



# WARDSAUTO™

THE BIG STORY / JANUARY 2018



## Our 2017 Vehicle **MVPs**

BY WARDAUTO STAFF

**A**utomakers introduced 41 all-new or refreshed models in the U.S. last year in an ongoing effort to offer fresh product to consumers who have come to expect a lot. American dealers delivered more than 17 million cars, SUVs and light trucks in 2017. The average transaction price was \$35,000.

All automotive products enter the market with high hopes. But some stand out more for various reasons. Accordingly, *WardsAuto* editors, who test drive nearly 100 vehicles a year, offer their individual picks of memorable ones in 2017.

So buckle up and away we go. (Next month's Big Story will feature hot ones to keep an eye on in 2018.)



## JAMES AMEND'S PICKS

### CADILLAC CT6 with SUPER CRUISE

The Cadillac CT6 with Super Cruise arrived late in 2017 and a test drive confirmed the timeline to driverless cars is shorter than most people think.

General Motors spent years perfecting the part-time autonomous driving system, going so far as to delay its launch an entire year to ensure its safety. In fact, I first witnessed Super Cruise way back in 2012 when I rode shotgun with a GM engineer inside a Cadillac SRX

at GM's top-secret proving ground near Detroit.

It was hard to imagine it on

public roads back then, but after test driving the production version in the CT6 with Super Cruise it is a near certainty. Operating the technology requires regular driver supervision and it works only on limited-access highways without cross-traffic intersections or stoplights. But once activated, the driver can pull his hands from the wheel, peek out the window here and there and leisurely let adaptive cruise control manage the following distance of cars ahead. It will be interesting to see how the market reacts to the technology after it has been out for a few more months.





## JAMES AMEND'S PICKS

### INFINITI Q60

This luxury coupe recalls a day not so long ago when the choices for sexy, performance-oriented rear-wheel-drive coupes were many. There are very few left, and the Q60 is among the leaders on the lot.

Its curvy lines will make your heart ache, while its front end with a menacing grille and cat-eye LED headlamps will startle you into submission. Interior styling is just as sexy but it does not come at the expense of comfort. This is a bonafide luxury car and the beefy steering wheel and

well-placed gear shifter make it a driver's dream, as well.

There are three engines to choose from but the one that hooked me was, unsurprisingly, the 3.0L twin-turbo V-6 with 400 hp and 350 lb.-ft. (475 Nm) of creamy torque. It is an absolute riot to drive and while the rear end will break away enthusiastically, the Q60 never loses its composure thanks to smooth power delivery and a superb electronic suspension system. Run, don't walk, to your nearest Infiniti dealer for a test drive.





## JAMES AMEND'S PICKS

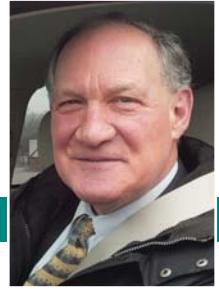
### CHEVROLET SS

This is one of the sweetest 4-door performance cars on the market. Or, at least it used to be. Sourced from GM's Holden subsidiary in Australia, the SS went out of production in 2017 as the brand ceased output and shifted to a sales and marketing organization.

A handful probably remain at Chevy dealers across the country, but not for long thanks to the raging-bull-like 6.2L small-block V-8 under the hood. It makes 415 hp and 415 lb.-ft. (563 Nm) of torque and buyers can choose from a 6-speed automatic or 6-speed

manual. You read that correctly, a manual transmission mated to a pushrod V-8 in a sedan. It also boasts GM's Magnetic Ride Control real-time damping technology to make it perfectly livable as a daily driver and enviably capable as a weekend track monster. In fact, racing fans know the SS as Chevy's entry in NASCAR. The Chevy Camaro ZL1, another righteous muscle car from The General, assumes those duties in February. But on the street, few cars would happily burn rubber more than the SS.





## STEVE FINLAY'S PICKS

### HONDA ACCORD

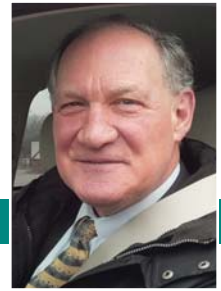
Sure, it is a midsize sedan living in a CUV world, but what a car. At the launch of the new Accord, Honda exec Ray Mikiciuk said, “It’s a big deal for us. It’s a reimagining of our 10th-generation flagship sedan. Four decades of what we learned is in this car.”

You could say it should be good after 10 shots at it over 40 years. But that would be cynical. And unfair, because the Accord just

keeps getting better. It takes mainstream to a new level of quality, performance and good looks. And all for a starting price of \$23,570. A top-of-the-line model costs about \$12,000 more. But still, you’re getting a lot of car either way.

Car or no car, the Accord is a tough contender that alone has outsold 30 other brands. Not models, *brands*.





## STEVE FINLAY'S PICKS

### INFINITI Q50

This sports sedan is gorgeous on the outside, but its real beauty is deeper and can't be readily seen. But it sure is noticeable when you are driving it. The Q50 is a modern marvel, with Nissan's luxury unit throwing a lot of its considerable engineering talents into making its driving dynamics spectacular.

"We're committed to this car, and we've committed the resources to make it world class," Infiniti planning director Keith St. Clair says of the Q50.

One of its standout features is a steer-by-wire system that uses electronic connections between components. Infiniti is the only brand with a system that relies on electrical signals sent from the steering wheel to front-wheel motors.

Because it doesn't rely on a rack-and-pinion system, the Q50's steering wheel theoretically could go in the back seat, and still function. OK, that's an inadvisable placement. But just saying...it's possible.





## STEVE FINLAY'S PICKS

### CHEVROLET CRUZE DIESEL

We're not talking about just any Cruze. The sedan and hatchback models with diesel engines stand out among other versions of Chevy's bread-and-butter compact car.

The Cruze's 1.6L 4-cyl. turbo diesel puts out 137 hp. Ok, that's no big deal. But it gets more than 50 mpg (4.7L/100 km). That is a big deal. A fellow auto journalist, Michael Simari, hypermiled it up to 70 mpg (3.4L/100 km).

Diesels are in disfavor these days, scandalously in some respects. (Thanks, Volkswagen.) Some people feel diesels are a dying breed, however others

swear by them. Give General Motors credit for bravely swimming upstream in niche river.

Some people are put off by the distinctive sound (and feel) of diesels. Diesel lovers hear music in that clack-clack of the engine. As colleague James Amend notes, "Diesel buyers are different."

GM recognizes a market, however limited, of diesel diehards. That cult of consumers knows what it wants, and, by gosh, GM is obliging them. It's also looking to conquest VW buyers in the wake of Dieselgate. It will be interesting to see how many of them cross over to the Cruze.





## BOB GRITZINGER'S PICKS

### CHEVROLET BOLT EV

General Motors regains the mantle of leadership in electrified vehicles with the game-changing Chevrolet Bolt EV.

Its official range is listed at 238 miles (383 km), but we've noted bonus miles – almost like having a reserve fuel tank – and we're told the diminutive hatchback is capable of more than 300 miles (483 km) of range.

As we demonstrated on a 600-mile (960-km) road trip, a little planning and monitoring

the power gauge go a long way toward alleviating range anxiety.

But it's not just range that makes this a stunning achievement. Punch the Bolt EV and you feel the kind of kick-in-the-pants joy that comes with tire-chirping, instant-on EV torque, backed up by silent running that makes this little runabout a stealth muscle car.

As a harbinger of EVs to come, the Bolt is a great ambassador for an electrified future.







## BOB GRITZINGER'S PICKS

### HONDA ODYSSEY

CUVs are taking over the marketplace, but is there a better utility vehicle than a minivan like the Honda Odyssey?

We put it to the test on every measure, running around-town errands and on cross-country jaunts, and give it kudos for a superlative interior space and a

spectacular user interface.

For anyone who likes a car-like ride and good fuel economy, and values passenger room without cramming bodies into tight spaces and cargo capacity without stuffing gear under a tarp in a truck bed, the Odyssey is an easy pick.





## BOB GRITZINGER'S PICKS

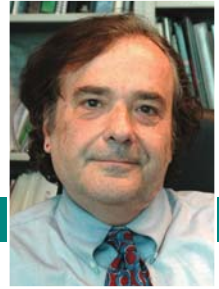
### ALFA ROMEO STELVIO

While we'd all like a nice Italian sports car like the Alfa Giulia (or a Maserati or Ferrari), the reality is utility is king for most buyers. Enter the Stelvio, a premium mid-size CUV from FCA's hot-blooded Italian brand offering all the flexible cargo room the market demands while giving up little in

the handling and joy of driving departments.

Even better news: FCA has big, global plans for the Alfa Romeo brand, including the addition of as many as four more models by 2020, mostly built on the same impressive rear-drive architecture found in the Stelvio.





## JIM IRWIN'S PICKS

### LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

This fullsize luxury sedan just about pulled off a *WardsAuto* trifecta in 2017: It won 10 Best Interiors and 10 Best UX honors, and its 400-hp, 3.0L twin-turbo V-6 contended for a 10 Best Engines award only to be a hair outclassed by Infiniti's similarly excellent VR mill. Sales slipped as the year wore on, but only because like-2016 numbers were more robust.

Ford also upped Lincoln's game on the customer-pampering front, expanding its Lincoln Personal Driver service and testing a program allowing customers to buy a Lincoln without needing to visit a dealership.

Several such initiatives were launched with an eye toward China, where Lincoln is eager to grab a share of that country's expanding luxury market.





## JIM IRWIN'S PICKS

### CHRYSLER PACIFICA PHEV

Fiat Chrysler Automobiles isn't terribly deep into either diesel power or electrification, at least not in the U.S., but the Chrysler Pacifica plug-in hybrid minivan signals the automaker's measured transition away from the internal-combustion engine on these shores.

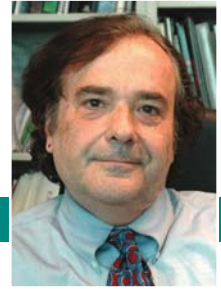
Good for 33 or so miles (53 km) of electric-only range, and an EPA-rated 32 mpg (7.3 L/100 km) with its 3.6L Pentastar V-6, the Pacifica PHEV is comfortable, connected and economical. It's

also the only 7-passenger plug-in hybrid minivan available in North America.

The gasoline engine makes it practical for long trips regardless of whether charging is available, while plugging in overnight generally can give the minivan all the power it needs for a day's worth of running errands around town, or dropping off or picking up kids.

The Pacifica PHEV is a Wards 10 Best Engines winner for 2018, one of two returning winners from last year.





## JIM IRWIN'S PICKS

### CHEVROLET CRUZE DIESEL

Diesel may be literally a dirty word in areas such as Europe, where Dieselgate fallout persists, but in the U.S., General Motors kept the faith this year by putting a 1.6L turbodiesel in the Chevrolet Cruze.

Diesels have powered Cruzes since as early as 2013, but the 1.6L offers refinement in terms of reduced NVH, lower emissions and stellar fuel economy. Beating

the EPA estimates of 31/47 mpg (7.6/5.0 L/100 km) isn't difficult on lengthy trips. The engine's 137 hp is about to be expected, but its 240 lb.-ft. (325 Nm) of torque enhances the Cruze diesel's fun-to-drive factor.

General Motors thinks enough of this engine to install it in the '18 Chevrolet Equinox and GMC Terrain SUVs. As it should.





## TOM MURPHY'S PICKS

### HONDA ACCORD

The redesigned Honda Accord is as good as any mainstream vehicle ever to have come from Japan, or Ohio, if you prefer.

From the narrow-angle, bejeweled headlamps and air dam below the grille to the coupe-like rear profile and excellent and efficient 2.0L turbo-4, the Accord

actually has a shot at dissuading shoppers who have their hearts set on a CUV.

Through November, the Accord remains No.2 in its segment behind the all-new Toyota Camry, but that rivalry is running neck-and-neck as shoppers discover the Accord's many attributes.





## TOM MURPHY'S PICKS

### VOLKSWAGEN ATLAS

The all-new large 3-row CUV is gaining momentum among U.S. shoppers and is outselling the well-regarded GMC Acadia and long-in-the-tooth Ford Flex through November.

Yes, VW is extremely late to this party, but better late than never. It looks burly enough inside and out, yet has accept-

able on-road manners for long family road trips. Problem is, the Chevy Traverse is fully redesigned and, to date, has outsold the Atlas more than 5-to-1 through November.

The Nissan Pathfinder and Buick Enclave also are making it tough for the Atlas to find traction in the marketplace.





## TOM MURPHY'S PICKS

### FORD F-150 WITH 2.7L ECOBOOST V-6

Big pickup trucks are Detroit's cash cow, and shoppers at the counter have many cuts to consider, from the filet of glistening, leather-clad beasts priced over \$60,000 to the utilitarian, sparsely equipped, fabric-seated work truck – the equivalent of hamburger.

Wisely, Ford has a solid new offering at the lower end: an all-new 2.7L EcoBoost V-6 that

makes as much torque (400 lb.-ft. [542 Nm]) as the new 5.0L V-8.

This engine is more fuel-efficient than the excellent V-8, represents zero compromise in performance and has been crowned a 2018 Wards 10 Best Engines winner. It's now the best-selling engine in the best-selling F-Series, which through November outsold both the Chevy Silverado and GMC Sierra combined.







## CHRISTIE SCHWEINSBERG'S PICKS

### HONDA ODYSSEY

Much like the new Chrysler Pacifica, the redesigned Odyssey is another great reason why the minivan segment has a future in a world of parking lots crammed with crossovers.

The Odyssey is well appointed

and has lots of features (seats that slide fore and aft and side-to-side!) you can't get in a CUV. Plus it has a Honda-first 10-speed automatic transmission that helps the portly vehicle maintain good fuel economy.





## CHRISTIE SCHWEINSBERG'S PICKS

### HONDA ACCORD/TOYOTA CAMRY

Coincidentally, the Honda Accord and Toyota Camry got redesigned in the same year. The old-guard family sedans, the Nos. 2 and 1 best-selling midsize sedans in the U.S., show there still is life left in that segment.

The Accord Sport grade makes

me wonder, “Why does anyone need a 3-Series?” after a recent turn behind the wheel, while the Camry’s Hybrid variant, winner of a 2018 Wards 10 Best Engines trophy, shows a roomy vehicle and excellent fuel economy need not be mutually exclusive.





## CHRISTIE SCHWEINSBERG'S PICKS

### KIA STINGER

Kia has been looking for respect for years and seems to have found it. The midsize luxury-like Stinger is a triumph for the struggling South Korean brand.

Benchmarked against some of the finest midsize sport sedans in the world, the Stinger keeps pace and in some cases exceeds them with its sporting character,

including its twin turbo V6, winner of a 2018 Wards 10 Best Engines award.

It also has a great suspension, giving the car excellent ride and handling.

Kia may not sell a lot of Stingers, but the car certainly boosts the brand's reputation around the world.





## DREW WINTER'S PICKS

### NISSAN TITAN

The U.S. fullsize pickup market is one of the most lucrative segments in the world. Big pickups are the best-selling vehicles in the U.S. and average transaction prices are more than \$40,000.

Toyota and Nissan have cracked the code for virtually every other market sector in the U.S., so it seems logical they eventually could capture a significant piece of the business.

At the beginning of 2017, the Nissan Titan seemed poised to do some damage in the pickup arena, especially with a light heavy-duty model equipped with a serious Cummins diesel

engine. The truck received favorable reviews from critics and even was a finalist for the 2017 North American Truck of the Year.

But through November, Nissan sold only 35,970 gasoline-powered trucks and an estimated 11,372 diesel versions, according to *WardsAuto* data, less than 50,000 total. Those numbers represent huge gains compared with 2016, but still are disappointing considering the big players sell more than 10 times as many.

For all its strong points, the new Nissan Titan demonstrates how difficult it is to increase share in the fullsize pickup marketplace.





## DREW WINTER'S PICKS

### CHRYSLER PACIFICA

Many automakers have given up entirely on minivans in favor of SUVs and CUVs, but the Chrysler Pacifica proves there still is life in the minivan segment. It won Wards 10 Best awards for its sophisticated plug-in hybrid powertrain (for the second year in a row) and its roomy and feature-laden interior.

The Pacifica is satisfying to drive, high tech inside and just about the most practical vehicle

on Earth. And believe it or not, a lot of car buyers agree. Chrysler sold 107,130 units through November, an increase of more than 100%.

Minivans are not nearly as popular as they used to be, but the Pacifica and the superb Honda Odyssey, the Pacifica's key competitor, are two vehicles that promise to keep the minivan segment alive and interesting for the foreseeable future.





## DREW WINTER'S PICKS

### HONDA RIDGELINE

More than 18 months ago, Honda's U.S. chief hoped the second-generation Ridgeline's unique attributes and improved design someday would lift the unibody midsize truck to the first-gen Ridgeline's high-water mark of 50,193 in annual sales.

The first-generation Ridgeline hit that peak in 2006, one year after its release. Unfortunately after that, demand decreased to a trickle of 13,389 units in 2014, when the automaker ceased production of the first-gen model.

The automotive media, includ-

ing *WardsAuto*, loves the new second-gen truck. It handles well, has a great interior and it features an innovative speakerless audio system in the pickup box. Earlier this year it won the 2017 North American Truck of the Year award.

It seems like engineers and designers did just about everything right, but if Honda wants to hit 50,000 annual sales, it will have to wait until next year. It sold 31,895 units through November. According to *WardsAuto* data, that's 63% higher than 2016, but still far from the elusive goal.





## DAVE ZOIA'S PICKS

*There's impact on the market, and then there's impact on the brand. The three models that made their presence felt in 2017 weren't the highest-volume vehicles sold in the U.S., and not all were even newly introduced this year. But each was either key to establishing a brand in the U.S. – or saving one.*

### ALFA ROMEO GIULIA

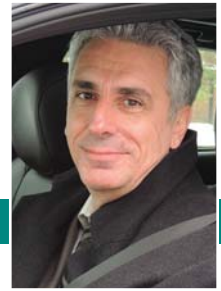
Launched in 2017, it more than accomplished its critical mission of putting the brand on the map. Sure, Alfa already had stuck its stake in the ground with the more-exotic 4C, but the Giulia is the first “mass-market” model for the brand in the U.S. since Dustin Hoffman was driving Katharine Ross around in a Series 1 Spider 1600 in “The Graduate.”

Its volume won't frighten the big-boy brands, but the car drew

adulation from the critics and has set the stage for more to come. With the Fiat marque sucking wind, Alfa may be the best hope for saving an entire dealer network. The Giulia, whose platform also underpins the Stelvio CUV, was Fiat Chrysler's first move in that regard – and a well-played one at that.

Give brand-saving credits to two models of long-time domestic luxury brands Lincoln and Cadillac.





## DAVE ZOIA'S PICKS

### LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

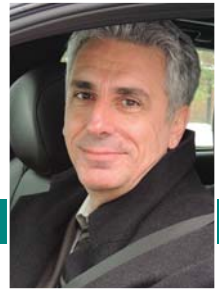
There were skeptics when the new Continental debuted in 2016, as many feared the flagship sedan would be nothing more than a warmed-over MKS that it replaced.

But character and style both inside and out has made the

Continental a standard-bearer for where the brand is headed in years to come. Its true volume accounted for only about 10% of Lincoln sales this year, but the Continental's impact on brand building shouldn't be overlooked.







## DAVE ZOIA'S PICKS

### CADILLAC XT5

The XT5 wasn't new in 2017 either, but if not for the CUV, Cadillac might be on the verge of vanishing. Sales of more than 61,000 units through November were up 92% from like-2016 and accounted for more than 43% of the brand's U.S. sales. No other

Cadillac model – car or truck – was in the black during the first 11 months of the year. In a market where CUVs dominate and Cadillac finds itself woefully short of offerings, the XT5 carried the ball for the brand in the battle for relevancy.

