



Buick's new LaCrosse is a cocoon of calm luxury, writes **Mark Andrews**

MOTORS

Quiet American

One division that wasn't on the table in General Motors' recent fire sale was GM China. It's one of the company's few profitable units and, with sales rising, it's not difficult to understand why. In the first 10 months of last year, sales were up by 46.5 per cent and have already exceeded 1.5 million units.

With the old LaCrosse, Buick chose to design in Shanghai a car for the Chinese and Taiwanese markets based on the American LaCrosse. This proved a shrewd move, with 2008 sales of 52,719 in China compared with 36,873 in the US market. So when it came to replacing the car with a single version, GM decided to design the interior at Shanghai's Pan Asia Technical Automotive Centre and the exterior in the US with consultation from its Chinese colleagues.

The new LaCrosse eschews the old model's balanced lines for a far more aggressive look. Although it may share the same Epsilon II platform as the Buick Regal (Opel Insignia) the car has been given a course of anabolic steroids and beefed up in the gym. At five metres long, it's bigger than the BMW 5 series and Mercedes E class.

Judging from the interior, GM sees the LaCrosse as its new bruiser in the fight against the Teutonic competition. Compared with the old version, it has seriously upped the game. Dominating the central console of our Luxury trim 2.4 litre is an LCD screen that acts as a



With its swish interior and lighting effects, the LaCrosse mounts a Chinese challenge to German luxury marques

reverse camera, GPS and DVD player, the controls blending seamlessly into those of the climate system below. Encasing these is the brown leather-topped dash that gives way to real wood and then a metallic strip, which at night bathes the interior in blue light, finally moving to the cream leather lined lower section. With velvet-lined storage compartments, the attention to luxury is impressive.

There's an attractive steering wheel and the blue theme continues with backlighting for the speedo and rev counter. In between sits a small LCD display for information such as tyre pressure and trip data. Mounted on the wheel are buttons for the cruise control, Bluetooth phone

connection and stereo system. On our version the cream leather seats in the front have not only heating but also a cooling fan, with memory controls and electric operation.

The cabin is very light, thanks to a large sunroof. In the rear there is a power socket and ventilation controls. Although legroom is generous, taller adults will have headroom problems. Passengers in the three-litre Flagship version have headrest-mounted screens. Access to the boot is a little restricted owing to a high lip and narrow opening, but there is space for a number of cases and the seats can fold down.

Comfort and Elegance versions of the 2.4 litre lose the DVD player and Harman Kardon speakers. On the Comfort version there are cloth seats and just a CD player.

The Elegance has leather seats but without the holes of the Luxury model and it also has a basic GPS system. The Flagship three-

litre V6 has an option of a black interior and has WVGA video input ports along with heated bench and curtain airbags in the back.

There is a choice of either a 2.4-litre Ecotec engine or a three-litre V6 unit, both of which are paired with a six-speed automatic gearbox. On paper the 2.4 litre unit's performance seems a bit sluggish, but on the road the car always seems to have plenty of power. Gear changes are smooth, but the

gearbox cannot match the technology of eight-speed units from BMW and Audi.

This car's true habitat is probably on the highway as a cruiser. However, one thing that's very apparent when on Shanghai's North-South elevated road is how wide the car is. Rear visibility is restricted but, luckily, the reverse camera is very good and has a nifty aiming system showing where the car is heading.

The ride is smooth and the suspension does a good job of soaking up potholes. Thanks to dense soundproofing, the cabin is also very quiet.

Differences with the North American version are minimal and are largely to do with engine choices. On the mainland, the car is not offered in the 3.6-litre V6 configuration. What Buick has created is a car that offers very good value for money. The Luxury model is cheaper in China than the base model of the far smaller Audi A4L and yet has all the toys of the much more expensive range topper. While it may not have the performance of its German rivals, they will still need to watch their rear view mirrors for the LaCrosse.

AT A GLANCE: Buick LaCrosse 2.4 litre

What drives it? A 2.4-litre Ecotec engine delivering 167 horsepower to the front wheels via a six-speed automatic transmission.

How fast is it? The LaCrosse's top speed is 200km/h and a dash from 0-100km/h takes 10.4 seconds.

How safe is it? All 2.4 litre versions get six airbags as standard and the car has electronic stability control. In the US it

received a Top Safety Pick from the Institute of Highway Safety.

How thirsty is it? At 90km/h it gets through 6.3 litres per 100 km.

How clean is it? No data is provided.

How much is it? The 2.4 versions cost 219,900 yuan (HK\$248,370) to 269,900 yuan and the three-litre Flagship is 319,900 yuan.



London lads back for more funny business

GIGS

Ben Sin

Richard Vranich makes a lot of things: animation, music and, with a PhD in radiation physics, he could probably make a bomb if he tried hard enough.

But he enjoys making things up the most.

He'll be doing just that next week when he performs at the Punchline Comedy Club.

Vranich and his team - Andy Smart, Stephen Frost, Steve Steen, and Ian Coppinger - have performed improvisational comedy together for more than 25 years. Known as The Comedy Store Players from their regular appearances at the Comedy Store in London, the crew have a routine that spawned the hit TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and led them to performing worldwide.

Vranich says it'll be "at least their tenth show" in Hong Kong over the

past decade. But the shows will never get old, he says. "The beauty of improvisational comedy is that we're making things up as we go along, so it's a guaranteed fresh show each time," says the versatile Vranich, who also works as a TV writer, music composer, animator and actor.

The group's routine consists of the five performers playing out scenarios in a style and setting of the audience's choice.

Search for them on YouTube and you'll see clips of Vranich performing skits on piano, kissing another man, and taking a peek at a man's ripped trousers.

"It's really anything goes," he says.

But Vranich says the clips online or on TV only serve as an advertisement for their live shows, as they fail to recreate the atmosphere.

"To interact with us live and actually have a say in what we do is an experience that simply



Seriously funny and in town for three nights only ... (clockwise from left) Jim Sweeney, Andy Smart, Richard Vranich, Steve Steen and Stephen Frost

cannot be replicated on television," he says.

The ability to thrive off feedback from live audiences and spin off their suggestions makes

improvisational comedy more accessible to the local audience than traditional English stand-up comedy, he says.

Vranich first got into comedy

during his days as a radiation physics student at Cambridge University, when he stumbled into a comedy club and met fellow comedians Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie. "We performed a bit and I was hooked," he says.

After he received his PhD, Vranich had two choices: continue comedy or work in radiation physics with the army.

"It was either work with the army - a dead serious job - or comedy," he says. "No brainer."

Vranich expects a rowdy crowd at the show.

"The first time we came to Hong Kong to perform was right in the middle of the Sars outbreak," he says. "It was packed house. Laughter is the best medicine, after all."

Whose Line Is It Anyway? Punchline Comedy Club, Jan 14-16, 8pm; Jan 17, 9pm. The Viceroy, 2/F, Sun Hung Kai Centre, 30 Harbour Rd, Wan Chai. HK\$360. Inquiries: 2317 6666; cityline.com.hk

Japanese nurture grape expectations

WINE

Justin McCurry

Less than a decade ago, the mere mention of Japan would elicit puzzled looks, if not snorts of derision, from the global wine cognoscenti.

The country that gave the world premium sake and award-winning malt whiskies has been infamous for producing the kind of plonk that gives wine a bad name - often blends of cheap imports and even grape juice.

But wine snobs are being forced to think again with the recent arrival in the US and Europe of labels made from 100 per cent domestically grown grapes.

Though it lacks the heritage of the great winemaking countries of Europe, Japan is hoping to emulate New Zealand and quickly prove its oenological credentials. That effort is centred on Yamanashi prefecture, where grape growing began 1,000 years ago, eventually spawning a modest wine industry in the second half of the 19th century.

The central region, where 90 wineries operate in the shadow of Mount Fuji, is now producing drinkable wines from chardonnay and other European grapes.

But it is the koshu grape, an indigenous variety that found its way to Japan via central Asia and China more than a millennium ago, to which connoisseurs have turned for inspiration.

Yamanashi's fortunes received a boost in 2004, when researchers found that the koshu grape is more than 90 per cent *Vitis vinifera*, part of the same European vine genus that gave us sauvignon blanc.

For Ernest Singer, president of Millesimes, a wine merchant based in Tokyo, it represented a crucial step towards realising a long-held dream of unleashing fine Japanese wine on the world's drinkers. After an encouraging foray into the US market in 2005, Singer turned the

light-purple grapes into a wine that met strict EU regulations.

Amid a global boom in Japanese food, koshu is being touted as the perfect accompaniment to sushi's subtle flavours and delicate textures.

"Japan has the potential to be a major wine-growing region," says Singer. "It makes sense that Japan should have a viable wine export industry when you consider that there are hundreds of Japanese restaurants in New York alone."

His company's Shizen 2006, Cuvee Denis Dubourdieu, has won critical acclaim since it appeared on the menu at Umu, a Michelin-star Japanese restaurant in London, in February last year. Millesimes has since shipped 480 bottles to Britain, and 5,800 to picky France since last year.

The dry, fruity wine was clearly to the liking of American critic Robert Parker, who described it as "crisp and pleasant and clearly meant to be a wine to guzzle with sushi or sashimi".

Just as Japan's distillers learned how to make decent single malt by dispatching researchers to the Scottish Highlands, its winemakers are tapping into foreign expertise.

"By sending researchers to places like France and the US, we have managed to produce dry varieties that have received great reviews," says Hiroto Naito of the Yamanashi prefectural government.

"All we can do is tell [people] Japan is serious about winemaking and the best labels come from Yamanashi."

Next month a koshu wine-tasting event in London will, its organisers hope, add to the list of exports to the EU, which includes only Millesimes' koshu vintage and Cuvee Magrez-Aruga Koshu Isehara 2007.

"Like any other wine-producing country, Japan has some great wines and some awful ones," says Kunio Naito, managing director of Cave de Relax, a wine seller in Tokyo. "You have to remember, we are starting from scratch."

Guardian News & Media



The local koshu grape is touted as a good match for sushi. Photo: Alamy

18X2

Show them the money

QMS

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SCMP has more making active lives than any other Hong Kong newspaper

South China Morning Post