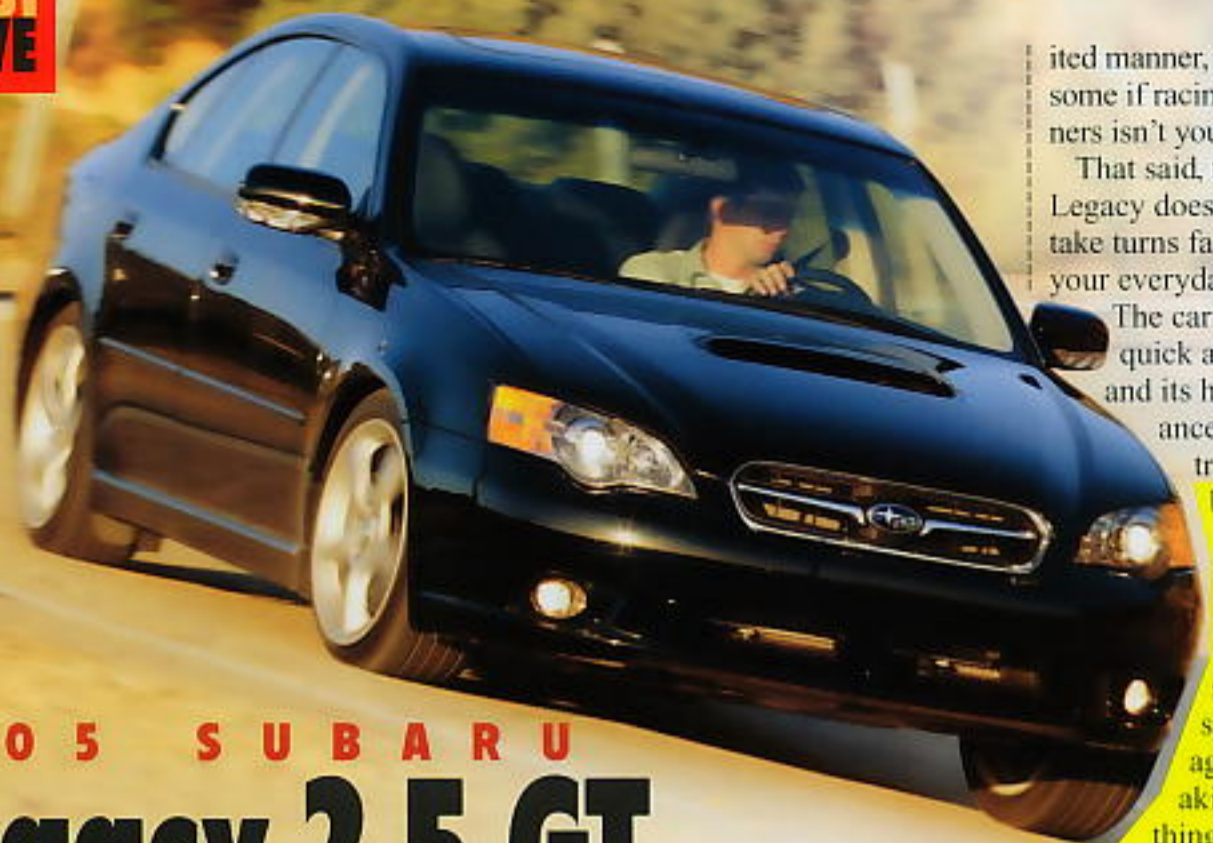


ROAD & TRACK

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Stylish All-New Subaru Legacy and Outback for 2005





2005 SUBARU

Legacy 2.5 GT and Outback 3.0 R

Raising the bar in the fiercely competitive midsize sedan segment

BY SAM MITANI • PHOTOS BY MARC URBANO

TALK ABOUT UPSETS. When the Subaru Legacy beat out the Toyota Prius for Japan's 2004 Car of the Year, the Japanese media had a field day, comparing it to Buster Douglas' surprise victory over Mike Tyson. Even Subaru execs were caught off guard—supposedly no one from Subaru had prepared an acceptance speech at the annual awards event.

But for those who had driven the car, the news came as no surprise. The Legacy is that good. Finally, a year after its introduction in Japan, we'll be getting our own version of the award-winning car here in the States. And after a day-long test drive, I must admit this new Subaru is no fluke; it's better-looking inside and out and one of the best-handling cars in its segment.

Subaru designers wiped the drawing board clean when designing the new

Legacy. The boxy shape that characterized Legacies of yore was replaced with a sleek new profile, highlighted by a long nose (the base car doesn't get the hood scoop) and an elliptical roofline that flows flawlessly to a short rear deck. The face is aggressively styled, with an elegant rectangular grille sitting between canted glass-covered headlights. The large rear taillights are simple yet stylish.

Step inside, and you'll notice that the materials as well as fit and finish have been dramatically improved compared with the previous model's. The dashboard design is clean and simple, with all knobs and buttons within easy reach of the driver. The only shortcoming here is the lack of head room at the rear. Anyone taller than 6 feet sitting in the rear seats will probably find the top of their head brushing the roof.

Powering the new Legacy 2.5 GT is the same turbocharged 2.5-liter flat-4 found in the company's formidable sports sedan, the WRX STi. In the Legacy, this powerplant produces 250 bhp and 250 lb.-ft. of torque. While I love this engine in the Impreza WRX STi, I would have preferred something with a bit more linear acceleration in this car. There's a dead spot below 2500 rpm, and while the on-off nature of the turbocharger (which occurs around 3000 rpm) may be fun when driving in a spir-

ited manner, it can get tiresome if racing around corners isn't your thing.

That said, the new Legacy does invite you to take turns faster than in your everyday commuter.

The car's steering is quick and precise, and its handling balance is near neutral.

Despite being awd, the Legacy reacts like a rear-wheel driver, possessing response and agility more akin to something from Germany than Japan. The suspension system—MacPherson struts up front and multilink at the rear—does a commendable job of providing stability while keeping body roll minimal.

The new Outback 3.0 R shares the same basic setup as the Legacy, but with one major difference: It gets the 3.0-liter flat-6. This engine has seen a number of improvements from the previous version, including variable valve

timing and lift. The 6-cylinder powerplant now produces 250 bhp and 219 lb.-ft. of torque, very similar numbers to the turbocharged flat-4 (which is available in the Outback 2.5 XT), but the way it puts the power down is as different as night and day. A glance at the specs reveals that the turbocharged 2.5-liter's peak torque of 250 lb.-ft. comes at 3600 rpm, while the 3.0-liter's 219 comes at a higher 4200. But what's peculiar is that from the driver's seat, the 3.0 R leaves the line more smoothly without the lag of the 2.5. The gear ratios of the 5-speed automatic transmission (a 5-speed manual is also offered) feel better suited to the 6-cylinder.

As for price, the 2.5 Legacy GT will come in at \$25,995 (the base model with a 168-bhp naturally aspirated 2.5-liter flat-4 will be \$20,995). The Outback 3.0 R, which will be available in L.L. Bean and Vehicle Dynamics Control trim, will start at \$32,195. Expect to see the new Legacy at dealer showrooms in the early fall.

■ The Legacy (top) and Outback boast excellent fit and finish.

