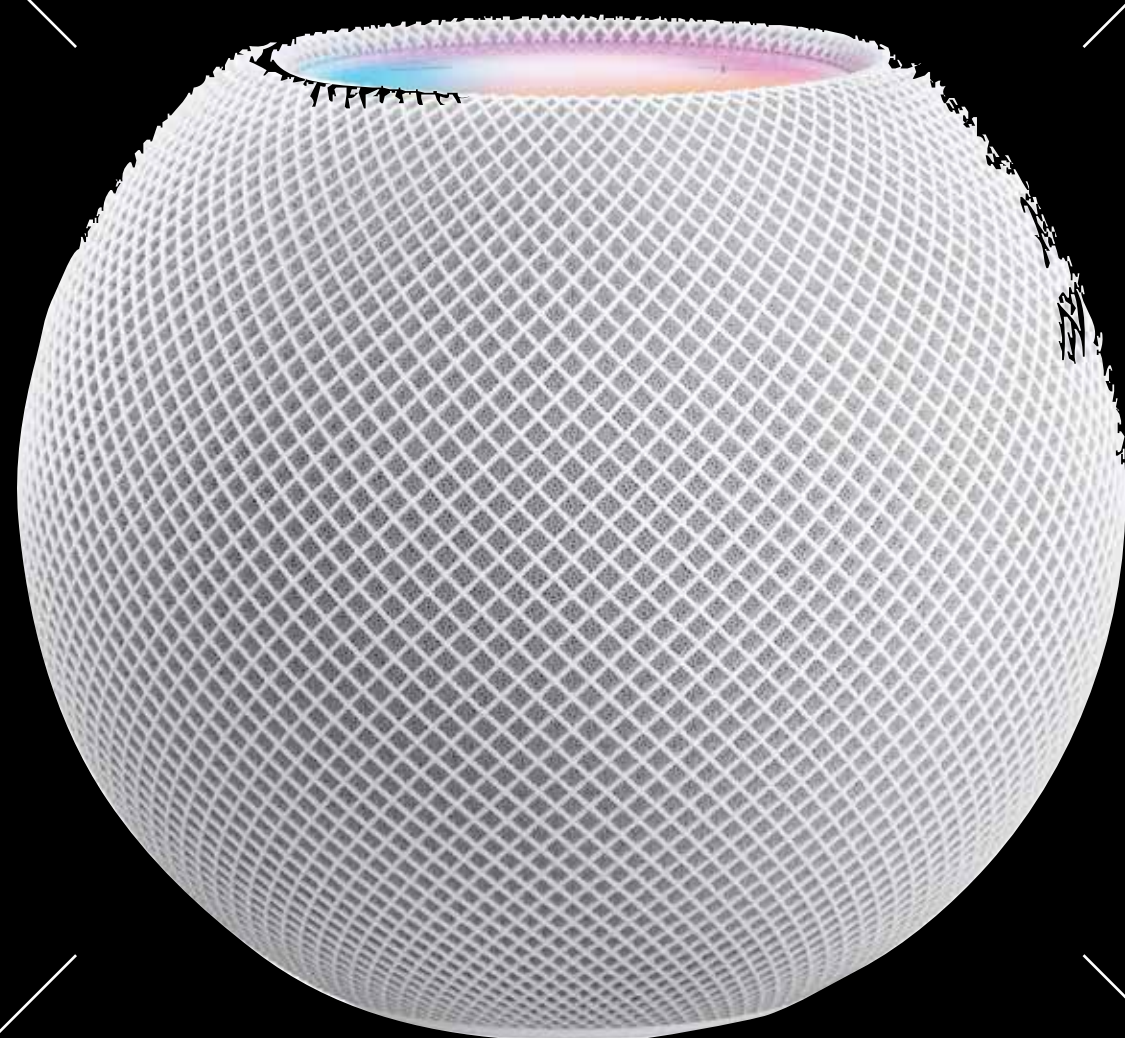


# TALKING HEADS

2020's voice assistant speakers aren't just getting smarter by the day, they're also ready to fill up your room with excellent sound as they optimise your day-to-day living – even if you don't have a smart home to match just yet



## HOMEPOD MINI

For those who exist within the Apple universe, investing in a HomePod Mini is a no-brainer. A more affordable option than the larger HomePod, it also fits seamlessly into your tech grid. It can take calls; pick up any song playing off Apple Music on your iPhone (if you bring the two close enough); pair with another HomePod for stereo sound; create an in-house intercom system. And it can do it all with excellent sound, a combination of top-of-the-line hardware, software and design that allows for 360-degree sound radiating from the bottom of the speaker. Of course, there's Siri, smarter than ever, who can identify multiple voices and knows who needs to listen to A World of Calm every night.

₹9,900

WORDS: NIDHI GUPTA

## SMARTER THINGS

### AMAZON ECHO (2020)

Amazon's trusty Echo gets a radical design upgrade – it looks like a bowling ball now, with a colour ring at the bottom that gives it an ethereal quality. Alexa is still built into the cloud and diligently acquiring new skills – 30,000 and counting, which includes paying your bills. The 4th-gen Echo gives it the audio output to match, with a 76.2mm woofer and two 20mm tweeters. The Alexa app is compatible with Fire OS, Android and iOS devices, can stream music from pretty much every platform out there, and is ready to voice control your home – when you are.

₹9,999



### MI SMART SPEAKER

Bigger doesn't always mean better; but a 63.5mm driver with a 12W output and two built-in mics are good enough reasons to make it large. MI's first smart speaker is powered by Google Assistant and sports a beautiful ring at the top that indicates when the speaker is listening. It isn't the most portable device around – with no built-in battery, it needs to be plugged into a socket – but at this price, you might want to get a couple at a time and transform your den into a rock arena.

₹3,999

### GOOGLE NEST AUDIO

It's widely acknowledged that Google Assistant is, at the moment, the most capable of all AI systems out there. Its powers are enhanced when sitting inside the Nest Audio, Google's latest mid-range smart speaker, a great combination of sleek design (aluminium and magnesium inside that classic fabric wrap), great sound (coming off a 75mm woofer and a 19mm tweeter) and an assistant that can summon a lot of the World Wide Web's knowledge at command. Available in five colours, it is a stationary device, but can deliver the boom if you pair with a second one: big crisp stereo sound that's perfect for your year-end (and socially-distanced) house party.

₹9,999



## BUYING GUIDE

**Things to keep in mind while buying a smart speaker**

**BUDGET AND FUNCTIONS:** On the lower end of the price spectrum exist devices that offer the functionality of an AI assistant with basic sound: useful if you're in the market for something simple that'll make your shopping lists and tell you the weather. On the higher end are devices that come with screens (Google Nest Hub could be a karaoke machine) and incredible sound (Sonos and Bose also make devices that offer access to multiple voice assistants) that can replace your home theatre sound bars.

**AI:** While most smart speakers pair with multiple operating systems and devices, for a seamless experience, it's best to stick to the AI system that compliments the majority of your gadgets. Siri in particular is great if you run on iPads and MacBooks; Alexa is exceptionally useful if you shop off Amazon a lot; and Google Assistant is an Android loyalist's perfect wingman.

**PRIVACY:** Usually smart speakers tune in only after you drop the wake word – "Alexa", "Hey Google", "Hey Siri" – but all smart speakers record your commands. Google Nest Audio sports a button to mute the mic. Alexa allows you to erase previous commands. Apple says it doesn't associate requests with a user's personal ID and does not sell information to advertisers.