

Kitchen cabinets: "Custom" goes mainstream

How can you tell a premium kitchen cabinet from a basic one? In the past, if you saw dovetail joints inside the drawers, you knew you had a high-end model. But that distinction has blurred as manufacturers offer premium features at lower price points.

All but 4 of the 14 cabinets we tested include these stronger joints. More style choices are also moving basic "stock" cabinets closer to the midlevel "semicustom" cabinets that span the gap between basic and made-to-order "custom" units. What's more, you'll find more semicustom lines that offer range-hood covers, elaborate crown moldings, and other custom options.

That's welcome news, considering that cabinets often eat up roughly half of a remodeling budget, according to the National Kitchen and Bath Association, a group that trains and certifies kitchen designers. But you can also pay a higher price for lower-quality cabinets.

We compared a cross section of matched base and wall cabinets. We chose tight-grained maple, which, with cherry, is gaining on oak. Most models are sold at Home Depot and Lowe's, which account for about half of all residential sales. We evaluated premium lines sold at Expo Design Center, Home Depot's high-end division, along with midlevel models from local stores. Here are the details:

More storage options. You'll find more low-priced basic cabinets available with pullout shelves and full-extension drawers. Both features eliminate bending and hunting. Opt for a premium cabinet, and you can get full-extension drawers with a "soft-close" feature that stops them from slamming shut.

Better basic models. You'd think that ready-to-assemble basic cabinets would be less durable than pricier units. But two we tested from Mills Pride and Ikea withstood our wear tests better than some more expensive brands.

The catch: These offer fewer choices in door designs, box sizes, accessories, and trim. And you must allow for an hour or more of assembly time for each set of base and wall cabinets.

How to Choose

Once you've chosen a look you like, see [Types](#) for an overview of what you'll get at typical price points. Then



PREMIUM CABINETS FOR LESS
Diamond, shown, is among the cabinet brands that scored nearly as well as the best we tested, yet costs far less.

Photo courtesy of Diamond Cabinetry,
Judith Watts

keep these tips in mind as you shop:

Do the choosing yourself. Readers who chose cabinets based solely on the advice of contractors, designers, or architects were twice as likely to report a problem as those more involved.

Put your money where it counts. You can probably get away with a box made of particleboard rather than plywood. But well-built drawers and guides are critical, since they get the most use. Many brands allow you to upgrade the drawer guides.

Focus on convenience. Work-savers include a lazy Susan, a pull-down soap and sponge holder, and deep pot drawers.

Skip the nonessentials. For example, glazing, while nice, typically adds 10 to 20 percent to the cost.

Factor in the work. Installation can easily cost more than 50 percent of the cabinet cost. Set your budget accordingly.

Doing it right: planning for a safe installation

Of the nearly 2,000 readers we surveyed who recently remodeled a kitchen, more than half spent at least \$5,000 on cabinets. A good job protects that investment by preventing boxes that can warp, doors that won't close or sit flush, and wall cabinets that can fall.

Check references. Talk to suppliers and former customers to confirm proper business practices. Ask for copies of insurance certificates as well.

Check credentials. Having certification in kitchen and bath remodeling from the National Association of the Remodeling Industry is a plus. It requires five years in the industry and passing a full-day exam.

Have the plan handy. That way, when the installer comes for the estimate, he can account for the heights and types of new wall cabinets, soffits, locations of electrical outlets and plumbing, and other variables.

Factor in your old cabinets. The installation estimate should include demolition and removal of your existing cabinets.

Shore up the wall mountings. Have your installer reinforce wall-cabinet mounting strips if they're made of thin particleboard.

CR Quick Recommendations

We tested 14 kitchen-cabinet sets from six major manufacturers. MasterBrand and Masco make more than half of all cabinets, from basic brands like Kitchen Classics and Mills Pride to premium brands like Diamond and Omega. For each, we chose 21-inch-wide base cabinets--a common stock size--with one drawer and one pullout shelf, and 21-inch-wide, 30-inch-tall wall cabinets with fixed shelves.

Our major findings:

Price doesn't guarantee performance.

Salespeople will tell you that you get what you pay for, and to a degree, that panned out. Premium cabinets withstood heat, water, moisture, and other abuse best overall. Indeed, readers we surveyed who bought the least-expensive cabinets were likelier to have problems. We found strong lower-priced performers, however.

The ready-to-assemble Ikea (4) outperformed much more expensive units, despite its low price. High-quality drawer hardware and doors and a robust mounting strip helped. You'll also find reasonably priced, preassembled cabinets such as the Diamond (3), Thomasville (5), and Shenandoah (6), that offer more options. But any judged at least very good should weather most wear and tear.

Most offer upgrades. Like cars, cabinets often offer upgrades à la carte or as part of a package. Upgrades often include better drawer guides and shelves and a box made of plywood, not particleboard. The Omega (1) includes those upgrades in its high price. The basic Ikea (4), Mills Pride (9), and Kitchen Classics (11, 14) don't offer these upgrades.


Price quotes may vary. Most stores provide the total cabinet cost within your kitchen design. We've provided prices for individual sets of base and wall cabinets strictly for comparison. Home centers can also give you costs per linear foot or for a typical kitchen configuration--10 x 10 feet, say--to help you shop. Consider such figures rough estimates, since they don't account for upgrades and accessories. Price is likely to vary by region.

Ratings *Cabinets*







CR Quick Recommendations

See a [summary of test findings](#)--the choices that merit first consideration.

Cabinets

Click  for more information.
In performance order.

 Excellent
  Very good
  Good
  Fair
  Poor

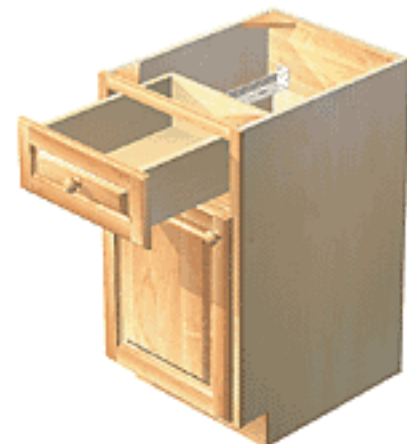
Key number	Brand & line	Retailer	Type	Price	Overall score	Test results				
						Drawers	Pullouts	Cabinet box	Shelves	Mounting strip
1	Omega	Expo	Premium	\$1,055						
2	Fieldstone 1/2-inch	Expo	Premium	1,020						
3	Diamond Platinum	Lowe's	Premium	630						
4	Ikea  	Ikea	Basic	290			NA			
5	Thomasville	Home Depot	Midlevel	500						
6	Shenandoah	Lowe's	Midlevel	435						
7	KraftMaid	Lowe's, Home Depot, Expo	Midlevel	510						
8	Wellborn Premier	Local retailers	Midlevel	880						
9	Mills Pride  	Home Depot	Basic	260						
10	American Woodmark Designer Series	Lowe's, Home Depot	Basic	350						
11	Kitchen Classics Select 	Lowe's	Basic	265			NA			
12	Premier 	Home Depot	Basic	320						
13	Merillat Deluxe	Local retailers	Midlevel	475						
14	Kitchen Classics	Lowe's	Basic	350			NA			

NA means not available.  Ready to assemble.  Frameless construction.

Features that count

Whatever you're paying for cabinets, look for premium details

Take away the beveled doors and fancy hardware, and even the highest-priced premium cabinets you'll see at stores are essentially wooden boxes. That makes well-built drawers and other details the most crucial parts of any kitchen cabinet. Here are the seven most important features to look for and which tested cabinets have them, by key number:



Illustrations by Trevor Johnston

1. Drawer-box construction

Premium: Solid wood sides, secure dovetail joinery (shown), and a plywood bottom that fits grooves on four sides, as on most tested brands. **OK:** Metal sides, as on the Ikea ([4](#)), Mills Pride ([9](#)), and Kitchen Classics ([11](#)); staples at the drawer bottom backs, as on the Premier ([12](#)). **Of lesser quality:** Stapled particleboard, which is the least sturdy, as on the Kitchen Classics ([14](#)).

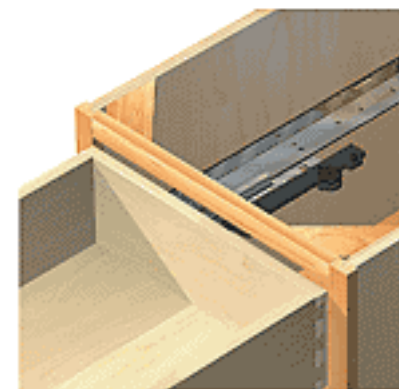


2. Pullout-drawer construction

Premium: Same as for drawers, as on the Omega ([1](#)), Fieldstone ([2](#)), Diamond ([3](#)), Thomasville ([5](#)), and Shenandoah ([6](#)). **OK:** Stapled solid wood with a groove, as on the KraftMaid ([7](#)); full metal sides, as on the Mills Pride ([9](#)). **Of lesser quality:** Doweled or stapled particleboard sides or stapled bottoms, as on the Wellborn ([8](#)), American Woodmark ([10](#)), Premier ([12](#)), and Merillat ([13](#)).

3. Drawer and pullout hardware

Premium: Full-extension guides (shown), as on the Omega ([1](#)), Fieldstone ([2](#)), Diamond ([3](#)), Ikea ([4](#)), and Shenandoah ([6](#)) for drawers, the Omega ([1](#)) for pullouts. **OK:** Side rails integrated into a metal box or an undermount double-roller design for drawers, as on most tested brands; or integrated metal side rails for pullouts, as on the Mills Pride ([9](#)). **Of lesser quality:** Side rails of enamel-coated metal for drawers or pullouts, which don't withstand impacts as well, as on the Kitchen Classics ([14](#)) drawers and on most pullouts.

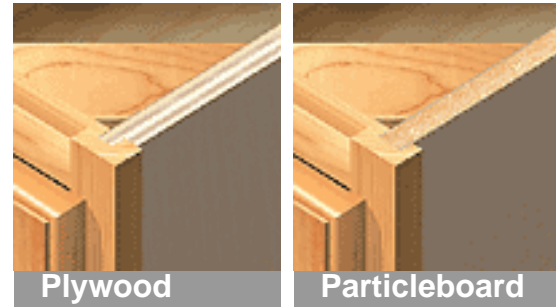


4. Shelves

Premium: Medium-density fiberboard or 3/4-inch plywood, as on the Omega (1) and Diamond (3). **OK:** 3/4-inch particleboard, as on most. **Of lesser quality:** 5/8- and 1/2-inch particleboard, which may sag, as on the Kitchen Classics (11, 14).

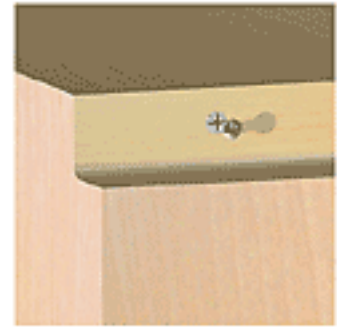
5. Cabinet box

Premium: 1/2- to 3/4-inch furniture-grade plywood, as on the Omega (1) and Fieldstone (2). **OK:** 3/8-inch unfinished plywood or 1/2-inch or thicker coated particleboard, as on most. **Of lesser quality:** 3/8-inch coated particleboard, as on the Merillat (13) and Kitchen Classics (14), which may not hold shelf pins and drawer hardware as well.



6. Mounting strip

Premium: 3/4-inch hardwood (shown at right) or metal with bolt holes, as on the Omega (1) and Ikea (4) wall units. **OK:** 1/2-inch or thicker particleboard, solid pine, plywood, or medium-density fiberboard, as on most units. **Of lesser quality:** Thinner materials, as on the Thomasville (5), Merillat (13), and Kitchen Classics (14), a concern for heavily loaded wall cabinets.



7. Doors

Premium: Solid-wood frame, surrounding a solid-wood or plywood panel, as on most tested brands. **OK:** Veneered particleboard or medium-density fiberboard panel, as on the Mills Pride (9), American Woodmark (10), Kitchen Classics (11, 14), and Premier (12). **Of lesser quality:** Laminate or thermofoil over particleboard, found on none of those tested.

Types: Match the style and features you want to your budget

Even basic stock cabinets offer a growing number of options, while midlevel and premium semicustom lines include dozens of styles and storage features. Here's what you'll typically get in the three broad price segments you'll find at stores:

BASIC	MIDlevel	premium
<p>Best for those who are less picky about style options or don't need perfect fits. Often called stock, these off-the-shelf units include inexpensive, ready-to-assemble units.</p> <p>But you still get fewer style and trim options, sizes, and features overall. Boxes are often thin veneered particleboard, rather than plywood. Many models use frameless construction, where the doors hide the frame.</p> <p>Price range \$250 to \$350 for a typical 21-inch-wide base and 30-inch-tall wall duo.</p>	<p>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 solid-wood frame shows between doors and drawers.</p> <p>But their features and quality varied most in our tests. Boxes still tend to be thin or thicker veneered particleboard, rather than higher-quality plywood.</p> <p>Price range \$400 to \$900 for a typical 21-inch-wide base and 30-inch-tall wall duo.</p>	<p>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 1/4-inch increments, rather than the typical 3 inches.</p> <p>But prices for premium cabinets, while lower than for made-to-order custom units, tend to be highest for lines that offer the most features and quality.</p> <p>Price range \$600 to \$1,000-plus for a 21-inch-wide base and 30-inch-tall wall duo.</p>