

PRINTERS

> THE BUYERS: PHOTOGRAPHERS AT ALL LEVELS CAN NOW AFFORD TOP PRINT QUALITY AND MAJOR-LEAGUE FEATURES

Right now, the big picture in inkjet photo printers is that the three leading brands have achieved a comparable—and extremely impressive—level of output quality.

Previously, Epson had the edge, but recent entries from Canon and Hewlett-Packard have leveled the playing field so that now, all high-end (and many less expensive) models turn out beautiful continuous-tone prints. And aside from subtle differences in hue, sharpness, and saturation, color prints from a top Epson, Canon, and HP look very similar.

On the other hand, there are significant differences in terms of speed, paper handling, available media variety, and print longevity. The premium Canon machines use six colors with individual ink tanks, which means less waste. Epson's top pigment printer, the Stylus Photo 2200, packs seven colors. Recently, HP raised the bar with an eight-color system in the Photosmart 7960. The HP 7960 and Epson 2200 also employ special inks for better black-and-white reproduction, something Canon needs to work on.

Meanwhile, Canon printers are still the fastest, but Epson gives you the widest choice of papers. Epsoms come in two flavors: those using higher-gamut, dye-based inks, and those with longer-lived, pigment-based ones. But understand that the life expectancy of any inkjet print depends not just on the ink, but on many other factors, including whether the print

HOT Photo-quality inkjets are so good and cheap that everyone can afford one.

NOT Digital photofinishing is giving the do-it-yourselfers a run for their money.

is mounted behind glass or exposed to contaminants in the air.

Your buying decision may hinge on other features, such as borderless prints, roll-paper handling, and the ability to print onto the surface of a CD or DVD. You'll also find pricey large-format inkjet models, as well as inexpensive combo units that double as scanners and copiers.

Of course, inkjets aren't the only photo-quality game in town. Olympus, Kodak, Mitsubishi, and Sony make letter-sized dye-sublimation printers that use resin-coated papers closer in look and feel to conventional photo paper and more resistant to scratching and moisture than most inkjet prints. (In fact, many snapshot-size printers are dye-sub.)

These fast printers, which use red, green, and blue dye ribbons, plus an overcoat, let you apply a choice of texture finishes without changing papers. Under a loupe, you'll notice that dye-sub prints are smooth (no inkjet dots), the result of the dye being vaporized and absorbed ("sublimated") into the paper rather than lying on the surface. The downside? Dye-sub typically don't produce sharp text in small font sizes.

Many printers (both inkjet and dye-sub) have built-in media-card slots, and most can print directly from a digital camera.

For best results, stick with the same brand of printer and camera, or make sure they use the same print-matching language, which embeds the camera's unique imaging profile within each picture file. Some manufacturers support Epson's PRINT Image Matching (P.I.M.) II; others use Exif (Exchangeable Image Format File) 2.2. A new one called PictBridge debuted this year, which also allows printers and cameras from different companies to work together. —Jonathan Barkey

> BILLBOARDS MADE EASY

Most of us are thrilled to make 13x19-inch prints. But what if even that big isn't big enough? Enter the Epson Stylus Pro 7600, which produces monster-size, borderless blowups (up to 2x100 feet!) on a variety of papers, with a life expectancy of about a century. The 7600 provides superb prints with its seven-color Ultra-Chrome pigmented inkset. Although its color range is much better than that of earlier models, the 7600 also comes in a dye-ink version (print-display life up to 26 years) with an expanded color gamut and better black density. The 7600 costs (only) \$3,000 street.



> KINKO'S—WATCH OUT!

Tired of desktop clutter? New all-in-ones from Epson and Hewlett-Packard squeeze a photo-quality inkjet printer, color scanner/copier, and fax into a single compact package. The Epson Stylus CX5200 boasts fast printing, 48-bit, 1200x2400-dpi, letter-sized scanning, plus faxing via your PC. Using four DuraBrite pigmented ink cartridges, it makes water-resistant color copies and prints (single and double-sided). The even fancier HP PCS 2410 Photosmart (shown) offers six-color output, direct printing and proofing from media cards, and color faxing. The CX5200 streets at about \$150. The HP 2410 is \$300.



5 PRIME PICKS | PRINTERS

CANON i9100 PHOTO PRINTER

> WIDE-CARRIAGE SPEED DEMON

THE SKINNY: Terrific color output and blazing speed, with 4x6s in about 37 sec, 8x10s in 1 min 13 sec, and borderless 13x19s in 6 min 7 sec. Image quality and resolution have improved over the earlier S9000.

FEATURES TO LIKE: User-replaceable print-head. Low-ink sensor warns you when one of the six individual Think-Tank ink cartridges is running low. Borderless prints right up to 13x19. Very quiet operation.

VITAL STATISTICS

- > 4800x1200 dpi
- > 3,072 nozzles
- > 4-picoliter droplets
- > Borderless prints to 13x19
- > \$500 street



Tested November 2003
www.usa.canon.com
 800-652-2666

>SIMILAR AND RECOMMENDED
 Epson Stylus Photo 1280 (\$380)

EPSON STYLUS PHOTO 900

> A BARGAIN THAT ALSO PRINTS CDS AND DVDS

THE SKINNY: Letter-sized inkjet with high performance and a low price. Beautiful image quality thanks to six photo inks. Borderless 4x6s, 5x7s, and 8x10s. Template and software for direct printing onto CDs and DVDs. Two large ink cartridges (black and color) offer extended printing, but we'd prefer six separate tanks. **FEATURES TO LIKE:** Accepts 4- and 8.3-in. roll paper, prints banners up to 44 in. long. Love that price!

VITAL STATISTICS

- > 5760x720 dpi
- > 4-picoliter droplets
- > 2 ink cartridges—CcMmY plus black
- > \$185 street



Tested October 2003
www.epson.com
 800-463-7766

>SIMILAR AND RECOMMENDED
 Epson Stylus Photo 960 (\$330)

EPSON STYLUS PHOTO 2200

> BIG BEAUTIFUL PRINTS THAT LAST AND LAST

THE SKINNY: Seven-color, junior version of the Stylus Pro 7600 is much better than the earlier Stylus Photo 2000P. Faster, wider color gamut, neutral b&w output, banishes color shifting under different lighting. Great paper handling. Lower price. **FEATURES TO LIKE:** Takes roll paper up to 13 in. wide. Auto paper cutter and catch basket for easy batch printing. Optional Matte Black ink gives better matte and watercolor prints.

VITAL STATISTICS

- > 2880x1440 dpi
- > 4-picoliter droplets
- > 7 individual UltraChrome pigmented ink cartridges
- > Borderless prints up to 13x44
- > \$700 street



Tested October 2002
www.epson.com
 800-463-7766

>SIMILAR AND RECOMMENDED
 In a class of its own

HP PHOTOSMART 7960 PHOTO PRINTER

www.hp.com; 800-752-0900

> EIGHT COLORS AND B&W, TOO

THE SKINNY: A new level of dedicated photo printing. Eight-ink system matches others in color, and beats all in black-and-white with Photo Gray ink. Print directly from built-in media card slots, as well as from compatible HP cameras. Downside: slow.

FEATURES TO LIKE: 2.5-in. swiveling LCD screen. Borderless prints up to 8.5x11. Separate 25-sheet tray for 4x6s.

VITAL STATISTICS

- > 4800x1200 dpi
- > 4 cartridges hold 8 inks
- > Direct printing from Photosmart cameras and 6 media formats
- > \$290 street



>SIMILAR AND RECOMMENDED
 Canon i900D (\$250)

OLYMPUS P-440

www.olympusamerica.com; 800-622-6372

> LIKE HAVING A MINILAB IN A BOX

THE SKINNY: Dye-sub prints from this new machine (as with the earlier, slower P-400) rival lab prints for smoothness, feel, durability. Borderless 8x10s, 1.8-in. color LCD monitor. Downside: uses only Olympus paper.

FEATURES TO LIKE: Print from built-in xD card slot, other media via PCMCIA slot and adapters. Glossy or matte overcoat without changing paper. Video-out lets you view and edit on your TV.

VITAL STATISTICS

- > 314 dpi
- > Continuous tone
- > 16.7 million colors
- > 3-pass CMY ink ribbon plus clear overcoat
- > Borderless 8x10s
- > \$499 street



>SIMILAR AND RECOMMENDED
 Kodak Professional 8500 Digital Photo Printer (\$900)