Careful cabinet selection can save you thousands on your next kitchen remodel. Shown: Dayton raised-panel full-overlay style in painted maple; cliqstudios.com
Invest in value

Purchasing semi-custom cabinets can save you money without compromising quality or looks

KITCHEN REMODELING is one of the most popular, and desirable, home-improvement projects. It’s also one of the most expensive upgrades a homeowner can undertake, costing on average $54,000 when all the installation costs—flooring, countertops, sinks, lighting, and appliances—are tallied. New cabinets will consume about 30 percent of those renovation dollars, so it makes sense to choose ones that will give you the best value. In this world, that means durable materials, easy-to-maintain finishes, and hardware sturdy enough to withstand daily use, all for a reasonable price.

Cabinets come in three basic types—stock, custom, and semi-custom—each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Stock units have the best pricing, as low as $120 per box, and can be picked up at a home center or delivered in about a week. But the options, styles, and sizes are limited and the quality…well, you tend to get what you pay for: a vinyl or laminate veneer over particleboard or MDF boxes and doors. Custom cabinets, by contrast, are built to order, sometimes with top-flight materials, and fit exactly in the space you have. They generally start at $750 per box and have a lead time of up to four-months.

The happy medium between these extremes is semi-custom: cabinets built to order out of solid wood and plywood, for delivery in about four weeks. Like stock, dimensions are in 3-inch increments, but they offer more customizing options and come in at a fraction of the price of custom, from $175 per box and up.

On these pages, you’ll see plenty of handsome, affordable semi-custom cabinetry as we explain the details to look for when you shop, how to start the design process, and the best installation techniques. Follow these guidelines and your cabinets will provide many years of useful service in your new kitchen.
Vitals

**HOW MUCH DO THEY COST?**
The price of semi-custom cabinets varies depending on the quality of the materials used to build and finish them. Expect to pay between $175 and $650 per box. (That’s still a lot less than custom cabinetry, which ranges from $750 to $2,000 per box.) Don’t overlook the chance to save money with free shipping, offered by some manufacturers.

**WHERE TO BUY THEM?**
Look online for reputable retailers, such as CliqStudios.com.

**DIY OR HIRE A PRO?**
Installing semi-custom cabinets won’t be a challenge for a skilled DIYer and a helper. But if speed is of the essence, consider hiring a kitchen remodeling contractor. He or she can put in your cabinets quickly and coordinate the schedules of the other tradespeople involved, including the plumber, electrician, countertop fabricator, flooring installer, and painter.

**HOW LONG DO THEY LAST?**
Well-made cabinets that are installed properly and cared for consistently should last as long as your house. Semi-custom-cabinet makers typically offer lifetime limited warranties on their products.

**ARE THEY CARB2 COMPLIANT?**
You don’t want your new cabinets off-gassing copious amounts of formaldehyde, a serious lung irritant and carcinogen. Emissions are more of a problem with cabinets built of MDF and particleboard than with plywood, but Carb2 compliance means the levels remain at or below a minimum standard.

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**What to look for in a cabinet company**

1 > **Lifetime limited warranty** It means the company stands behind the quality of its products. Read the fine print.

2 > **Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association (KCMA) certification** Ensures that all cabinets are built to current industry standards.

3 > **Responsive customer service** Before you hand over your money, check with the Better Business Bureau and read online reviews to see how other customers were treated.

4 > **Replacements** If a cabinet is damaged in transit, make sure there’s no charge for shipping its replacement.

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**BASE CABINET ANATOMY**
Knowing your cabinet’s parts smooths communication

- **TOEKICK** Closes gap at cabinet base and provides recess for feet.
- **CABINET BOX** Supports the doors, drawers, countertop, and shelves.
- **FACE FRAME** Stiffens box and provides solid mount for hinges. (Not used on frameless cabinets.)
- **HINGE** Can be visible or concealed (shown).
- **DOOR** Four types: flat panel (shown), raised panel, slab, and glass front.
- **DRAWER** Moves on metal glides mounted underneath.
- **BRACE** Holds base cabinet box square.
Hallmarks of cabinet quality
Look for these features when comparing products

1 > Plywood cabinet boxes. Plywood holds screws more securely and resists moisture better than less expensive particleboard or MDF. Look for a thickness on the sides and bottom of at least ½ inch, and ¾ inch on the back. Plywood is also the best material for drawer bottoms and, inch for inch, makes the most sag-resistant shelves.

2 > Solid-wood doors and drawer boxes. Wood allows the use of strong, glued joinery, like the dovetails in this drawer box. Avoid drawers held together with glued-and-stapled joints.

3 > Metal hardware. For hinges, drawer slides, and shelf supports, metal offers the greatest strength and longevity. The best slides—shown in Photo 4—extend fully, mount underneath the drawer, and close softly.

4 > Face frame. Cabinets with ¾-inch-thick, solid-wood frames made with glued, double-doweled joints are much stronger and more durable than frameless cabinets, which have no such structure on their fronts.

FINISH CHOICES
Four ways to enhance and protect cabinets, inside and out

1 > PAINT
This finish puts color in your kitchen as it highlights the profiles of doors and drawers. Easy to clean, especially when topped with a two-part catalyzed clear coat.

2 > STAIN
Choose this finish when you want to see wood’s natural beauty. Look for stains with a catalyzed clear coat, which is just as tough and cleanable as clear-coated paint.

3 > LAMINATE
Highly resistant to dirt, stains, and scratches, it’s a practical, low-maintenance surface for cabinet interiors. On doors and cabinet faces, it shows a dark edge at corners and is prone to chip.

4 > THERMOFOIL
A vinyl sheet melted over an MDF panel. Looks like paint, but can’t be repaired, refinished, or refaced if worn or damaged.
Choose your style
The look that cabinets create carries beyond the kitchen into the entire house

**TRADITIONAL**
These cabinets celebrate woodworking details, such as raised-panel doors surrounded by intricately detailed frames.

**SHAKER**
Sometimes called Craftsman style, its simple, understated look has a modern sensibility that also goes well with traditional decor.

**MODERN**
Sleek, shiny unadorned surfaces have a cool, urban feel. This style typically uses frameless cabinetry and slab doors (see below).

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**DOOR STYLES**
And nothing does more to define a cabinet’s look than its doors and drawers

1. **FLAT PANEL**
A square-edged frame surrounding a flat, unadorned panel is the hallmark of traditional Shaker- and Craftsman-style cabinets. Look for a solid-wood frame and a plywood panel.

2. **RAISED PANEL**
It also has a frame surrounding a panel, but in this case both elements are adorned with profiles that catch the light and the eye. The result: a rich, elegant look reminiscent of colonial wall paneling. Look for solid-wood construction.

3. **SLAB**
This type of door gives cabinets a contemporary look. Typically mounted full overlay on frameless modern cabinets. With no crevices to hide dirt, cleaning is a breeze. Be sure to inquire about what the door is made of and the type of finish used.

4. **GLASS FRONT**
On upper cabinets, a pane of glass allows you to see at a glance what’s in a cabinet while displaying objects to maximum advantage. Available either as open frame or with dividers. In some doors, the glass is mounted permanently to the frame. In others, the glass can be removed for cleaning. If glass is used on base-cabinet doors, it must be tempered.
Storage ideas
Make the most of your available space by incorporating these useful accessories

SUPER SUSAN
This all-wood version of a lazy Susan has no center pole, so it’s a snap to access pans in corner cabinets. Starting at $589

PULL-OUT RACK
These maple shelves keep your spices and canned goods out of sight but within easy reach. Starting at $465

VERTICAL STORAGE SLOTS
They’re the perfect place to park your cookie sheets, pot lids, and cutting boards. Starting at $215

More options
There are many ways to make use of cabinets or customize them

1 > Islands Freestanding base cabinets add counter and storage space as they provide a gathering spot in the kitchen. Make sure to leave enough room on all sides—42 inches is ideal—for people to circulate. Shown: Austin flat-panel inset style with a Carbon paint.

2 > Pantries These floor-to-ceiling cabinets are all about storage for foodstuffs, crockery, and cleaning supplies. Adding roll-out trays makes access even more convenient. A pantry can be sized to match the depth of a base cabinet or of an upper. Shown: Tall Pantry, 96 inches tall by 24 inches deep.

3 > Crown molding This classic accent dresses up the tops of traditional and Shaker-style upper cabinets and gives them a built-in look. Shown: Traditional Crown Molding with Cherry Russet stain.
MAKE A PLAN

A detailed layout allows you to figure out the best arrangement for the available space and serves as the basis for placing your order.

STEP 1: MAKE A SKETCH If you plan to stay within your kitchen’s existing footprint, draw a plan (overhead) view of the perimeter walls on a piece of graph paper. Include the location of doorways and windows. Next, using a tape measure, get the actual width and height (to within \( \frac{1}{8} \) inch) of all the elements on your sketch. Record these measurements on the sketch, as well as which way the doors swing. Also, sketch each wall in an elevation (front) view and record the heights of windows and doors, the dimensions of any moldings, and the locations of pipes and receptacles. If you’d rather not do this yourself, some cabinet companies will take the measurements for you—for a fee.

STEP 2: GET A DESIGN Armed with these sketches, and any clippings of ideas from magazines or the Internet, make an appointment with a kitchen designer, either in a store that sells the cabinets you like or online. The designer can develop, free of charge, a detailed final plan and elevation showing where each cabinet, appliance, and fixture will go, along with a price and an estimated delivery time. These days, most designers can also provide a 3-D perspective rendering to help you see more clearly exactly what your kitchen will look like when finished.

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Cabinet rules of thumb

Use these guidelines to help your planning:

1. Upper cabinet depth: 12 inches
2. Countertop height: 36 inches
3. Lower cabinet depth: 24 inches
4. Countertop to upper cabinets: 18 inches
5. Countertop overhang: \( \frac{3}{4} \) to 1 inch
6. Clearance in front: 42 inches minimum
7. Kickspace: 4 inches high, 3 inches deep

**TIP** For maximum cooking efficiency, the three legs of the work triangle between fridge, sink, and range should add up to between 12 and 26 feet.
Prep the kitchen
What to do before the new cabinets arrive

OUT WITH THE OLD Remove all the appliances, old cabinets, and any trim or molding that will interfere with the installation of the new cabinets. If new flooring is going in, rip out the old floor now.

IN WITH THE NEW With the kitchen more or less bare, take the opportunity to add or upgrade receptacles, install wiring for new fixtures, and relocate plumbing pipes. If your kitchen will be getting a new floor, install it now.

MARK THE WALLS Using your final elevation plan and a level, draw out in full scale exactly where each cabinet, appliance, and countertop will be placed. Label each of the drawn-out spaces. Find and mark the locations of the studs.

INSTALLATION BASICS
The process will go faster, and your cabinets will look better and hold up longer, when you follow these steps

1 > FIND THE FLOOR’S HIGH SPOT
Measure down to the floor from a level line on the wall. Make a mark at the spot where the measurement is shortest. That’s where the first base cabinet will be installed.

2 > INSTALL UPPER CABINETS FIRST
That way you have a convenient place to stand or put a stepladder as you work without the base cabinets getting in the way. Use at least four screws per cabinet, with finish washers under their heads, and drive them into the studs.

3 > DRILL BEFORE SCREWING
Making a pilot hole for each screw helps them go in easier and prevents the wood from splitting.

4 > Scribe, Don’t Caulk
Don’t use caulk to hide uneven gaps where the cabinets meet the wall. Instead, scribe a filler piece to fit exactly. Caulk will fail eventually; a scribed piece will not.

TIP Before installing upper cabinets, fasten a level cleat to the wall where you want their bottom edges to land. The cleat will support the cabinets’ back edges as you mount them to the wall. Once the cabinets are hung, simply unscrew the cleat and remove it.

Cabinet care
Busy kitchens are subject to spills, splashes, airborne grease, and dirty fingers. Here are some tips to keep your cabinets looking good

CLEAN IMMEDIATELY
The longer a spill sits, the harder it will be to remove the residue. A damp cloth is usually sufficient to take care of fresh dirt.

USE A SAFE CLEANER
If mild dish soap and warm water aren’t effective, use a cleaner like Murphy Oil Soap, which has no waxes, solvents, or silicones that can harm cabinet finishes.

STAY AWAY FROM DISH TOWELS
They’re more likely to spread smears than to remove them. Also avoid paper towels, which are slightly abrasive and can dull a finish. Use a soft microfiber cloth instead.

TAKE CARE WITH GLASS
Many glass cleaners contain solvents that can dissolve finishes. Remove panes, if possible, or spray the cleaner on a cloth, not on the glass itself.

WATCH A PRO
See how TOH general contractor Tom Silva installs kitchen cabinets at thisoldhouse.com/cabinet-install
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