

Technical Notes — December



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This is the first in a series of “What year is that Vette?” articles. Ever find yourself at a show and have someone else know the year of any given Corvette and wonder, “how the heck do they know?” Well, there are many ways to tell the year of a Corvette. The best is to find the VIN number and decipher it. Next best is to open the hood, trunk, doors, and look into every nook and cranny. You can usually differentiate Vettes by their seat cover design, tach face, the engine compartment stickers, etc. But suppose you feel you might get a “knuckle sandwich” by touching a stranger’s car. How can you tell by just walking around it?

First, a few standards: We will only consider the outside appearance of the car and are talking about strictly stock vehicles. Also, we will stick to the plain vanilla, high volume vehicle for the year, generally the coupe. Unfortunately, many years are extremely difficult to discern by only outside features. Paired years like the 53-54, 56-57, 59-60, 70-72, and many of the C4, C5 and C6 cars changed very little on the outside, or not at all, thus making a walk-around ID very difficult. But, it can be done in most cases.

This article will look at the early C3 Vettes, that is, 1968-1977. This design is often referred to as the Mako Shark. Designed by Larry Shinoda, the 1968 car was introduced to the public not by General Motors, but by Mattel Toys. Its “Hot Wheels” model of the “Custom Corvette” (shown to the right) was actually an authorized model of the ‘68 car, and, to GM’s chagrin, was introduced weeks ahead of the actual vehicle unveiling.



The early cars from 1968-1977 had a notched back roof design. 1978-1982 versions were all fastback coupes. Below is the general layout of the early C3 cars. They started out with metal bumpers on both ends and by the time the 5 mph bumpers laws took hold, ended with urethane compound bumpers front and rear.



1969 Car



1976 Vette

Let’s start with the 1968 and 1969 cars. There were a few exterior differences, as both had metal bumpers and four vertical slots in the front fender. However, one dead giveaway to distinguishing the two was the door opening mechanism. The lock on the 1968 car was an actual round metal button the owner would push in to open the door. The 1969 car only had the round key lock on the door side. Opening the door required pushing down on the chrome flap on the top of the doorframe. The 1969 door opening mechanism design remained until the last C3 in 1982.



1968: Key Lock and Push Button



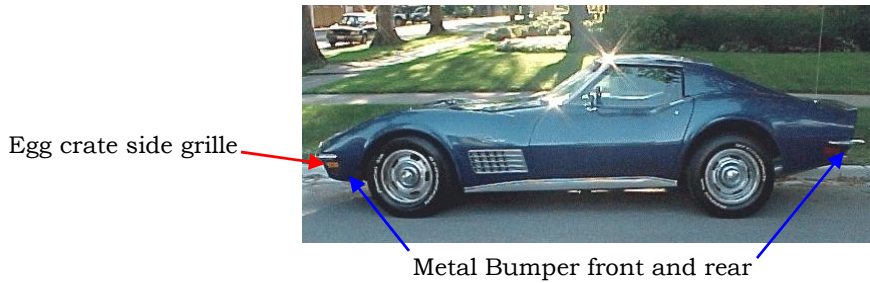
1969: Key Lock only

Side vents on both were four louvers

The next three years, 1970-1972 were extremely close in exterior appearance. A GM strike in 1970 delayed production and only 17,316 cars were produced that year. These 3-years had metal bumpers and an “egg-crate” side fender grille.

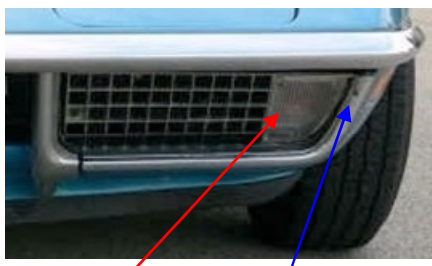
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1972 Corvette



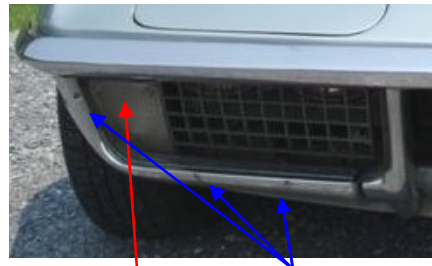
To tell the difference in the cars, you must go to the front and look at the two side radiator grilles and parking lights. Note below that the '70 Vette had only one screw in the side grille frames. Three studs, molded into the back of the grille, slid into the bumper assembly for alignment. In 1971 Chevrolet eliminated the studs and held the grilles into place with a three-screw design. In 1972 the parking lights lenses were changed to amber.

1970 Corvette



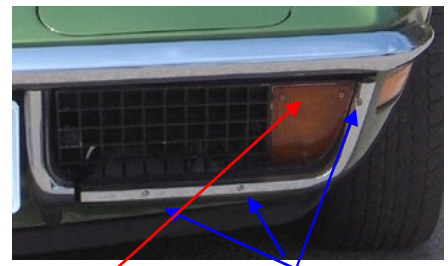
Clear lens and one screw

1971 Corvette



Clear lens and three screws

1972 Corvette



Amber lens and three screws

A single horizontal slot replaced the side fender egg crate grille of the three previous years in 1973. This feature remained on the C3's until the series ended. However, the 1973 Corvette is a one-of-a-kind and is easily recognized. Government regulations started to require 5 mph impact resistant bumpers on cars. Chevrolet began by replacing the front Corvette bumper with a urethane compound. The rear bumper remained metal. So, the '73 car employed a hybrid bumper system.

Front bumper of urethane

Notice the single horizontal side fender vent



Rear bumper of metal

The 1974 car was another one-of-a-kind. That year Chevrolet replaced the rear metal bumper with urethane. However the technology did not exist to make such a large one-piece bumper cover, so the 1974 car had a two-piece (split) rear bumper. This was the only year for this feature.

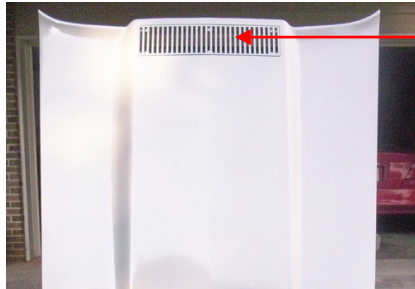
Look at the following picture to see vertical seam formed by the "split" rear bumper on the '74 car.



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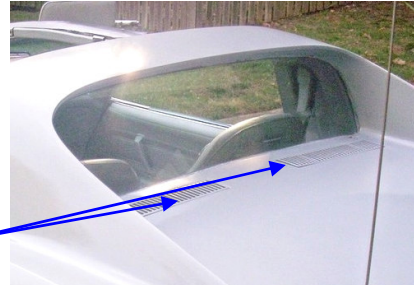
The last three years of the early C3s were fairly easy to distinguish if you look closely at the front hood and rear deck. For years, Chevrolet has had a love affair with all sorts of vents, grilles and other openings on the Corvette, even if some were only decorative.

The 1975 through 1977 cars look similar at a distance. The rear urethane bumper was all one-piece and the side fender still had the horizontal single vent. As in the '74 model, the 1975 Corvette had a slotted vent at the rear of the front hood and two slotted vents on the top deck behind the notch back window. In 1976, Chevrolet removed the rear deck vents. In 1977, both front hood and rear deck vents were eliminated. So, these years are easy to tell apart.



Font Hood Vent

The 1975 Corvette had vent grilles in front and back



Rear Deck

The 1976 Corvette had vent grilles on the hood only. The rear deck vent grilles were removed.



The 1977 Corvette had the hood vent grille removed, so the car had no vent grilles at all.

