

# Signature Details for Kitchen Cabinets

Depending on your point of view, the devil or deity of your choice is in the details, especially when it comes to cabinetry. After all, cabinets are essentially boxes to store stuff; the right details can raise the boxes to a higher function and aesthetic. The best details make a kitchen or pantry less like a collection of boxes and more like a piece of furniture, valued for its beauty as well as its function.

Subtle details make a difference—a slight curve on a lower rail or a softened edge where your fingers grab a door. But not all details are things you have to put your hands on to appreciate. A good detail can just as easily be a clever way to incorporate cabinets into the room; you might not appreciate the design until you stand back to look.

Like most things these days, cabinets are usually factory-made, and options for wood species, size, finish, and style are dizzyingly diverse. However, just because you have a choice doesn't necessarily mean it's the right choice. And that's where small shops come into the picture. Under the auspices of a smart designer, a small shop has the flexibility to transform the usual details of doors, drawers, face frames, and end panels into a kitchen or built-in as unique as the owner's face.

For the examples here, I tried to get an even distribution of regional work and styles, but I know I'm just scratching the surface. I'd like to encourage you to submit photos of your favorite cabinet work to our online forum "Breaktime" at FineHomebuilding.com. Let's continue the conversation.

Seven creative cabinetmakers show what a small shop can do that a cabinet factory can't

BY CHARLES BICKFORD

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Charles Bickford is a senior editor. Photos by the author, except where noted.

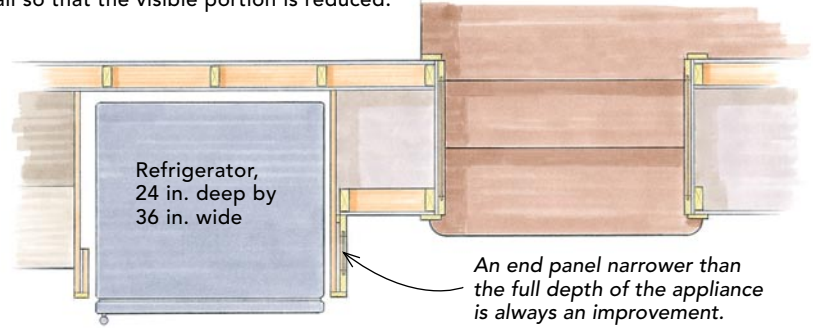


## GETTING CREATIVE WITHIN THE REALM OF TRADITION

**Jon Frost** lives and works in the Minneapolis area, which has a strong architectural tradition based in the late-Victorian period. He's been building cabinetry for the past 25 years, so it's no accident that Jon has mastered the traditional frame-and-panel style and has made his new work fit seamlessly into older houses, even as every year brings bigger and bigger modern appliances. "The Sub-Zeros are too tall and deep, in my opinion. ... We recess the fridge and oven units into the wall so that their cabinets don't appear to be so deep and bulky. We do that any-

## MAKE THE APPLIANCES GO AWAY

Modern appliances, especially refrigerators, tend to overwhelm the scale of a kitchen. Jon Frost likes to push them back into a recess framed into a wall so that the visible portion is reduced.



where and everywhere we can." In one kitchen (photo above left), the fridge appears to be about 9 in. proud of the wall; the rest is tucked back alongside the cased opening. Sometimes Jon even covers the condenser panel with upper doors to bring the unit into scale.

He employed a similar trick to reduce the mass of a double wall oven (photo above right). This time, he also radiused the end display shelves. This is a busy, informal household, and the eased corners of this big unit keep traffic incidents to a minimum.



**Columns warm the color scheme.** Basing the design on a profile taken from architect Edwin Lunde, who remodeled this particular house 70 years ago, Jon's shop turned a clear-finished quarter column of mahogany to punctuate the transition between an end panel and an adjacent built-in seat.

## GETTING MORE FROM LESS



Trained as an architect, **Joe Lanza** is also a builder and cabinetmaker in Duxbury, Mass. Soon after moving into his house,

he built his own cabinets from Baltic-birch plywood, which he likes to use without edgebanding. Rather than run the cabinets straight across and lose space under the shed roof, he stepped them up for maximum storage space (photo below). Exposed washer-head lath screws on the end panels are there, as he put it, “for a bit of quasi-industrial neo-modernist anti-ornamental



*The material speaks for itself.* Applied over stock cabinets, the bamboo plywood’s laminations (top left) create a decorative edge that doesn’t need edgebanding. The base cabinet’s end panel (above left) is highlighted by a narrow kerf cut where the panel meets the unbanded edge of the front panel.

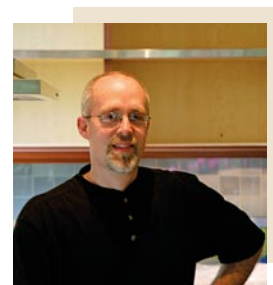


ornament.” He used pneumatic nails where they wouldn’t show. The door frames are solid birch with frosted-glass panels. To reduce dead space above the cabinets on the lower slope, Joe used triangular MDF panels above the cabinets; he set them back ½ in. from the face of the cabinet boxes.

## UPSETTING THE STATUS QUO WITH SMALL DETAILS

A cabinetmaker and designer in the Seattle area, **David Getts** has found that his real forte is making things look deceptively simple. His bamboo-plywood kitchen (photos above) is spare and sleek; the continuous grain pattern that runs from one side to the other is the big clue to his abilities. Look closer, and you see another important detail: Every door and drawer front is an unadorned piece of plywood, and the panels seem to be cut with a laser. The reveals are sharp and precise. David says that the material is easy to use and forgiving; he used a 60-tooth ATB blade in his tablesaw for all the cuts and cleaned everything up on a stationary belt sander.

David also uses a wide variety of materials to make his work distinctive. On an entertainment center’s vertical-grain Douglas-fir doors (photo right), he mixed smoked-glass panels and two sets of Häfele pulls as an effective way of catch-





## A NEW ISLAND INSPIRED BY AN OLD PIECE OF FURNITURE

**Rex Alexander** of Brethren, Mich., designed this island (photo below) as the last part of a quartersawn red-oak kitchen he built. The homeowners needed a large stovetop cooking area, plenty of drawer space for pots and pans, and a place where the kids could do homework while watching their mother cook. His intention was to design something that looked more like a Gustav Stickley-inspired library table that would serve as the family workstation. A 5-in. by 9-in. granite-topped divider helps to keep cooking spatters contained on the cooktop side.



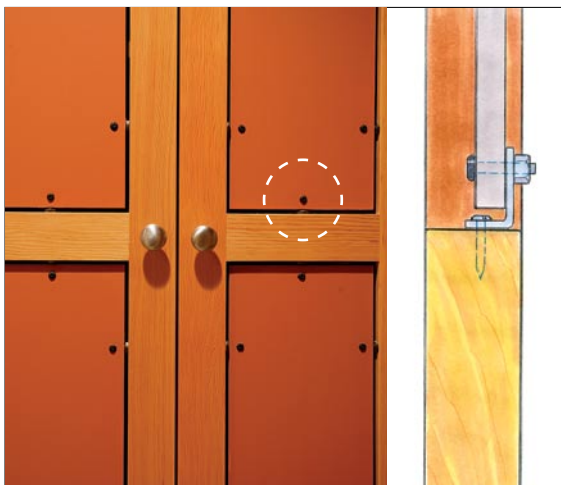
To reduce costs, Rex built interior casework from melamine, then applied the end panels, face frames, drawers, and doors. The island was assembled on site; after installing a toe-kick box, he followed with individual cabinets, end panels, and a solid top of quartersawn oak. To fabricate the corner posts, Rex borrowed a building trick from Stickley, assembling each post from four quartersawn pieces with mitered edges. Assembled with biscuit joints and glue, the posts are dimensionally stable and show off perfect edge grain on all sides.

ing the eye. The pulls' brushed finish goes well with the warmth of the fir, which David favors for many of his projects.

On another set of doors, he used 1/4-in. medium-density fiberboard (MDF) panels (photo below) that seem to float inside the door frames. It's an uncluttered look that's inexpensive, and as he says, "You can use almost any 1/4-in. material." In this instance, the panels were originally slated for a geometric design, but in the end were painted a solid color.

### EXPOSE YOUR INNER HARDWARE

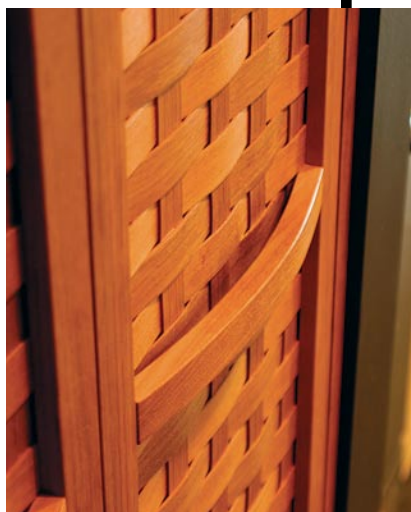
The hardware used to mount the panels onto the door frames is simple right-angle brackets from Häfele ([www.hafele.com](http://www.hafele.com)). The beauty of the design is that almost any material can be mounted without splitting or delaminating.





## A WOVEN PANTRY DOOR PULLS OUT LIKE A DRAWER

The ventilated door panel is an idea that has been used for years on boat interiors. Caned like a chair seat or woven like a basket, the lightweight door panels allow air to circulate in and out of a cabinet, and that can be as good an idea in a kitchen as on a boat. **Ted Timmer**, a builder/designer from Beacon, N.Y., says, "I was trying to play around with some design ideas as well as use materials that might be considered a bit more 'green' than the medium-density fiberboard (MDF) and veneer I usually see." With that in mind, Ted made the cabinets of low-VOC bamboo plywood; for the face of this cabinet, he decided to go with a handwoven teak panel (photo right). (The teak was plantation-grown.) The project required ripping the teak into strips a heavy  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. thick; he played with a few different styles of weaves before settling on this one. After trimming them to fit, he then set the woven panels into teak frames and applied the frame to the front of the pull-out pantry. An arched teak handle (bottom photo) is tenoned into the stiles in place of a middle rail.



## CELEBRATING THE GRID

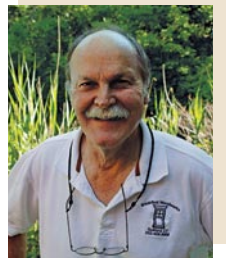
### Joel Wheeler's

shop in Albuquerque, N.M., built a kitchen designed by local architect Phil Custer. The majority of cabinets are faced with maple-frame doors and drawers divided by an irregular grid of ¼-in. by ¼-in. slots painted a deep green (photo below). Once the grid was laid out, Joel says the slots were cut on a tablesaw and cleaned up with an antique molding plane. The mitered frames were splined. Custer says, "It was a small room, so part of the concept was that the lighter color creates a larger sense of space. To keep it from bleaching out, I added the geometrics." The glass cabinets (photo left) were another strategy to break up the space. Glass stops applied to the exterior reinforced the grid concept and made the painting and glass installation easier.



## ACCENTUATE CURVES WITH MORE CURVES

To maximize space in a small kitchen, **Louis Mackall** of Breakfast Woodworks in Guilford, Conn., designed these cabinets (photo above) around a doorway that leads to the garage. As Louis explains, "All entries are important, even those out back." The cabinets create an unusual detail that resembles a bulkhead leading down from the main deck of a boat. The lightly curved lower rails of the cabinet doors form an arch over the door. The thick partitions that form the stairway also have curves, this time a stronger design that crests like a wave at the top. Newel posts that resemble milk bottles anchor the partitions to the cabinets.



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Cabinetmakers talk about their influences and approach to the craft.