

Doing it all, all at once

BY JOE SAGE

Each summer, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) shows us their entire next year's lineup all at once, early in the product cycle, and we get to drive almost all of it. The event, "What's New," is held at FCA's top secret Chelsea Proving Grounds, in the deep woods among farmlands outside Chelsea, Michigan, about 20 or 30 minutes west of Ann Arbor, or an hour west of Detroit.

There's a good great going on there that we don't, deep inside development buildings and perhaps on some other tracks, but there's plenty that we do. We drive a lot, we learn a lot, and we even get to do another rare thing at any proving grounds—take photos. Then we are sworn to secrecy for a couple of months—but now we can tell you all.

Have you ever seen a clip of one of those old contests or game shows where you get to dash around a supermarket or big box store for maybe two minutes and grab everything you can for free? It's good to do some homework first, so you spend enough time in the more expensive aisles. This is a bit like that. We have maybe five active hours (carving out time for an in-tent new product reveal,

a sandwich, and time for shuttles among three overall event venues. In that time, we can drive everything FCA has coming up for the 2020 model year, plus a number of 2019 models still at hand. Unlike that game show, we can't plot our activity first, as the list is not revealed until we get there.

The event breaks down into three overall zones of activity. Durability and lateral load road courses are in our home base, which also includes static displays and tents for presentations and lunch. Lyman Trail, a shuttle ride away, is where FCA's off-road development takes place and we do our own off-roading. And a shuttle ride away in the other direction is an area comprising a very large oval (part of which we use as a dragstrip, another part for towing) and a paved area inside one end of that oval that's set up as an autocross course.

Pretty much every vehicle is available to us in the home base road course area. Another round of Jeeps and pickups are also staged at Lyman Trail. The third location has zero-to-60 specialists—additional Challengers, Chargers and Trackhawks—for its eighth-mile dragstrip; Alfa Romeo, Dodge,

Fiat and Jeep for autocross; and a range of the most highly tow-capable pickups and SUVs bearing the most challenging loads.

There's time to give everything a look and catch some one-on-one executive and engineer time, as we chose a string of favorites and newsmakers to drive in each locale.

Alfa Romeo / Maserati

Last year's "What's New" event took a new spin on things, with a full day devoted to Alfa Romeo and its newly tied-in Maserati cousin brand. This year, Alfa Romeo brought its **Giulia** Quadrifoglio sedan and **Stelvio** Quadrifoglio SUV as 2019 models. We're keeping an ear to the ground on 2020.

Chrysler

The automaker's original anchor brand continues to have one of the briefer lineups, but it's a solid one, and it adds a new badge for 2020. The new **300** sedan will be easy to spot if you get one of three new paint colors or if you opt for the new Red S package with Black Noise and Red badging, wheels and details. A Radar Red interior option is also available with the Red S trim. **Pacifica** and **Pacifica Hybrid** also add a Red S package, upgrades from panoramic sunroofs to Uconnect Theater to wheels and tech and will be available in

four trim levels (three for Pacifica Hybrid). Former lower-trim Pacifica badges (L and LX) move to the new Chrysler **Voyager** (along with LXi for rental fleets), cementing Pacifica as a premium badge. We spent a week with the Pacifica Hybrid back here in Arizona—see our feature also in this issue.

Dodge

Dodge is the broadest brand overall, with sedans, coupes, utilities and a minivan in the lineup (even if Jeep has more variety in utilities and Chrysler in minivans). **Charger** makes the biggest splash for 2020, with Widebody news. **Charger SRT Hellcat** goes all Widebody, standard, and **Charger Scat Pack**, slated to start below \$40,000, will now offer Widebody as an option. As these were exempted from the September embargo date, you can read all about them in our prior (July/August) issue. **Challenger**, basically an it's-perfect-don't-change-a-thing-mobile, adds a wide variety of wheels and new colors or 2020—now with twelve paints available over eight models, and as usual they are distinctive and often pleasingly over the top. **Dodge Durango** offers a bump in premium content on the popular R/T model, with optional availabilities including new Blacktop and Brass Monkey appearance packages; a premium interior with Dinamica suede headliner and hand-wrapped, accent-stitched instrument panel; and gloss black 20-inch wheels

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as an additional add-on to the Blacktop package. As **Dodge Journey** shows signs of ever-increasing popularity, its lineup is actually simplified—to just two trims for 2020 (both with the same 172-hp 2.4L four-cylinder engine). The upper trim gains a standard sunroof, while many options are now moved into simplified bundles. Dodge's eternally popular minivan, the **Grand Caravan**, upgrades its midlevel SE Plus with Super Stow 'n Go second row bucket seats and in-floor storage now standard, while that trim plus top SXT offer upgraded finishes inside and out, including a Blacktop package as on Durango. We drove a good cross-section of Dodge entries on the handling and lateral courses, revisiting Charger and Challenger on the drag-strip for Launch Control and Line Lock runs, and the Challenger also on autocross, where it once again impresses us with its ability to feel as nimble as the small sports cars it ran with there.

Dodge Pursuit

Police vehicles remain very important to Dodge—and Dodge's offerings are very important to law enforcement, who have made **Charger Pursuit** the best-selling police cruiser. They also always capture the imagination of many of our colleagues, who can't resist being on the giving end of the sirens throughout the day. Charger Pursuit gets an eight-speed TorqueFlite transmission for 2020, in place of the old five-speed. **Durango Pursuit**, new a year ago (and revealed at the What's New event last year), is unchanged for 2020.

Fiat/Abarth

We gave the **Fiat 500 Abarth** a great run on the autocross course, once again proving its spunk and belying its front-drive basis. **Fiat 500** itself has had a great run, but it's coming to an end in the US—the **500** and electric **500e** will be discontinued

after the 2019 model, but available into 2020. The **Fiat 124 Spyder** (which we also autocrossed) and **500X** crossover (both with a few new options) and the five-passenger **500L** will remain.

Jeep®

The biggest news out of Jeep remains the new **Gladiator** mid-size pickup, which not only broadens and deepens the lineup, but takes it into a whole new category—though not for the first time, as Jeep has a rich pickup heritage. For in-depth info on the Gladiator, see our launch feature (May/June issue), our Moab concept feature (May/June) and our feature from the NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year competition, where Gladiator won three out of seven awards, including the overall top trophy (July/August issue). Our Jeep driving focus at What's New was largely on Lyman Trail, the off-road development course. This area includes the roughest two-tracks, rock climbs, stairsteps, two-wheels-in-the-air articulation courses and water troughs every year—but after a day or two of intense rainfall, the trails outdid themselves this year. As did the Jeeps. As you would expect. We also drove a number of Jeep models on the paved handling courses. For 2020, Jeep **Renegade**, **Compass** and **Cherokee** all get more driver assist tech on more models, while Renegade also gets global telematics and an available audio upgrade; Compass gets a new red paint, available speaker upgrade and a Luxury Seat Group available on upper models; and Cherokee gets new paints and wheels, plus Alexa Skill available with upper Uconnect 8.4 systems. **Grand Cherokee** adds new available interiors, wheels, badge and trim accents, bi-xenon HID and LED lighting, and standard sunroof, varying by trim. The new-last-year **Jeep Wrangler** updates its engine lineup—2.0L and 3.6L gasoline engines

with engine stop-start (ESS) or eTorque mild hybrid tech, and arriving later a 3.0L EcoDiesel with ESS—and offers some lighting upgrades. See also Mopar, for a modified Gladiator Rubicon.

Ram / Ram Commercial

Ram 1500 pickups were all new last year (see our May/June 2018 issue). An overall trend continues of upgrading the trucks outside and in, with interiors offering enough options to create any combination of finishes, features, style and tech you want. While customization is fun, **Ram 1500** has a couple of special builds ready for you out of the box for 2020—such as Night Edition, available on Big Horn and Laramie trims, featuring a monochromatic finish, black badging and big black wheels (Big Horn 20-inch, Laramie 22); an all-American Big Horn "Built to Serve" model; and a Black Appearance Group for Rebel (which also has a new driver assist tech package). There's also a Ram 1500 Special Service model, with emphasis on towing, cargo and tasks. **Ram 2500-3500 Heavy Duty** pickups are all new this year (see March/April 2019), with the HDs following the 1500s lead on premium finishes, for 2020 offering a Ram Heavy Duty Night Edition (Big Horn and Laramie), also monochromatic with black badging, and with 20-inch black 20-inch wheels and black interior. Ram 3500 HD now tows up to 35,100 pounds. Technology gets a boost on Ram 3500-4500-5500 Chassis Cab trucks with the addition of lane keep assist, adaptive steering and—great for companies and fleets of any size—Ram telematics vehicle tracking. Body-color bumpers are also available. **Ram ProMaster** 1500-2500-3500 Class 2 commercial vans now offer a factory hitch good for towing 6800 pounds, and new 136-inch wheelbase 2500 and 3500 Cargo Van models. Smaller **Ram ProMaster City** vans are unchanged.

Mopar

The Mopar parts and accessories operation at FCA also creates customs. For 2020, they have brought us two new modified vehicles. The **Mopar-Modified Jeep Gladiator Rubicon** has a long list of Jeep Performance Parts upgrades including two-inch lift and 37-inch tires, cold air intake, powder-coated rock rails, a decked bed storage system, satin black grille and grille guards with LED light brackets, Katzkin leather seats and more. The **Mopar-Modified Ram 1500 Big Horn** also has two-inch lift, with 18-inch bead-lock-capable off-road wheels, body-length slip-resistant off-road running boards, cold-air intake, throaty cat-back exhaust, Katzkin leather and more. We drove the 1500 Laramie Night Edition and the ProMaster van on the handling courses, and 1500 Rebel and 2500 Power Wagon off-road.

You could easily make a week of it. A midday break dovetailed the Charger Widebody reveals with classic Michigan lunch in our event tent: sandwiches from Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor, along with Faygo pop and Vernor's Ginger Ale. The FCA lineup has remarkable brand identity across all badges, and they know how to preserve that while applying incremental changes or creating entirely new generations. Their evolutionary skills are so strong, it's almost easy, on a daily basis, to forget that the Ram 1500, Ram 2500 and 3500 HD, Jeep Wrangler and of course Gladiator are entirely new. Rumors always float around of something else on the horizon, but there were no further mentions at this event. We're not pushing for it—things are rock solid as is.

We did some overtime all-paved driving in the region in a 2019 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon 4x4 2.0L Turbo Two-Door for a couple of days (see our July/August issue), before heading back to Arizona. ■

