



# Build a Kitchen Island



How to assemble semicustom cabinets  
and off-the-shelf parts for a hardworking island



BY RICK GEDNEY

**T**he function of a modern kitchen island can be traced to the familiar kitchen worktable that's been helping families to run the household and prepare meals for generations. An island's job is even tougher, though: A table from the 18th or 19th century didn't need to be a space for making pizza, checking email, or stir-frying. It also didn't have to integrate pipes, ducts, and wires.

I was recently called to a client's house for a full kitchen remodel. The young family wanted to renovate their existing, space-challenged galley kitchen, turning it into a wide-open room with an eat-at island. We looked at the available space and decided a single-level island with a farm sink made the most sense.

One often-overlooked item with island installations is how different floor coverings transition around the cabinets. On this project, we had to make an attractive transition between the wide pine floors in the adjacent living areas and the new kitchen's tile floor. We opted to make the transition at the end of the island and run the wide pine under the eating area. This seemed like the most logical spot to transition between the two types of flooring.

The installation of this island was pretty typical, although the open ceiling in the basement made running pipes and wires to the island a little easier. In this case, the plumber and electrician decided it would be best to do their rough-ins after the cabinets were installed, although such a process varies from one job to the next. When I'm designing a kitchen island, I always get the general contractor and the subcontractors involved as soon as we have preliminary drawings because plumbing, ventilation, and electrical requirements can make some designs unworkable with a typical budget.

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## START WITH A FOCAL POINT, THEN FOLLOW THE PLANS

Light fixtures are typically centered over sinks and appliances, so this is a logical starting point for establishing the cabinet layout. From there, move left and right according to the plans, accounting for discrepancies in floor height as you move. With the cabinets aligned, screwed together, and at a consistent height, they can be fastened to the floor.

**Center the sink.** Using a pair of levels, transfer to the floor the location of the light fixture centered over the sink. This becomes the starting point for the layout.



**Work from the end.** With the position of the sink's overhead light as a starting point, use the kitchen designer's measured drawings to determine the end of the island. Measure from the wall cabinets to create a parallel line that the island will follow.



**Find middle ground.** Many installers find the highest point of the floor to reference cabinet height, and then shim up the cabinets that sit on low spots. A better option is to find a cabinet at average height and then shim the low cabinets up and plane the high cabinets down. Shimming and planing should be minimal.



**Check across the gap.** Where there's a gap in the island's cabinet run for a dishwasher or other appliance, use a long level to ensure that both cabinets are at the same height. Check front and back to confirm that the cabinet tops are in the same plane. Also, make sure that the cabinets are spread the proper distance and that their sides are parallel.



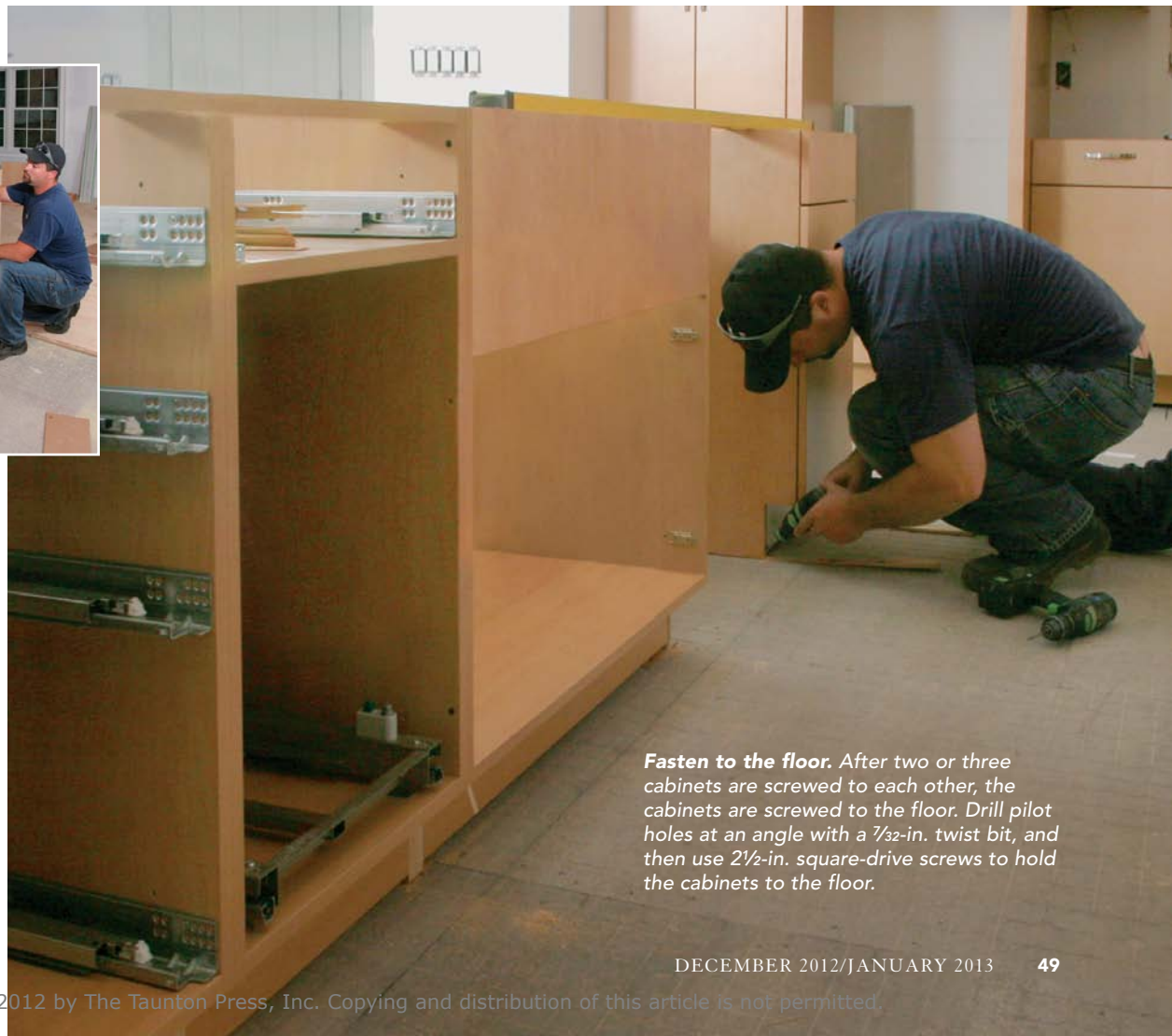
**Lower the high cabinets.** Using a level that spans from a high cabinet to one already at the correct height, center the bubble, and adjust your compass scribes so that they reflect the height difference. Use the same tool to mark the base of the cabinet for planing.



**Adjust the height.** A few strokes with a power plane quickly remove enough stock to level the cabinet. This planer can remove about  $\frac{1}{32}$  in. with each pass while providing a smooth finish. Deeper passes leave a rough surface. Planing should be limited to a maximum of about  $\frac{3}{8}$  in.



**Check one more time for inconsistent height.** After the cabinet bottom is trimmed, put the cabinet in place, and check for level side to side and front to back. If necessary, make further adjustments with shims or planing until the cabinet is level in all directions.



**Fasten to the floor.** After two or three cabinets are screwed to each other, the cabinets are screwed to the floor. Drill pilot holes at an angle with a  $\frac{7}{32}$ -in. twist bit, and then use  $2\frac{1}{2}$ -in. square-drive screws to hold the cabinets to the floor.



## CREATE A SEATING AREA

Rather than having extradeep or extrawide boxes, semicustom cabinets often have extended side panels for scribing to walls or other cabinets. These panels often work in conjunction with factory-finished plywood and solid hardwood to cover cabinet backs and empty cavities. The built-in eating area on this island is defined with a plywood panel that matches the cabinets. These additional parts are cut to size before they're fit and fastened.



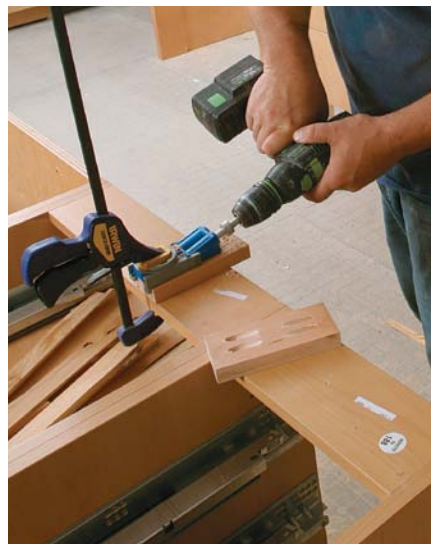
**Trim factory-finished panels on site.** Using a track-guided saw, cut a plywood panel to form one side of the island's eating area. Cut it with a 45° bevel to correspond to a bevel on the cabinet's side panel.



**Glue mitered joints.** The end and back panels meet with a mitered joint. A thick bead of wood glue prevents the mitered joint from opening with changes in humidity. While the glue dries, the joint is held together with 2-in.-wide masking tape.



**Blocking reinforces the panel.** Use scraps of hardwood or plywood blocking to reinforce the eating area's plywood panels. Pocket screws are a strong, efficient way to make these connections. Previously installed cabinets make a great workbench for drilling pocket holes.



**Fasten the blocking.** Using 1/4-in. coarse-thread pocket-hole screws, fasten blocking between the top of the plywood and the adjacent cabinet backs. The blocking prevents the plywood panel from warping.

**PRO TIP**

Cut the long part of the leg to keep the top consistent.



**Locate the legs, and cut them to length.**

A pair of legs support the eating area's overhanging countertop. Use a pair of levels as straightedges to position the legs in plane with the cabinets. Turn each leg upside down where it will be installed so that it can be marked for trimming on a miter saw.



**Attach the legs to the floor.** After drilling a hole in the center of the leg, fasten the leg to a 2½-in. drywall screw that's been cut off with line-man's pliers. This anchors the leg in place without visible fasteners.



**Install an apron.**

Secured with pocket screws, a 2-in.-wide apron under the overhanging countertop supports the legs and provides a finished look. A 6-in. apron on the back of the island holds a receptacle.



**Add bracing.**

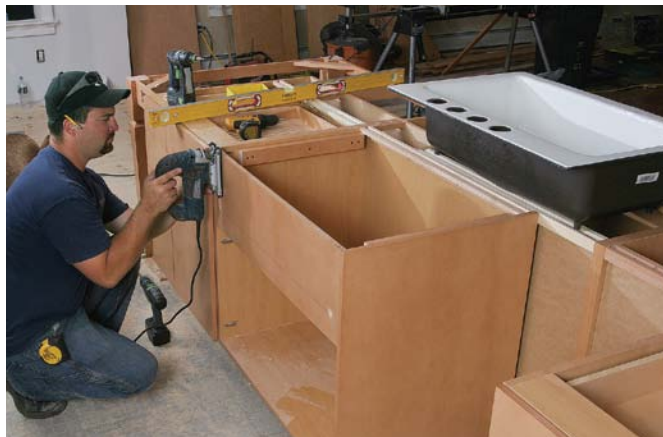
Two-in.-wide stretchers attach the apron to the back of the cabinets, while angle braces keep the corners square. Both types of bracing are held in place with 1¼-in. coarse-thread pocket screws.

## FINISHING TOUCHES

The finishing touches depend on the individual island, but most islands need drawer and cabinet pulls and some way to hide the obvious seams between cabinets. Appliances and fixtures may be installed now or after the top is in place, depending on the appliances. Once the cabinets are finished, it's time for the fabricator to measure for the countertop.



**Hide the seams and screws.** The seam at the end of the island where the two cabinets meet is often hidden with a wine rack, bookshelves, or panels. This island has a pair of panels that mimic the cabinet doors. The seam between panels is offset from the cabinet seam, locking the cabinets together. Screws installed from the back side are hidden from view.



**Cut the farm-sink opening.** Once the cleats that support the sink top are cut and secured to the sides of this cabinet, the installer cuts the blank panel at the front of the cabinet with a jigsaw and cleans it up with a rasp (photo below). When finished, the sink will be flush with the cabinet.



## Time for templating

With the cabinets in place, the eating area finished, and the farm sink installed, it's time for the stone fabricator to template the countertop. Decisions about thickness, the way the top overhangs the cabinets, and edge treatments should all be decided by this point.

