

KITCHENS



Rethinking the Pantry

Practical upgrades include customized shelving and cabinets, work surfaces, and matching finishes

BY GARY STRIEGLER

These days, most of the kitchens that we build feature an open floor plan, with few, if any, walls separating the kitchen from the home's living space. Clients say that everyone ends up in the kitchen anyway, so why not make it a part of the living area? There's logic to this argument, but on the other hand, the absence of walls means that the kitchen will have fewer upper cabinets for storage, and any clutter in the kitchen that can't be hidden behind a door will always be in plain view.

The practical solution for most of my clients is an upgraded pantry. Traditionally, pantries have been small back rooms with utilitarian shelves for bulk storage of food and maybe a place to store a mop and a broom. But now, I like to think of the pantry as an extension of the kitchen, with work surfaces and better storage options, along with cabinetry and finishes to match. It's an easy upgrade to sell, even for homes without an open floor plan; 85% of home buyers consider a kitchen pantry "essential" or "desirable," the National Association of Home Builders reports.

Photos by Gary Striegler



When a client wants pantry cabinetry with doors and drawers, the author assembles poplar face frames with pocket screws **(1)**. Utilitarian drawer boxes are built with plywood and glued and nailed together **(2)**. Shelving and shelf supports are typically cut from MDF; to make the shelving adjustable, the author uses a Kreg shelf pin jig to drill holes in the supports for removable pins **(3)**. After the pantry shelves have been installed, the painting crew sprays them with primer and a finish coat **(4)**.

SHELVING AND CABINETS

Every pantry I build has at least one section of 24-inch-deep shelves that are 36 inches tall with a fixed countertop. I tell clients that this countertop is a great place to sit bags of groceries while stocking the shelves or to gather together the ingredients for a recipe or a meal. A popular upgrade is to add a stone top to match the countertops in the kitchen.

Food and supply storage is still the primary function of a pantry, with versatile storage a must. We build in adjustable full-height shelving in depths ranging from as narrow as 4 inches for single

cans to 16 inches deep for bulky items like laundry detergent. We try to optimize the shelving layout to eliminate blind corners (where access to shelves on one wall is blocked by shelving on an adjacent wall) and maximize floor space.

Our pantry shelves and cabinets are always painted, so we typically build the shelving using MDF. Since we use MDF extensively for interior trim elsewhere in the house, we are able to use up off-cuts and rippings to make shelving and supports and reduce waste. Where there isn't already a factory bullnose profile on our 3/4-inch-thick shelving stock, we apply it ourselves with a couple of passes of



Shallow shelves provide good visibility for cans and bottles (5), while dishes, cookware, and other bulk items require deeper shelves (6). To prevent sagging, limit shelf width to less than 30 inches (7). A work surface is a key feature in a pantry (8).



Convenience hardware can be fitted to pantry cabinetry to minimize clutter; examples include this mixer lift (9) and pull-out baskets (10). Be sure that the pantry is fitted with plenty of counter-height receptacles for small appliances such as toaster ovens and microwaves (11). Serious chefs will appreciate having a second oven—and storage for frequently used baking supplies—close at hand (12).

a router fitted with a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch quarter-round bearing bit.

Once shelving gets to be longer than 30 inches, we either face the shelves with poplar nosings glued and pinned to the shelving or attach a cleat under the back edge of the shelf. Either method works to help prevent sagging, but cleats take less labor.

Oftentimes, clients want us to trim the shelf supports with face frames—which we also build out of poplar—to match the look

of their kitchen cabinetry. For some clients, the pantry shelving is elevated to cabinetry with doors, drawers, and pull-out shelves, especially for base units. When we make these upgrades, though, we generally use more-utilitarian construction details than for our regular kitchen cabinetry. For example, most of our kitchens have undermount soft-close hardware and dovetail drawers; in a pantry, we nail the drawers together like plywood boxes and install them



Shallow shelving for canned goods won't interfere with an in-swinging entry door into the pantry (13). When space is tight, consider a pocket door (14) or a sliding door fitted with barn-door-style hardware (15). A door fitted with decorative glass offers a stylish touch and a degree of illumination, while blocking views of pantry clutter when the door is closed (16).

using side-mount full-extension slides.

We don't recommend doors on pantry cabinetry unless they are within the line of sight of the entry door into the pantry; otherwise, they get in the way. If we do install cabinet doors, we match those that we build for the kitchen but fit them with standard rather than more-expensive soft-close hinges.

APPLIANCES, ACCESSORIES, AND ACCESS

Many of our clients move small appliances like coffee makers or wine coolers into the pantry to get them out of sight. One client added a sink, simply to be able to fill their coffee pot and rinse it out afterward. With limited upper cabinet space in the main kitchen, sometimes clients decide to move their microwave into the pantry too. Another option is to simply add a second microwave in the pantry; once we even added a second oven there.

Convenience hardware such as pull-out trash bin slides and appliance lifts are popular base-cabinet upgrades for our clients. We typically use Rev-a-Shelf hardware (rev-a-shelf.com), because the quality is good and it's easy to point clients to the company's website for design ideas.

We also pay extra attention to the entry door into the pantry. Some clients opt for a pocket door so that no part of the pantry is blocked by an inswinging door. Transoms (when there are tall ceilings) and custom glass in doors are also popular; we've custom-built several pantry doors fitted with decorative glass.

Lighting. In our jurisdiction, pantries are considered closet space and fall under those code requirements for receptacles, light fixtures, and heating and cooling. Still, we make it a point to provide illumination (most pantries don't have windows) and electrical outlets at countertop level. It's also a good idea to make sure there is adequate heating, cooling, and ventilation by adding a supply duct (a return typically isn't needed).

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