

Chevrolet Cavalier

Like a well-heeled preacher, the Chevrolet Cavalier has always had mass appeal. The Cav is about as sophisticated as a Big Mac and nearly as popular. A fast-food sticker price has always been part of the Cavalier's appeal, but with plenty of competitors crowding the market, that's no longer enough. So, when Chevy restyled its entry-level mainstay in mid-1994, it brought the aging automobile up to world-class standards. "You get the look of driving a sporty car for half the price. The interior is roomy, comfortable and plush," says *AAOW* Editor Jacqueline Mitchell. Editor Warren Brown likes its "in-yo-face styling touches." The new look is curvaceous, with a low, sweeping hood flowing into a sharply raked wind-



shield and roofline. Intriguingly, the latest Cav is actually a couple inches shorter than the car it replaced. But smart packaging means there's more usable space in the passenger compartment. The base 2.2

liter engine pumps out 120 horsepower. It's a little sluggish with the optional 3-speed automatic, but there's a far more peppy package with the 5-speed manual transmission that comes standard.

ing. And the best of the breed boasts a bit of each.

Take the Ford Escort/Mercury Tracer, our Top Urban Pick. The new models, launched last spring, are bigger, faster, and far more stylish. They're loaded with features and boasts an extensive list of upscale options, including a high-end CD sound system. Safety features have been enhanced. And better yet, prices have actually been cut on several of the most popular models.

For years, American automakers tried to ignore the small car segment. After all, they assumed, small cars meant small profits. So domestic models tended not to have the level of refinement or nearly as many features as the better imports. But that's changing fast, as our choice of the Escort and Tracer demonstrate. Indeed, you'll note that three of our four favorites carry domestic nameplates—and even the Civic

was built at the Honda plant in East Liberty, OH.

If you're a regular reader, you're well aware that our Urban Picks aren't based on the usual "car-of-the-year" criteria. We're looking at how these vehicles meet the needs of our readers. How do these cars perform and handle in the urban driving environment? Lots of cars can hit 150 on the smooth-as-glass autobahn. But not nearly as many will stand up to potholes and other inner-city road hazards. Comfort and durability count high on our list of criteria. But we're also interested in the sense of safety and security a vehicle provides.

Obviously, we have to make some subjective judgments, but to help make the selection process more objective, we've created what we call the VPAP scale. That's short for Vehicle Performance Assessment Parameters. VPAP considers not

only how fast you can race away when the light turns green, but how fast you can stop at the next red one.

A big engine doesn't mean much if you spend much of your daily commute stuck in traffic. So we're looking for "creature comforts." How good is the stereo system and are the controls well placed? What about seating? A well-engineered seat can make all the difference in the world after an hour's drive on pothole-strewn streets.

And you can't ignore utility and functionality. Fold-down rear seats were one of the distinguishing features of the Saturn SL1, one of our four Urban Picks this month.

It wasn't easy coming to a conclusion with a list like this. But when we sat down to compare notes and features, *AAOW* editors came to a consensus on these four Urban Picks for under \$12,000.