

Testing in six dimensions

BY JOE SAGE

Once a year, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) hosts a "What's New [next model year]" program in Michigan. It has always been a very full and fulfilling day, held at the FCA Chelsea Proving Grounds near Ann Arbor, during which we see and drive every product in the core corporate family, with special emphasis on some new surprises for the next year. We drive on development tracks, off-road, autocross and dragstrip. This year, there were two new dimensions: a towing area was added, and an entire new day was added for Alfa Romeo and Maserati at a different location, with track and autocross, as well as adding local streets.

Day One: M1 Concourse, Pontiac

Alfa Romeo's lineup is familiar and has already gone through recent expansion, notably the Giulia sedan and Stelvio crossover, both highly award-winning. Maserati's lineup is seen often in our neck of the woods and is being expanded considerably,

meaning we should expect to see a lot more of it.

Alfa Romeo and Maserati (along with Ferrari and Fiat performance subset Abarth) have a complex history with FCA. The short version had Maserati returning to the US in 2002 as a luxury grand touring brand selling small numbers; Alfa Romeo easing back onto our shores in the intervening years, one model at a time; and Ferrari being spun off. Last year, Maserati North America relocated from Englewood Cliffs, NJ to Auburn Hills, Michigan (about a mile from FCA US headquarters), where its new operation is combined with Alfa Romeo.

In honor of and in support of this, a day was added at the beginning of "What's New," just for Alfa Romeo and Maserati. We shuttled from our hotel in Ann Arbor to the M1 Concourse—an 87-acre club motorsports facility in Pontiac, Michigan, featuring a 1.5-mile performance track, 2.5-acre skidpad and other event areas for members and also available for use by manufacturers.

Veteran FCA executive Tim Kuniskis, now global CEO of Alfa Romeo and Maserati, told us that while many people anticipate big changes, he's "not going to change Alfa-Maserati; these brands

have been around for over a hundred years." He did promise continued refinement and evolution.

It's about an hour's drive from Ann Arbor to Pontiac in good weather, though the weatherman had suggested rain was likely that day, and he was true to his word. By the time we got to the track, it was pouring. You know what we're going to say next—this did not dampen anyone's enthusiasm.

We had driven the Alfa Romeo lineup before—the 4C Spider and 4C Coupe (about \$56k and \$66k base), Giulia sedan (just \$38,195 base) and Stelvio SUV (just \$42,195 base) at launch events; on the roads of Arizona; at comparo events on the two-lanes of Oregon and on track in Texas (where the Giulia Quadrifoglio [\$73,700] won Car of Texas and two Performance Sedan Awards in its two years of existence, and the Stelvio Quadrifoglio [\$79,995] won Performance Utility in its debut year).

We knew from those prior experiences that, as great as the lineup is to drive on a daily basis, the models really show their stuff when you open 'em up. Driving on the track and autocross, as well as through wooded suburban neighborhoods, provided the same superlative experience, pouring rain

not diminishing the vehicles' eager Italian spirits. Grip and handling remained superb from the low-slung 4C to the Giulia sedan and taller Stelvio.

There was a time, not long ago, when the move of sports, exotic and supercar brands into SUV terrain was considered sacrilege. Now it's expected. Alfa Romeo has certainly delivered with their Stelvio (which, as mentioned, has won many performance/comparo awards, particularly its 505-hp Quadrifoglio model). Maserati now follows suit.

Maserati offers Ghibli, Quattroporte and GranTurismo sedans from about \$75,000 to \$138,000; a droptop version of the GranTurismo, the GT Convertible, starting at about \$150,000; and the Levante SUV, on sale here for two years now.

Levante has been available in 3-liter V6 base and S models (345 hp and 424 hp, from about \$76-120,000). For 2019, they are adding two 3.8L Ferrari V8-powered models: the 550-hp Levante GTS and 590-hp Levante Trofeo—the latter a 4784-lb SUV with a zero-to-60 time of just 3.7 seconds.

The GTS is expected to appeal to more buyers than Trofeo, with horsepower just seven percent less at a price about 30 percent lower—about \$120k for GTS versus \$170 for Trofeo. All are all-wheel-drive with air suspension and six levels of ride height for off-road and high-speed cruising.

As with the Alfa Giulia and Stelvio, we took the Maserati Levante on a long drive through the region, where its gorgeous interior, instrumentation, features, performance and handling confirmed we will be seeing plenty of these in Arizona.

KEEP RIGHT >>



Day Two: Chelsea Proving Grounds

FCA Chelsea Proving Grounds, about a half-hour from Ann Arbor, is an isolated and secured 4,000-acre location in the Michigan woods. Tucked away inside are 100 lane-miles of test and evaluation road systems, including a banked high-speed oval that is handling-neutral at very high speed (the banking neutralizes centrifugal force, for the equivalent of endless straight-line driving). We don't drive on the banked oval, but within it are various handling and evaluation courses, a variety of challenging surface tests and the famous Lyman Trail off-road development area. A shuttle ride away, in another part of the woods, are our autocross and eighth-mile dragstrip areas, as well as a towing course new to the event this year.

There are also some other areas we don't utilize during this event—crash barriers, skid test pads, wind tunnels, emissions control certification, corrosion testing, curb impact and sled impact testing, and extreme grades of 15 percent to 32 percent. With 900 employees here, there are surely some other top secret elements to the place, too.

All of the above is a useful environment, but we are here for the hardware, and there is plenty of it—the full 2019 model year from Chrysler, Dodge, Fiat, Jeep, Ram Trucks and SRT. It's a day in the candy store like few others.

Chrysler ups the sex appeal of the 300S with dramatic new "Black Noise" wheels, also available with an optional package on Touring models.

Dodge had some of the biggest news, with a formal pull-back-the-sheets reveal of not one but three new Challenger models. The last 840-hp factory dragstrip-ready Challenger SRT Demon had rolled off the assembly line just weeks before, but

take heart—new to the lineup is the 797-hp Challenger SRT Hellcat Redeye Widebody (see a feature on its launch drive elsewhere in this issue). With a zero-to-60 time of 3.4 seconds and able to hit the quarter-mile in 10.8 seconds at 131 mph, it's the quickest, fastest and most powerful muscle car on the market—and it includes the awe-inspiring Widebody sheet metal and stance of the Demon), priced at \$69,650. The engine gets a bump on the Hellcat, as well, from 707 to 717 hp—yet its price drops by more than \$5000 for 2019 (at \$58,650). Rounding out our three-plex Challenger reveal was a new R/T Scat Pack, a 485-hp model that's priced under \$40,000 and is now also available with an optional Widebody package.

As smaller SUVs continue to increasingly dominate sales industry-wide, the midsize Dodge Journey has been especially hot. For 2019, its lineup is simplified to three trims, with even the base SE getting performance styling front and rear, including an optional Blacktop Appearance Package with 19-inch gloss black wheels, plus three-zone climate control and more, starting at just \$24,720—\$2300 less than last year.

Dodge reinforces its strong presence in law enforcement with the Charger Pursuit sedan, a model that receives an Officer Protection Package, a suite of situational awareness technologies, all standard for 2019, along with many other updates. Completely new is a Durango Pursuit. Whereas Durango has been a popular basis for adapted law enforcement SUVs for some time, the new Pursuit-built model comes factory-ready with the highest level of suspension, brake performance and durability (including integrated cooling ducts), the same Officer Pro-

tection Package, and many other task-specific upgrades, all available with either a Pentastar V6 or 360-hp V8 HEMI engine. And yes, when you're driving these at Chelsea, you can turn on the lights and siren—although the two of us on our run may be the only ones who didn't (even when everybody is doing it all day, you'll find it still has most people looking over their shoulders!).

Other Dodge Durango news includes updates to the V6 Durango GT, which now gets the front fascia and lights of Durango R/T and SRT, with even an SRT-style performance hood available (with center scoop and heat extractors, giving you SRT presence with V6 fuel economy). There are also seating and wheel upgrades in various Durango models, while of significant note is an integrated trailer brake on all Tow Package-equipped models.

That newly enhanced Durango capability was one of the things on tap for us at the new towing component of the What's New event, as both Durango and Ram were available for test runs with thousands of pounds in tow—a chance to also revisit the new Ram 1500's tow capacity of up to 12,750 pounds (see our 2019 Ram 1500 launch feature in the May/June 2018 issue).

While the full range of newer 2019 Ram 1500 pickups is poised to grab the market's attention—notably including new eTorque mild hybrid engine choices in both Pentastar V6 and HEMI V8—the prior truck will be offered in 2019 as the Ram Classic, in a variety of trim levels (not Rebel), with an eye toward fleet sales and entry level buyers.

On the commercial side, Ram ProMaster gets distinctive new all-Ram front styling, sure to pay

huge dividends in brand recognition and expanded sales. The smaller Ram ProMaster City receives a dose of the same, along with fleet telematics to track usage and driver behavior, as well as vehicle performance and diagnostics.

The last year and a half have seen the arrival of an all-new Jeep Compass, a 707-hp Grand Cherokee Trackhawk, a neatly facelifted Cherokee, and the major evolutionary jump from Wrangler JK to JL—all of which we've covered in these pages as they have launched. "What's New" gave us a chance to drive every one of them again on the top secret Lyman Trail—with steep climbs, high centers, extreme terrain good for one or two wheels in the air, deep water fords and more—affirmation of all that is good and unique with Jeep. There was one new Wrangler model at this event, but it is under strict embargo until October. Stay tuned!

Autocross included everything from the little Fiat 500 and 124 Spider, to Challenger, to Grand Cherokee Trackhawk, with the usual surprises and tradeoffs between supreme horsepower and lightweight agility. Every one is a winner here.

The eighth-mile dragstrip a short walk away from the autocross course included a chance to try the ever-climbing horsepower of Dodge and Jeep's top performance models, but equally importantly a chance to confirm their launch control modes and their braking with these boosts.

Just wait 'll next year!

We could give you a 16-pager on each and every model presented during our two jam-packed days, but this gives you a good taste of what's coming through the FCA pipeline. We'll keep you updated at every opportunity. ■

