



Tool
Test

Compact Routers

Choose the best tool for
profiling, flush trimming, and
mortising one-handed

BY PAUL JOHNSON

The original compact routers were created for a singular purpose: trimming laminate for countertops, cabinetry, and shelves. More recently, compact routers have become the go-to tools for edge profiling, flush trimming, and hinge mortising. I use one nearly every day in my remodeling and cabinetmaking business, and I really appreciate how a compact router, which can be held with one hand, frees my other hand for holding stock or managing the cord. Since I was in the market for a new compact router, I welcomed the chance to review all of the currently available models in a head-to-head test.

How we tested

I routinely use my compact router for dadoes, grooves, and rabbets, so I began the process with a power test. I gathered half

a dozen species of hardwoods and some MDF and took successively deeper passes with a 3/4-in. mortising bit. I found that all but one of the routers could take 1/2-in.-deep passes with little problem. With power no longer a question, I concentrated on day-to-day shop and job-site tasks. I rounded over hundreds of feet of door edges and cabinet faces; routed profiles into cabinet tops and shelves; mortised hinges; and cut slots, rabbets, and dados.

Best overall and best value

After a few weeks of using these routers, I determined that the Bosch is the best overall, but the Makita and Ridgid are also in the running. The Bosch is available in several kits, which are differentiated by the last letters of their model name. The EVSPK has both plunge and fixed bases and is my top pick for general finish carpentry and cabinetmaking. The accessories in the EVSNK make it suitable primarily for laminate work. If you don't need the plunge base, the EVSK includes a router, case, and edge guide. The Ridgid is my best-value pick. □

Paul Johnson is a cabinetmaker and remodeler in Lake Oswego, Ore. Photos by Nina Johnson, except where noted.

BOSCH PR20

PRICE \$209 (EVSNK); \$163 (EVSPK); \$112 (EVSK) POWER 1 hp
SPEED 16,000 to 35,000 rpm WEIGHT 3.3 lb.

**BEST
OVERALL**



The Bosch is well made, comfortable, and the second-lightest router in the group. The textured finger holds on the base are a great way to stabilize the router when bearing on narrow workpieces. Its clear baseplate has a bigger hole for larger bits and provides the best line of sight of all the routers. I also appreciated the Bosch's 10-ft. cord, which is longer than that on all the other tools except the Festool. Both macro and micro depth adjustments are smooth and precise; undoing the quick clamp lever and turning the base counterclockwise allows the base to be set to any depth. Turn it clockwise again and you can fine-tune the setting with the micro-adjustment dial. My one complaint is that you have to push the base upward as it's locked or the depth setting will change slightly with hard pressure. Even with this small flaw, the router is a joy to use.

BOTTOM LINE This is the compact router to get.

RIDGID R2401

PRICE \$99 POWER 1 1/2 hp
SPEED 20,000 to 30,000 rpm WEIGHT 3.4 lb.

**BEST
VALUE**

The Ridgid is one of my favorite compact routers. It's the quietest and one of the lightest routers tested, which makes it comfortable to use. It has LED lights and easy-to-use macro and micro depth adjustments. Pressing down on a lever enables macro height adjustments, and a thumbwheel allows for fine-tuning. I don't like having to hold down the macro adjustment to remove the base, however. The process is awkward, especially when you're trying to put the base back on.

BOTTOM LINE This tool performs well and is comfortable to use.



FESTOOL MFK 700 EQ

PRICE \$525 POWER 1 hp
SPEED 10,000 to 26,000 rpm WEIGHT 4.2 lb.

The fit and finish of the Festool trim router is exceptional. The bases attach with absolutely no slop, and the depth adjustment is the most precise of all the routers tested. At 13 ft., the power cord is also the longest of the bunch, making an extension cord unnecessary in most cases. Nice and quiet, the MFK 700 router purrs pleasingly, is easy to hold one handed, and has a wide, stable base. Unfortunately, visibility is poor because the baseplate is big and covers the work area completely, which makes freehand routing nearly impossible.

BOTTOM LINE This precise and powerful tool suffers from poor visibility.



DeWALT DWP611PK

PRICE \$161 POWER 1¼ hp
SPEED 16,000 to 27,000 rpm WEIGHT 4.6 lb.



The DeWalt's best feature is its innovative depth adjustment. The base attaches to a ring that rides along threads in the router body. Turning the ring moves the base up and down, making it easy to dial in the correct depth. I also like how the baseplate is square on one side and round on the other, which offers stability when riding against a fence or jig and enhances access in tight spots. My primary objection is that I find the DeWalt uncomfortable to hold. It has a wide body, and the depth-adjustment ring makes it even wider at the spot where I typically grip. Those with larger hands might find it more comfortable.

BOTTOM LINE

A large housing hampers an otherwise excellent router.

PORTER-CABLE PC450PK

PRICE \$160 POWER 1¼ hp
SPEED 27,000 rpm WEIGHT 4.6 lb.



The Porter-Cable router appears to be identical to the DeWalt, and it shares the DeWalt's innovative depth-adjustment ring and quick release for changing bases—not surprising, since both brands are owned by the same company. Unfortunately, the Porter-Cable version doesn't have variable speed or the LED light, two useful features found on the DeWalt. I don't use variable speed often, but I find it helpful when using larger bits and to control burning. These omissions don't make much sense to me, especially when you consider that the Porter-Cable is priced about the same as the DeWalt.

BOTTOM LINE

A big body and no variable speed are significant drawbacks.

TWO
PAIR

It's easy to see that the DeWalt and Porter-Cable and the Makita and Grizzly routers share common DNA, but the individual models vary in power and features.

MAKITA RT0701CX7

PRICE \$135 POWER 1¼ hp
SPEED 10,000 to 30,000 rpm WEIGHT 3.9 lb.



The Makita is nearly as comfortable as the Bosch, with a narrow, smooth body that's comfortable to grasp. This is also one of the few router kits that includes plastic shrouds (both fixed and plunge) for improved dust collection. The fixed base slides on and off very easily and can be adjusted up or down by hand for macro adjustments or with a thumbwheel for micro adjustments. The disappointment here is that the rack-and-pinion depth adjustment is finicky for micro changes, and I had to hold the base tightly when locking down the clamp to prevent it from moving.

BOTTOM LINE

This otherwise solid tool suffers from finicky micro adjustments.

GRIZZLY T27139

PRICE \$74 POWER 1 hp
SPEED 10,000 to 30,000 rpm WEIGHT 3.9 lb.



Although the plastic components are slightly different, the Grizzly's body and bases appear to be exactly the same as the Makita's. And like the Makita, the Grizzly's body is slim and easy to grip one-handed. The Grizzly's \$75 price tag makes it the least-expensive tool in the test. I found that it worked fine for ordinary edge profiling and dadoes, but when I tried deeper passes in dense material, I could feel the motor slow. I also found that the depth adjuster stuck both when I was adjusting the depth and when I was installing or removing the base.

BOTTOM LINE

This inexpensive, comfortable tool doesn't quite match the power of the other routers.