

What Does Custom Cabinetry Really Mean?

Can I share one of my pet peeves? I often hear people refer to locally built cabinets as “custom” and they are equating that with high quality. In reality, as the word custom is defined as “made specially for individual customers; dealing in things so made, or doing work to order”, any items (cabinets) that are made to order for you are truly custom regardless of their quality. An off-the-wall example – your Aunt Sally’s hand knitted sweater in lime green and fuchsia is custom, but not necessarily something you would wear to a state dinner or even in front of your best friend.

As evidenced by the example above, just because cabinets are custom made for you does not necessarily ensure quality. A local cabinet shop could be staffed by some of the best craftsmen around, or your cabinets could be made by someone who has only been doing this for a few months. It’s hard to know which is which before you buy. Is there a way you can see the quality before it is installed in your home? Are you receiving the proto-type of someone’s “great” idea? Who does the finishing of the cabinets & is it included in the price? What materials are used and how many coats? And will that local shop still be in business three or five years from now when you have a problem or you want to add additional matching cabinets?

You have other options. At big box stores you will find pre-finished stock and semi-custom cabinets in various quality levels. Since they are mass-produced, the prices can be very reasonable, but you will be limited to the standard sizes made. This may not be a bad choice for you. However, you may be essentially force fitting the kitchen to the cabinets – often you will end up with fillers (spacer strips) in random locations to make up the difference between the cabinet sizes and the available space in the room. At best, you will be compromising your design to the available cabinets.

In addition, there are cabinet manufacturers that are both nationwide and also completely custom. Most of these started on a small scale, and because of their success over many years, have grown to now offer the competitive pricing of a mass produced cabinet but with custom sizes and details. They are big enough to afford high-tech equipment that will ensure a quality fit and finish. This is the best of both worlds! You will receive precision built cabinets made just for you in all the sizes, baked-on finishes/colors, and the special shapes that you want, and you will also receive the benefit of long-term experience, high-tech facilities, and hand-finished detailing that custom factory created cabinetry offers.

Often nationwide cabinet manufacturers will offer their product through locally owned kitchen design showrooms. A great advantage of the showroom is that you can see many different cabinets displayed in actual kitchens – you can take the cabinetry for a test drive! There will be door and finish samples, brochures and idea books, a portfolio of completed projects, and much more. At the showroom, you will work with an experienced kitchen designer who is focused on your overall project, will help you pick out the particular specialty items you need, and will capture the style and look you are after. The designer is not just concerned with the nitty-gritty of cabinet building, but is also invested in the aesthetic outcome of the project. And since the designer has already selected a dependable manufacturer to work with, you can be assured that your project will receive the same quality cabinetry as displayed in the showroom.

To recap, just because a cabinet is made by a large factory does not mean it is “stock” and alternately, just because it is locally made doesn’t mean it is “custom”. If you want cabinets made especially for you, be sure and investigate all your options – the local cabinetmaker, big box stores, and the local professional kitchen design showroom. Don’t be afraid to explore new options and come to your own conclusion.

By Sarah Day and Lee Anna O’Daniel.



