attention to performance dynamics, with improved rear grip for the sake of sharper turning up front, plus a significant increase in body rigidity to draw more out of the suspension under challenging driving. Front suspension has been 100 percent reengineered, with stiffness in mind: spring rates are 39 percent higher. Rear springs are a whopping 62 percent higher. Lateral stiffness is increased by 35 percent and torsional rigidity by 40 percent. Much of this is achieved through use of high-strength lightweight steel, to deliver nimble fuel-sipping performance overall.

As Takatsu tells us, the resultant focused driving provides “a feeling of control and direction” reminiscent of the kinds of activities many a Subaru owner enjoys, such as surfing or skiing.

Subaru points to two “Gs”: powerful road-hugging G-forces (“the Gs you feel”), and Green credentials (“the Gs the planet doesn’t feel”). From materials to MPG, Subaru seeks improvements in “environmental performance.” Fuel mileage of up to 25 MPG highway is an increase over the prior model, with manual transmission.

We drove the manual from Napa, from the Wine Country, over some incredible two-lane roads climbing through the redwoods—that were really down to one lane in spots—then down to a quick lunch along the Pacific Coast. We found ourselves in 3rd gear for extensive stretches of both tighter and more sweeping esses. When a stretch would keep us between 3rd and 4th gears, our shift patterns were as smooth as silk. If we were jockeying between 3rd and 2nd gears, however, not so much so.

We drove back down Highway One—a legendary road with steep and winding stretches—in the automatic. This transmission seemed a little more ordinary, and we tried to figure out why. It has three modes, and Sport# (“Sport Sharp”) improved our experience. The manumatic also improved it. But two of us felt that the steering seemed to handle a little differently from the manual. We inquired with the engineers, who verified that the system is the same, so we speculate that perhaps the difference in split between 50/50 or 45/55 default could noticeably change the dynamics in some circumstances.

Again, the choice of transmission is intended to broaden the model’s appeal. If you are shopping for the WRX, we recommend you give both powertrains a very serious run for the money.

With the new WRX, Subaru continues to give the competition a run for the money—or, more accurately, continues to rule this sub-segment. ■

