By Steve Schaefer

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Much like the 1949 smooth-sided post-war Ford and the 1986 Taurus, Ford's new Fusion is a milestone vehicle.

The first Fusion arrived as a 2006 model, taking over the role of the midsize Taurus. After some styling excesses in the late 1990s, Ford was understandably cautious with the styling. A 2010 reworking earned the Fusion a Motor Trend Car of the Year trophy.

The 2013 is all new. Look at that Aston Martin grille. That's a theme working its way through the Ford line, along with shrunken logos and slim headlamps. The exterior folds, athleticism and edginess come from Ford's European styling studios, and align with the new Focus and Fiesta, and resurgent Taurus.

The interior of the new Fusion is equally enthusiastic. Silvery plastic trim defines the dash and the doors in a way unthinkable in the sober old car. The configurable instrument panel can show things like fuel economy on the left and your entertainment selections on the right. It's what we expect now — more personalization.

The dash has touch-sensitive controls for the climate system. You have to be careful not to accidentally bump one and change your settings. You can use the SYNC system for many controls; it works on voice commands. It can be very effective or make annoying or even hilarious mistakes, but it's a Star Trek user experience.

The new Fusion is the first car to offer three different power choices — a standard gasoline engine (in three sizes), a hybrid, and a brand-new plug-in hybrid called the Energi. I sampled the first two — a Ginger Ale Metallic SE with the Ecoboost engine and an Ice Storm Hybrid. While they looked very much alike on the outside, the experience driving them was a bit different.

The SE employs Ford's latest EcoBoost engine technology. This means that a 3,400-pound car is powered by only a 1.6-liter engine, but with 178 horsepower and 184 lb.-ft. of torque, it was just fine. EcoBoost uses a smaller engine to get the same performance as a larger one. My tester had a six-speed automatic, but the SE also comes with an optional six-speed manual.

The other two models in the standard gas lineup include the S model, which features a traditional 2.5-liter inline four-cylinder, which, though larger, puts out 3 fewer horsepower and 9 fewer lb.-ft. of torque than the 1.6 EcoBoost.

The Platinum, top-of-the-line Fusion, uses a 2.0-liter EcoBoost four-cylinder, which churns out 240 horsepower and 270 lb.-ft. of torque. Sadly, you can't equip it with the six-speed manual (yet).

My SE had automatic shutoff when I stopped at a light. That helps improve fuel economy, and is a new technology in the U.S. With all that, I earned 22.0 miles per gallon — decent, but not quite the 23 City, 36 Highway EPA numbers Ford boasts.

The Hybrid Fusion enjoys all the look and feel of the standard cars, but offers a proven hybrid platform. I averaged 37.1 miles per gallon with my test car. This is remarkable compared to the standard car — but is significantly lower than the 47 City, 47 Highway and 47 Average claimed by Ford's EPA tests.

The Hybrid provides four levels of small graphs that indicate gasoline usage, electricity use and generation, and more. You can also see how much energy is "recovered" from the regenerative braking system. On the right side, the Efficiency Leaves display grows greenery when you drive efficiently — and the leaves flutter away when you don't (or can't), such as when accelerating uphill on the freeway. It makes it a fun game to drive efficiently.

The Hybrid is about 200 pounds heavier than the standard car, and feels more planted on the road. It loses four cubic feet of trunk space from the presence of the extra batteries. On the freeway, it can run in pure electric-only mode at up to 62 miles per hour — up from 47 mph in the old car.

When you shut off the Hybrid, it shows you how many trip miles were electric only. On average, it was about a third of the time, but in town, around half of the time. Like other hybrids, this dual powertrain is especially effective in city or bumper-to-bumper commute travel.

The entry level S model starts at just $22,495 and the Titanium, with its leather interior, automatic climate control, greater power, and other extras, starts at $30,995. My SE, with the Luxury Package, Technology Package, Driver Assist Package and more, came to $30,975. The Hybrid, sold in SE level only, starts at $27,995. All prices include shipping.

The impressive new Fusion offers affordable family transportation, environmental responsibility, and, loaded up as the Titanium, something approaching a luxury ride. It’s more than just another pretty face.