

Ready-to-Assemble



Crisp and clean. *Ikea is the best-known RTA cabinet brand. Its latest line, Sektion, includes hundreds of cabinets and accessories. The Järsta wall cabinets and Ringhult base cabinets (shown) have high-gloss fronts for easy cleaning.*

Kitchen Cabinets



RTA cabinets can yield big savings, but assembly can take hours

BY ANATOLE BURKIN

Practically anything can be purchased online these days, and kitchen cabinets are no exception. Ready-to-assemble (RTA) cabinets cost 30% to 50% less than their assembled brethren. Ikea, CabParts, The Home Depot, TheRTAStore.com, and many other companies offer a huge selection of cabinet styles and accessories that can be delivered flat-packed to your front door. They're pretty easy to assemble and only require a few basic tools.

Should I buy RTA cabinets?

How do you know if RTA cabinets are right for you? For starters, if you're not that handy and need a lot of help designing and installing your kitchen, you're probably better off working with a home center or kitchen showroom that offers design and installation services. This is because the price advantage of RTA cabinets decreases quickly if you have to factor in design, assembly, and installation.

If you're a professional contractor, consider what builder Mike Guertin says about using RTA cabinets in his business: "The assembly time kills it for professionals, except in the rare case where you need cabinets immediately in order to finish a

CABPARTS **\$337** as shown (prices do not include shipping)

In existence since 1987, CabParts mostly serves professional builders and remodelers (the website doesn't offer much in the way of design help), but Stuart Thompson, the company's general manager, says that CabParts will work with "high-functioning DIYers." He explains, "We don't mind helping people, but there is only so much we can do. We're not

big, but we're mighty. We ship all over the United States and beyond." CabParts offers cabinet boxes in 1500 standard sizes and makes custom sizes as well. Boxes are melamine-coated particleboard or plywood. Stock melamine offerings are white, almond, gray, black, and natural maple (wood-grain pattern). The company also carries red-oak, maple, and cherry (all

unfinished) wood veneers on MDF, plus a prefinished maple plywood.

Cabinets are assembled with Conformat screws and 8mm hardwood dowels for alignment, or 8mm by 30mm hardwood dowels that come preglued and that are wetted just before assembly. CabParts also offers a huge selection of drawers that can be ordered with or without cabinet boxes.

JOINERY Preglued alignment dowels and Conformat screws with predrilled holes; feels rock solid and comes with correct (EZP3) driver bit



HARDWARE Blum undermount soft-close; slide-attachment clips come installed on drawer box; 100° Blum hinges



FINISH High-quality clear finish over veneer plywood with corresponding edgebanding



CONSTRUCTION 3/4-in. prefinished maple-plywood box; 1/4-in. prefinished maple-plywood back

THUMBS-UP
Rock-solid Conformat joinery and high-quality veneer-plywood construction

THUMBS-DOWN
Plain-Jane slab fronts and doors; no printed instructions

job. Some RTAs are stocked and can be delivered in a few days versus several weeks for assembled cabinets."

The tradeoff for perhaps dozens of hours of work putting together a kitchen's worth of cabinets is at least a 30% savings in cost over assembled cabinets. Besides the assembly time, you'll also need a space to store and assemble the cabinets before you install them. Furthermore, you'll have to measure the job accurately and design the kitchen yourself, or pay extra for those services. Lisa Finnin-Ciccoli, a local marketing specialist with Ikea, says the most common mistakes beginners

make involve measuring. "Exact measurements of wall placement, ceiling height, utility locations, and location and size of doors and windows are very important for planning and installation," she says.

Also important, she adds, is the time commitment: "Many DIYers underestimate how much time it takes to install their kitchen cabinets. A 10-ft. by 10-ft. kitchen can have over 100 different pieces, so organization is key. Make sure your measurements are correct, and inventory all your pieces. Group them together by cabinet to make sure you have everything you need."

THE HOME DEPOT **\$186** as shown

The Home Depot offers two lines of RTA cabinets. The company's Eurostyle line, which is made in Canada, has a contemporary look with boxes made of melamine-coated particleboard in a handful of color options. Doors are available in several materials, including solid wood. Heartland Cabinetry is The Home Depot's entry-level line.

According to Michael Holden, the company's merchant for stock cabinets and countertops, "The Eurostyle cabinets are currently the most popular." Prices for a 10-ft. by 10-ft. kitchen start at about \$1300 and go up to around \$2800, which makes them competitive with those of Ikea's RTA cabinets. Cabinets are not stocked in stores and must be ordered online,

although some stores allow you to order them in-house.

The Home Depot offers a design gallery and some online help via messaging as well as some in-store assistance. "We offer design services through our Design Connect team that supports store and online customers, but there are no online design tools at this time," says Holden.

JOINERY Screws with plastic togglelike inserts; finished box feels rickety, and screw heads strip easily



HARDWARE Metal drawer box with integral soft-close slides; tougher adjustments than with other styles; 100° hinges



CONSTRUCTION 3/4-in. particleboard box; 3/16-in. hardboard back



FINISH Melamine-coated particleboard with stained solid-wood doors and drawer front



THUMBS-UP Very low price, with free shipping to home or local store

THUMBS-DOWN Metal drawer box rattles and is tough to adjust for proper reveal

Stuart Thompson, general manager of CabParts, has heard his share of complaints from DIYers. "With wall cabinets, make sure that they are good and square, and that the back is attached firmly," he says. Regarding lower cabinets, he tells customers "to take pains to get the edges flush with one another and make sure the box is square." Doing so ensures that the door and drawer reveals are consistent.

Thompson likes building a platform for the boxes instead of using the leveling legs sold by many manufacturers. With the platform, he explains, "you level once, then install." That said, leg levelers work

just as well, but they take more time. When it comes to choosing a joinery method, Thompson has a favorite: "I prefer Conformat screws because the joint is held in tension, which makes the boxes stronger during handling."

Choosing a supplier

Big companies such as Ikea and The Home Depot have retail stores where customers can see their products up close, and their design and ordering processes have been refined through many years of experi-

IKEA \$288 as shown

Ikea offers lots of door and drawer designs, including traditional frame-and-panel style with a number of profile options, simple Shaker style, and the more modern slab style. All of its cabinet components come prefinished. Door-material choices include melamine-coated particleboard or fiberboard, as well as veneered and solid wood. Prices start surprisingly low. For example, a

basic 10-ft. by 10-ft. kitchen in the Haggeby line, which includes uppers and lowers (but no countertops), starts at \$900. That gets you a totally functional plain-Jane white set of boxes, shelves, doors, and drawers. At the upper end is the Ringhult line, at about \$3000 for a 10-ft. by 10-ft. kitchen. It comes with high-gloss gray doors and drawers made of melamine fiberboard.

What makes Ikea unique is that you can go to a store and come home with a complete kitchen the same day, although not all products are available at all stores for immediate pickup. Placing an order for delivery direct to your home is a more convenient option. You'll get everything at once, and you won't have to bring a truck or trailer to the store.

CONSTRUCTION

3/4-in. particleboard box with a 1/8-in. fiberboard back; steel reinforcement and hanging brackets



HARDWARE Maximera drawer box is sturdy and has full-extension soft-close slides; Forvara box is weaker and has 3/4-extension slides; 100° Blum hinges



FINISH Melamine-coated box with stained solid-wood door and drawer front



JOINERY Cam locks like those found on other Ikea products; box assembles quickly but doesn't feel as strong as boxes assembled using other methods

THUMBS-UP

Sturdy Maximera drawer box with full-extension slides

THUMBS-DOWN

Cabinet has many parts and comes in many separate boxes

RTA from a DIYer

Planning and installing a kitchen made from ready-to-assemble (RTA) cabinets will take the average homeowner several weeks if not months.

Mark and Donna Eis of Walden, N.Y., tackled a kitchen remodel in late 2012. Mark considers himself an intermediate-to-advanced-level DIYer. The project involved gutting

their 140-sq.-ft. kitchen and installing Ikea cabinets at \$120 per lin. ft. (both uppers and lowers). Regarding the layout, Donna preferred graph paper and pencil to Ikea's online design tool, which she found cumbersome to use. "If you're doing the layout design yourself, spend extra time in the planning phase," she advises.

"Make lists of your needs and preferences, and observe your family's habits, paying special attention to where your kitchen feels awkward or crowded. Mark out possible cabinet layouts in masking tape on existing cabinets, and walk through imaginary meal preparation and cleanup to get a sense of flow."

"Assembly and installation combined took about one to three hours per cabinet, depending on the complexity of the unit and the hardware," adds Mark. "As with most things, there was a learning curve. Once we got used to working with the cabinets and hardware, the process sped up."

THE RTASTORE.COM **\$238** as shown

Headquartered in Hopewell Junction, N.Y., TheRTAStore.com offers free design help and dozens of cabinet styles and sizes. Even the least expensive models have boxes made from 1/2-in. hardwood plywood. The cabinets are prefinished and assembled with either cam locks or sturdy

and easy-to-use steel clips. Drawers have dovetailed joints and are generally shipped knocked down. They are assembled on-site with wood screws.

Prices for a 10-ft. by 10-ft. kitchen start at about \$1400 for the company's Harvest Oak line and climb to about \$2500 for

Majestic Bronze. Somewhat unusual for RTA cabinets, many models from TheRTAStore.com have face frames, which provide greater flexibility when cabinets are installed on out-of-plumb walls. The face frames come fully assembled, with doors installed and hinges adjusted.



HARDWARE

Undermount soft-close drawer slides; 100° hinges



JOINERY

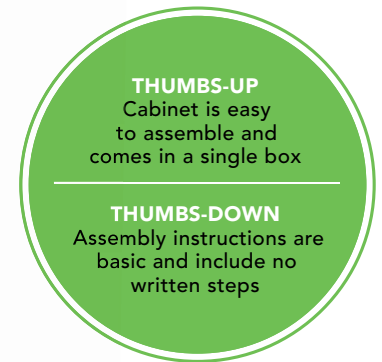
Unique system with steel clips that join the panels for a fast and strong connection



CONSTRUCTION

1/2-in. plywood box and 1/4-in. plywood back

FINISH Multilayer glaze with hand-applied pinstriping



THUMBS-UP

Cabinet is easy to assemble and comes in a single box

THUMBS-DOWN

Assembly instructions are basic and include no written steps

ence. Large online merchants such as TheRTAStore.com have catalogs of photos of their cabinets and also offer online design tools, often for free. They can arrange in-person design services, and assembly and installation are available for additional fees. Smaller RTA companies may not have all the online bells and whistles of their bigger competitors, but if you can handle a tape measure and a drill-driver, most of them can work with you online or by phone. If you have very specific needs—whether they be about sizing, wood selection, grain matching, or custom moldings—the smaller shops are your best bet.

If you're in a hurry, big companies have warehouses stocked with many of their products ready to ship. Small companies sometimes

require four to six weeks to complete your order. One final thing to keep in mind is that many high-quality assembled cabinets are certified by the Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association, an assurance that you're getting a quality product. Unfortunately, there is no industry certification for RTA cabinets because so much of the performance depends on the assembly. To protect yourself from shoddy products, review the information here, read online reviews, and look carefully at the warranties offered. □

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