

## Customizing Stock Cabinets

by Joan Eisenberg



Manufacturers of stock cabinets have come a long way in the past few years. While stock cabinets are still limited in size, they are available in a new range of shapes and styles. A creative remodeler, along with a skilled finish carpenter, can successfully complete even the most sophisticated projects using stock parts. The key to keeping costs down while creating a custom look is to familiarize yourself with the many accessories and options cabinet manufacturers offer. A good way to do this is by reading the manufacturers' brochures and talking to the local dealers.

Most companies offer decorative moldings, end panels, shelving, valances, and glass doors, all designed to complement various cabinet lines. Spice drawer inserts, integral cutting boards and knife trays, cutlery partitions, and cook-book holders, as well as lazy susans and recycling centers, will make the kitchen unique and easier to work in. The chief advantage in buying these parts from the manufacturer is convenience: The accessories arrive prefinished, prestained, and made to fit.

### Taking Stock

When it comes to manufactured cabinets, there are three categories: stock, semi-custom, and custom. Stock cabinets come in specific sizes and colors and do not deviate in height, width, or depth, nor are they available in special sizes.

Semi-custom cabinets are built to standard sizes. However, manu-

facturers will, for a premium, change height, width, and depth specifications.

Custom manufacturers specialize in made-to-order cabinets, those that are built to the client's specs. They are still made on an assembly line using standard materials, but there is a wide variation in shapes and sizes. There is also a wide variation in quality. Custom cabinetry is not necessarily finely crafted. In short, there are poor, good, very good, and excellent manufacturers in each of these three categories.

### America Catches Up

Most people believe American manufactured cabinetry is inferior to European cabinets. Conversely, most people also believe European cabinets, because they are expensive, are custom. Neither assumption is correct. Most European and American companies manufacture their cabinets using a modular system, although European sizes are metric. The beauty of the European system is that it offers many more standard sizes. European makers also place more emphasis on design. Finally, manufacturers abroad offer numerous customizing features and accessories.

Many American companies offer just as many accessories as the Europeans. For example, Merillat Industries (2075 W. Beecher Rd., Adrian, MI 49221; 517/263-8282) sells more than 100 different options, called *Customizers*, including window moldings, chair rail, and countertop bullnose trim, all stained, painted, or laminated

to match cabinetry (see photos). Most manufacturers also offer hardware options that make cabinets and drawers easier to use, such as roll-out trays, pull-out wire racks, and lazy susans.

When I want to play it safe, I create a uniform look by using matching accessories throughout. But if a customer wants something more adventuresome, I treat the various accessories as a palette, mixing and matching materials and shapes. For instance, some companies offer metal crown moldings that give a high-tech look when mixed with white Eurostyle cabinetry. I use 24-inch-deep end panels at either side of the refrigerator and a valance along the bottom of the cabinet above the refrigerator to make the appliance look built in.

Here are some other design techniques:

- Use a valance along the bottom of wall cabinetry to provide a place for under-cabinet lighting, including fluorescent strips or halogen spots.
- Run a line of customized shelving midway between the countertop and the wall cabinets.
- Substitute a bread drawer for two small drawers. These are deeper, usually 9 to 12 inches, and feature plastic or wooden lids and metal liners.
- Instead of a false drawer in front of the kitchen sink, use a tilt-down drawer front with attached storage bins for bottle scrubbers, sponges, soaps, and rubber gloves.
- Add a glass-front door or two to break up a solid bank of wall cabinets. Some companies offer these in stained or beveled glass as well.
- For a furniture finish, use a decorative end panel that matches the doors, instead of a flat panel, at the end of a run.

Use some creativity in arranging cabinets. For instance, I sometimes create a bookcase or plant shelves in a run of wall cabinets by inserting a cabinet 6 to 12 inches shorter than the others and leaving the front of the cabinet open. Or I might make a baking center by using a matching bathroom vanity (with matching doors) in a base run. Vanities are generally 28 to 30 inches tall, just the right height for kneading and rolling bread dough. If I want a shallower base cabinet, then I'll use a wall cabinet and add a base with a kick space. ■

Joan Eisenberg, CKD, CBD, is a home economist and president of JME Consulting, a kitchen and bath design firm in Baltimore, Md.



Many cabinet manufacturers offer matching accessories that give stock or semi-custom cabinets a custom look. The glass doors, pull-out waste baskets, and cutting board shown here are from Merillat's Customizers line.

