

PREMIUM CABINETS AT MIDLEVEL PRICES

Our cabinets come with solid wood drawer boxes, under mount drawer glides, plywood shelves and boxes and solid wood face frames and door frames. (All but one style comes with full extension drawer glides, soft close drawers and soft close doors.)

Details that count

Style might be what grabs your eye at the store, but it's the inner details that help well-made cabinets look good and last year after year. Most manufacturers offer a similar range of door styles, whether they're selling ready-made, semicustom, or made-to-order custom cabinets. Here are the features to look for—and some less robust details to avoid:

■ Drawer hardware

Full-extension guides are better than integrated rails or undermounted double-roller designs. Premium models often have a "soft close" feature that stops drawers from slamming shut.

■ Shelves

Look for $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood or medium-density fiberboard (MDF). Lesser quality $\frac{5}{8}$ - and $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch particleboard shelves are more likely to sag.

■ Cabinet box

Best is $\frac{1}{2}$ - to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch, furniture-grade plywood. MDF is OK, but try to avoid $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch coated particleboard.



■ Drawers

The best have solid-wood sides, dovetail joinery, and a plywood bottom that fits grooves on all sides. Avoid stapled particleboard.

■ Doors

A solid-wood frame surrounding a solid-wood or plywood panel is preferable to veneered particleboard or an MDF panel. Avoid laminate or thermofoil over particleboard. We didn't find any differences among types of door hinges in our extensive cabinet tests.

■ Mounting strips

Look for $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch hardwood or metal with bolt holes. MDF, particleboard, or wood that's thinner than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch can be a concern for heavily loaded wall cabinets. Ask your installer to be sure to use the stronger stuff.



Particleboard



Plywood



Get the installation right

A good, safe installation will protect your investment. It can prevent boxes from warping, ensure that doors sit flush, and even keep wall cabinets from falling. When the installer comes to make an estimate, have a plan handy. That way, he can account for the heights and types of new wall cabinets, soffits, locations of electrical outlets and plumbing, and other variables that might affect installation.

Make sure the estimate includes removing and disposing of your existing cabinets and any demolition. Before hiring an installer, talk to

suppliers and, if possible, at least three former customers to find out how the work has held up. Ask for copies of the installer's insurance certificates as well.

Certification in kitchen and bath remodeling from the National Association of the Remodeling Industry is usually a plus; it indicates a high level of professionalism.

For safety's sake, shore up the wall mountings. And be certain the cabinet installer adequately reinforces the mounting strips if they're made of thin particleboard.

BOTTOM LEFT: MICHAEL SMITH

On the market

Even basic stock cabinets offer a growing number of options, and midlevel and premium semicustom lines include dozens of styles and storage features. Choices also go far beyond traditional oak finishes and include tight-grained maple and cherry, as well as stained and painted finishes.

BASIC

Best for those who don't need the size and storage options offered by custom and other high-end cabinets. Often called stock, these off-the-shelf units include ready-to-assemble cabinets packed in flat containers. **But** you get fewer style and trim options, sizes, and features overall. Cabinet boxes are often thin-veneered particleboard rather than more durable solid plywood. Many models use frameless construction, with the doors and door fronts hiding the frame.

Price About \$250 to \$350 for a typical 21-inch-wide base and 30-inch-tall wall-cabinet duo.



MIDLEVEL

Best for most kitchens. Includes lower-priced semicustom models that offer many made-to-order choices in size, door style, materials, finish, trim, and accessories. Many use face-frame construction, where part of the frame shows between doors and drawers.

But features and quality for this group varied the most in our tests. Cabinet boxes still tend to be veneered particleboard, despite the higher prices.

Price About \$400 and more for a typical 21-inch-wide base and 30-inch-tall wall-cabinet duo.

PREMIUM

Best for those who want the most style and storage options short of made-to-order custom cabinets. Includes higher-priced semicustom models with plywood boxes and other premium materials and hardware. Widths can come in finer, 1/4-inch increments rather than the typical 3 inches.

But some can cost almost as much as made-to-order cabinets without offering as many storage and style options.

Price About \$600 to \$1,000-plus for a 21-inch-wide base and 30-inch-tall wall-cabinet duo.

