Basic Blenders Beat Upscale Rivals

Fancy features and a high price tag do not guarantee great performance.

BY ADAM RIED

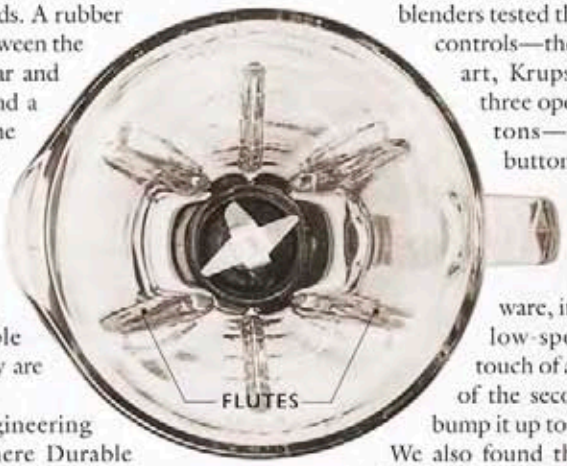
Blenders today are far sleeker and more advanced than the harvest gold clunker I've used for nearly 20 years. To its credit, though, despite being neither a beauty nor a technological tour de force, old faithful has faultlessly churned out daiquiris every summer since it was new.

Nonetheless, modern blenders occasionally beckon me with their electronic touch-pad controls, great range of speeds, redesigned jars, and pulse and ice-crushing functions. The bells and whistles don't come cheap, though: many units cost $100 or more. Do all of these features really add up to a better blender that is worth the extra expense? To find the answer, we tested the ability of eight popular models—Oster, Hamilton Beach, Farberware, Krups, Waring, Cuisinart, Sunbeam, and KitchenAid—to perform such everyday kitchen tasks as making smoothies and frozen drinks, pureeing chunky ingredients into a smooth soup, crushing ice, processing berries into sauce, and making pesto.

Why a Blender?

Food processors do everything blenders do and more, such as mincing, chopping, grating, slicing, and shredding. So it would be perfectly reasonable for a cook to ask, "Well, why bother with a blender, then?" As multitalented as food processors are, blenders are better at processing liquids and solids together to form a fine, smooth, well-aerated puree and at liquefying solids. A blender, for instance, will process cooked vegetables and broth into a finer puree than a food processor, making the texture of the finished soup silky. Blenders are also better than food processors at combining ice, fruit, juice, and yogurt to make smoothies. A food processor will leave small chunks of ice, whereas a blender will break up the ice and fruit into particles tiny enough for the drink to live up to its name.

Several design elements account for this. One important factor is the shape of the blender jar. Because food processor workbowls are relatively wide and low, the food that gets thrown off the moving blade tends to stick to the sides of the bowl. By comparison, tall, narrow blender jars force the food up because there is less space for it to move laterally. This upward motion, combined with the rapid spinning of the blades, creates a vortex within the jar that allows for the incorporation of more air, which gives the end product a fluffier, smoother consistency. In our experience in the test kitchen, blender jars also form tighter seals than food processor bowls—another benefit when processing liquids. A rubber gasket forms a seal between the base of the blender jar and the blade assembly, and a tight-fitting lid seals the mouth of the jar. (Despite its secure seals, you should not fill a blender jar more than halfway; this ensures that the contents will have ample room to move as they are blended.)



John Rousso, engineering manager for Windmere Durable Holdings (parent company to Windmere and Household Products, the makers of Black & Decker Household Products), stressed the importance of one component of blender jar design—the flutes. Flutes are vertical protrusions on the inside of the blender jar (see photo above), which, in Rousso's words, "collapse the vortex" inside the jar, thus redirecting the material being thrown against the jar walls back down onto the blade. This fosters increased contact between the food and spinning blades.

Kristin Verratti, product manager of food products for Household Products, reported that the configuration of the blade assembly also matters. Most food processors have a blade with two cutting edges at different levels, one tight against the bottom of the workbowl and one that is elevated slightly. The blades on most blenders, on the other hand, have four cutting edges oriented on two, and sometimes three or four, planes (usually, two of the cutting edges reach down toward the base of the jar and two reach up toward the top). This way, the material in the jar hits four cutting edges instead of two.

Frivolous Features

We were a little surprised to find that even in this digital age, electronic touch-pad controls made for little improvement over old-fashioned raised buttons. The flat touch pad is certainly easier to clean than the buttons, (around which it is undeniably difficult to maneuver a sponge or cloth), but it is not easier to operate. Of the four blenders tested that did have electronic controls—the Farberware, Cuisinart, Krups, and KitchenAid—three operated only if two buttons—"on" and a speed button—were pushed. Only the Krups required the use of just one button, though to be fair to the Farberware, it would operate in the low-speed range with the touch of a single button; a push of the second button served to bump it up to the high-speed range. We also found that you had to really pound on the buttons of the Farberware to get them to work. The fact that the touch pads were easier to clean did not compensate for these annoyances.

A wide variety of speeds was another feature that failed to dazzle us. Most of our tests, including those for smoothies, frozen drinks, soups, and berry puree, were performed at high speed, while crushing ice and making pesto were done at low speeds and/or with the pulse feature, which was included on all of the units tested except the Waring. Even the industry experts we interviewed agreed that only low, high, and pulse were essential; the inclusion of a broad range of speeds beyond those may be more useful for marketing than for cooking.

Jar designs vary in two principal ways—shape and material. The jars on the Krups, Cuisinart, Waring, Sunbeam, and KitchenAid units had straight sides rather than the angled sides famil-

TESTING | PERFECT PUREE

A good blender produces a perfectly smooth puree (left). Some of the less efficient blenders we tested failed to break down large chunks of food, as shown in puree at right.

SILHOUETTE PHOTOGRAPHY: VAN ACKERE

The Blenders We Tested

BEST BLENDER
Oster Designer 12-Speed Osterizer
Noisy, but solid and effective.

Hamilton Beach BlendMaster 14 Speed
A good performer, but had the shortest power cord of all.

Farberware Millennium 14 Speed
Good performer with sub-par touch-pad controls.

Krups Power Xtreme
Middle-of-the-road performance in an attractive package.

Waring Kitchen Classics
Classic and beautiful, but expensive and an uneven performer.

Cuisinart SmartPower 7 Speed
Excelled at crushing ice, but not much else.

Sunbeam 6 Speed Easy Clean
Cheap to buy, but you get what you pay for... mediocre construction and performance.

KitchenAid 5 Speed Ultra Power
Sleek and handsome, but also expensive and disappointing in every test.

SILHOUETTE PHOTOGRAPHY: VAN ACKERE

jar on older designs (the Waring jar was much narrower overall than the other four). We did not find these jars any easier to use, scrape down, or pour from than the old standards, nor were their mouths appreciably wider than most of the others. In fact, because these jars have wider bases, the distance between the jar walls and the blades was roughly ½ inch more than in our top three blenders, which had jars with angled sides (or, in the case of the Oster, jar walls that angle in steeply at the base). A narrower base translates into less space between the blade and the jar walls and therefore greater contact between the blade and the food.

Blender jars also come in several materials: stainless steel is common for bar blenders and not great for culinary uses because you cannot see through it. Most blender jars are glass, and although glass is heavier than the other choice, plastic, we prefer it because it is less likely to get scratched. After observing how badly scratched the plastic bowls on the test kitchen food processors have become, we were also concerned that plastic blender jars might scratch and therefore retain food flavors and odors over time. Among the eight blenders tested, only the Sunbeam had a plastic jar. One jar we particularly disliked, though, was the KitchenAid, because it lacked a pouring spout. We also found it difficult to align the base and body of the jar properly when screwing them together. The unfortunate result was that the jar tended to leak from the bottom. This was the case with two of the three KitchenAid 5-speed units we tested.

Conclusions

Overall, we found electronic touch-pad controls to be a nuisance, a broad range of speeds to be unnecessary, and newfangled, wide-bodied, straight-sided jars to offer no advantage over traditional jars with angled sides. Unfortunately though, even all the right design features don't guarantee first-rate performance. None of our blenders excelled in every single test. Chopping ice evenly and easily, which any blender should be able to do, stymied our two top choices, the Oster and the Hamilton Beach. Otherwise, both models were reasonably priced at around $40 and sailed through all the other tests with aplomb. Only the Krups and the Cuisinart did a great job crushing ice, but otherwise they turned in spotty performances. The losers of the bunch were the Sunbeam and, to our surprise, the costly, handsome KitchenAid. Looks like the harvest gold wonder in my kitchen at home stays on daiquiri duty again this summer.

RATING BLENDERS

RATINGS
★★★ GOOD
★★ FAIR
★ POOR

We tested eight blenders and rated them according to the criteria listed below. They are listed in order of preference. The majority of people we asked reported using their blenders primarily to make smoothies and frozen drinks, so these became our most (and equally) important tests.

PRICE: Retail prices paid in Boston-area stores and national mail-order catalogs.

CAPACITY: The bigger, the better. Note, however, that blender jars should never be filled to the top, so the figures here are intended for comparison only.

SMOOTHIES: We combined 1½ cups semifrozen mango chunks (thawed at room temperature for 1 hour), 1 cup orange juice, ½ cup strained berry puree, and ½ cup plain yogurt and set the blender on high speed—usually called "liquefy"—for 30 seconds. Blenders that produced a fine, smooth puree that left little or no pulp in a strainer when passed through it were rated good; somewhat coarser purees that left noticeable pulp in a strainer were rated fair; and those which produced a very coarse, bulky puree that left noticeable chunks of fruit in the strainer were rated poor.

FROZEN DRINKS: We combined one semifrozen 10-ounce can of frozen drink mix (thawed at room temperature for 90 minutes) and 10 ounces of water, added three cups of ice cubes, and then set the blender on high speed for 40 seconds. Blenders that produced a smooth, even slush that passed through a strainer completely were rated good; if the drink was acceptably smooth but left small granules of ice in a strainer, the blender was rated fair; and if the drink left any large chunks of ice or whole cubes in the strainer, the blender was rated poor.

SOUP PUREE: We cooked 1 cup sautéed minced shallots and 1½ pounds broccoli florets and stems—peeled, trimmed, and cut into pieces no larger than ¾ inch, in four cups of liquid until completely tender, about 10 minutes. The total quantity of this mixture was 7 cups. We allowed it to cool for 5 minutes and then pureed it in two batches of 3½ cups each, for 30 seconds, on high speed. Blenders that produced a smooth, lump-free puree that passed through a sieve completely were rated good; if the puree left any noticeable pieces of broccoli in the strainer, the blender was rated fair; and if lots of nearly whole pieces of broccoli were left in the strainer, the blender was rated poor.

CRUSHED ICE: We tried crushing 14 cubes of ice, with no liquid added, using the ice-crushing mode if the blender had one and otherwise using the pulse mode. If the blender pulverized all the cubes into reasonably small, even shards, it was rated good; if the size of the ice pieces was very uneven and some of the cubes remained in pieces about one-third to one-half their original size, the blender was rated fair; and if whole cubes were left, the blender was rated poor.

BERRY PUREE: We cooked 12 ounces of hulled fresh strawberries in a modest amount of sugar syrup until they softened, about 5 minutes, and processed them, still warm, at medium speed—usually labeled "mix" or "shred"—for 20 seconds. If the puree was utterly smooth and passed through a strainer leaving no residue other than seeds, the blender was rated good; if medium-sized pieces of berry were left in the strainer, the blender was rated fair; and if large pieces or whole berries were left, the blender was rated poor.

PESTO: Most people make pesto in a food processor because it breaks down the basil easily, but for cooks who don't own one, we wanted to find out if a blender was a viable alternative. We processed three cloves of minced garlic, ¼ cup chopped walnuts, 2 packed cups fresh basil and parsley leaves, and 7 tablespoons olive oil any way we could, usually using a combination of pulse, low, medium, and high speeds and stopping frequently to push the mixture down onto the blades. If the blender was eventually able to break the ingredients down into a paste, it was rated good; if only a portion of the ingredients broke down, the blender was rated fair; and if essentially whole leaves and nuts were left in the jar by the time our patience ran out, the blender was rated poor.

COMMENTS: Testers' observations related to button responsiveness, jar handle comfort, and perceived construction quality augment the testing results.

Brand	Price	Speeds	Capacity	Smoothie	Frozen Drink	Soup Puree	Crushed Ice	Berry Puree	Pesto	Testers' Comments
BEST BLENDER **Oster** Designer 12-Speed Osterizer Blender, Model 6663	$39.99	12	5 cups	★★★	★★★	★★★	★	★★★	★★★	Good fit between base and jar, comfortable jar handle, and especially good pouring spout. But what a racket it makes.
Hamilton Beach BlendMaster 14 Speed Blender, Model 54200R	$39.99	14	5 cups	★★★	★★★	★★★	★	★★★	★★★	Not a sleek or stellar design—jar sometimes wobbles on base and buttons are especially close together and difficult to clean—but it does get the job done.
Farberware Millennium 14 Speed Electronic Professional Blender, Model FPB600	$79.99	14	6 cups	★★★	★★★	★★★	★	★★★	★★★	Small, hidden side power switch is easy to overlook and leave on. Electronic touch-pad controls required hard mashing to operate.
Krups Power Xtreme, Model 572	$79.99	6	6 cups	★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★	★	Best-designed electronic touch-pad control of all because it operates with one touch instead of two.
Waring Kitchen Classics Blender, Model PBB201	$129.99	2	5 cups	★★	★★★	★★★	★	★★	★	Simplest design and longest cord—6 feet!—of the bunch. Great for purees with plenty of liquid, but not so good for drier dishes. No pulse feature.
Cuisinart SmartPower 7 Speed Electronic Blender, Model SPB-7	$79.99	7	5 cups	★★	★★	★	★★★	★	★	Electronic touch-pad buttons were responsive but irritating because you must press two buttons—"on" and the speed of your choice—to operate blender.
Sunbeam 6 Speed Easy Clean Blender, Model 4142-8	$29.99	6	6 cups	★	★	★★★	★	★	★	Noisy unit looks and feels flimsy, but it out-pureed KitchenAid at less than one-third the price. Only unit with a plastic jar.
KitchenAid 5 Speed Ultra Power Blender, Model KSB5	$99.99	5	5 cups	★	★★	★	★★	★	★	Difficult to unscrew jar base and even more difficult to screw it back on so that the gasket seals. Have to press two buttons on the touch pad to operate blender.