

**Semi-what?** Called semi-custom, the category of cabinetry that makes up the lion's share of the market is full of variety. These cabinets, from Canyon Creek, are chocolate-antiqued creme color. The island is burnished ebony stain. Details like the crown molding and island legs are often standard features of semicustom lines.







# Get to Know Semicustom Cabinets

Consuming a breadth of the market between stock and custom, these cabinets offer variety and value

BY NENA DONOVAN LEVINE

If your kitchen cabinets are decades old and you're homing in on a renovation, consider this advice: "Ya gotta know the territory." It's from *The Music Man*, a show as old as those very cabinets. Dispensed by a traveling salesman headed for River City, it's also a great mantra to use when surveying today's kitchen-cabinetry landscape.

In 2012, the cost of an average kitchen renovation was over \$47,000, according to a National Kitchen and Bath Association member survey. Cabinetry consumes one-third or more of that amount. You can do the math, but it is safe to say this investment deserves careful consideration.

There are three broad categories of kitchen cabinets: Stock cabinets tend to be the most affordable but offer the least variety of style and finishes, are sometimes made from lower-quality materials, and may be constructed for a shorter useful life. Custom cabinets are at the other extreme in that they can be made of familiar or exotic materials to any size, style, and quality. Semicustom cabinets fall between stock and custom cabinets and are arguably the best value. The Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association defines semicustom as "built to order but within a defined set of construction parameters; available in standard widths but with more choices for depth and height modifications." According to one of the organization's recent member surveys, the semicustom category makes up 46% of the overall market.

MasterBrand Cabinets has lines in all three categories. Stephanie Pierce, manager of MasterBrand's design studio, says that unlike the company's stock line—which is limited to very specific dimensions, styles, and finishes—its semicustom lines, including Diamond and Decorá, offer



# SEMICUSTOM, FULL OF OPTIONS

Semicustom lines offer so many standard options that most of us don't need a custom shop to find what we're looking for.

## **Face framed, frameless, or both?**

*You don't have to choose. These cabinets from Canyon Creek offer a clean, frameless look with face frames hidden behind the door and drawer fronts. Some installers prefer this arrangement for durability and ease of installation.*



**Pullout pantry is narrow enough.** Standard cabinet widths start at 9 in. and can be specified in 3-in. increments (or smaller for an upcharge). This pullout spice rack from Merillat is a great use of narrow space next to the oven and cooktop.

designers and builders “flexibility within limitations.” More specifically, these brands’ offerings can be customized only to the degree of the shops’ capabilities. At the custom end of the spectrum, Master Brand’s Omega Cabinets will outsource any fabrication that its shop is not capable of.

## **Snapshot of a giant category**

Semicustom cabinets are built upon receipt of an order, so lead time is longer than it would be for stock cabinets, which you can sometimes get off the shelf at a home center. It’s shorter than it would be for custom cabinets, however, although this varies based on the complexity of the cabinets and the builder’s availability. Merillat’s semicustom Classic line can ship in as little as five to 10 days. Canyon Creek’s Katana line has a lead time as short as four weeks from order to delivery. Certain upgrades can push lead times out to six weeks or more.

Semicustom cabinets are offered in standard 3-in.-wide increments from 9 in. to 45 in. For an upcharge, you can modify this to 1/8 in.

Such precise dimensions reduce the call for filler strips and minimize wasted space. Standard cabinet depths and heights also can be increased or decreased for an upcharge. So if using a standard 24-in.-deep base cabinet doesn’t allow adequate clearance in a pantry or a passageway, you can reduce the box depth and still use the particular cabinets you were hoping for. Standard wall cabinets are 30 in. and 36 in. tall, but sometimes 33 in. or even 42 in. works better with a particular ceiling height. Again, with most semicustom lines, this level of customization is possible.

Semicustom cabinets are available with face-frame or frameless construction or both. The choice is mostly aesthetic: Face frames are more common on traditional-style cabinets, and frameless cabinets are more contemporary looking. But there are plenty of exceptions.

On face-frame cabinets, the doors can be inset or they can be overlaid to reveal more or less of the frames. The hinges attach to the face frames. Doors on frameless cabinets cover the cabinet box’s finished front edge. Door hinges attach to the box sides. Frameless construc-



**No wasted space.** This clever end-panel door from MasterBrand makes the most of a few unused inches for magazine storage and office supplies.



**Hardware matters.** Most manufacturers offer hardware options to enhance storage in their cabinets. Some can be outfitted with aftermarket hardware as well. These Diamond cabinets have elegant and useful storage that keeps cookware from getting lost deep inside the island.

## Find it

There are far too many semicustom cabinet manufacturers to list. Here are a few to get you pointed in the right direction. To dig deeper, go to a local kitchen showroom or visit the Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association website ([kcma.org](http://kcma.org)).

**Canyon Creek Cabinet Company**  
[canyoncreek.com](http://canyoncreek.com)

**KraftMaid**  
[kraftmaid.com](http://kraftmaid.com)

**MasterBrand**  
[masterbrand.com](http://masterbrand.com)

**Merillat**  
[merillat.com](http://merillat.com)

tion offers a more open interior and is typical of today's European cabinetry. In the United States, by contrast, face-frame construction outsells frameless, according to Danielle Mikesell, Merillat's director of marketing. Both traditional and frameless cabinets can be ordered with a panoply of door and drawer styles, wood species, finishes, crown-molding profiles, and box-construction options. Some manufacturers will even combine face-frame construction with a frameless aesthetic. When it comes to style and construction, most of what is commonly built by custom-cabinet shops can be found in semicustom cabinets.

Cabinet doors and shelves are typically  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. thick. A loaded,  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. shelf can span a 36-in.-wide cabinet, while thinner shelves may bow across that span. Full-depth shelves, adjustable in  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. increments, maximize storage. For organizing cabinet interiors, there are plenty of accessories, such as roll-out shelves and lazy susans. Companies such as Häfele, Knappe & Vogt, and Rev-A-Shelf make bins, baskets, and recycling containers to complement semicustom lines.

Semicustom lines offer warranties that may equal the limited-lifetime warranty typical for custom cabinets. Canyon Creek, Merillat, and KraftMaid all offer such warranties on some lines that cover the product for as long as the purchaser owns it, with certain exclusions. Unfinished products are excluded, for example, as are normal wear and tear, instances of abuse, and improper installation. Merillat's Classic, also a semicustom line, has a 25-year warranty.

### We can't tell you what it will cost

It would be great to read an article or visit a website and get a firm figure for what your cabinets might cost, but it's not that simple. Calculators, such as at [FineHomebuilding.com/cabinet-calculator](http://FineHomebuilding.com/cabinet-calculator), can give you a range, but the offerings of semicustom cabinetmakers are vast, and even some seemingly logical questions—such as whether face-frame or frameless cabinetry is more expensive—are not so easy to answer.

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# FOUR WAYS TO ASSESS QUALITY

Experts agree on what distinguishes a quality semicustom cabinet: box construction, drawers, doors, and finish. In addition, hardware—drawer slides and door hinges—should be well-made and adjustable. Blum, Grass, and Häfele are examples of top-quality hardware brands.

## BOXES



Today's semicustom cabinet boxes can be made from plywood, particleboard, or medium-density fiberboard (MDF). Even if different boxes meet the same testing requirements and have equal warranties, there are variations to note in the materials used.

To begin with, not all plywood is created equal. There are different grades, and the number of plies can vary. Assuming high-quality glue and fabrication methods are used—the more plies a panel has, the more stable the panel will be. Plywood is typically the most expensive option for cabinet boxes.

Another option, formaldehyde-free particleboard (sometimes called furniture board) is not the cheap, porous particleboard of the past. It is a dense and durable substrate for veneer and is often more affordable than plywood cabinet boxes. It can be sized and cut with great precision, as can MDF.

MDF is made from recycled wood fibers and resin. As the smoothest of the three box materials, it is an excellent substrate for both veneer and paint. MDF's downside is its heaviness.

## DRAWERS

You're likely to find dovetailed and doweled drawer construction in most semicustom cabinet lines. Both are equally sturdy, though dovetails add character and a high-quality appearance. You won't likely find glued or stapled drawers in semicustom cabinets. If you do, consider upgrading. Dovetails and dowels not only look better, but they last longer.

For a durable drawer, the hardwood or MDF fronts should be applied to a four-sided drawer box, not used as the fourth box side. Drawer boxes typically have 1/2-in.- or 3/4-in.-thick solid-wood sides, although Canyon Creek's semicustom lines feature a 1/2-in.-thick plywood drawer box. A drawer bottom of 3/16-in.-thick plywood resists deflection even when fully loaded. Some semicustom European lines offer metal drawer boxes; a different look, it's perhaps the most durable option available.

When it comes to drawer hardware, full-extension slides separate semicustom cabinets from most stock offerings and provide full access to the contents of a drawer. Undermount slides support the drawer from the bottom; their concealment is aesthetically preferable to side-mounted slides, particularly with dovetailed drawers. A soft-close feature, available on many semicustom cabinets, means they'll close quietly and without slam damage. Avoid drawers that shake or rattle when you operate them, which is a sign of cheap drawer slides.



## DOORS

Doors don't express a cabinet's overall quality as reliably as the other three items. Even lesser-quality cabinets may have reasonably well-built doors. In any event, look for 3/4-in.-thick doors made of hardwood, painted or veneered MDF, or veneered particleboard. Good particleboard is dense (Merillat Classic doors call for 48-lb. particleboard). All doors should have rubber bumpers to cushion their closing action and adjustable hinges from a reputable manufacturer.

Most doors consist of a four-piece frame plus a center panel. A center panel needs room to move in response to humidity, but that doesn't mean it should rattle around in the frame. A center panel may be hardwood or veneer, but its grain and color should

closely match the frame. High-quality doors have a raised center panel set into the door frame facing either outward (a raised-panel door) or inward (a recessed flat-panel door). Raised panels—whether facing in or out—possess a thickness and solidity that distinguishes them from a 1/4-in.-thick, flat center panel. Because they do not respond to changes in humidity, MDF doors in a raised-panel style are made of a single piece of material.

Door-edge, frame, and raised-panel profiles can be varied to individualize a semicustom door style, though not every style will be available for both framed and frameless cabinets. There are also laminate and thermofoil door options, but they are more commonly found in stock cabinetry.



## FINISH

Finish choices vary as much as door styles. Canyon Creek, for example, offers nearly 40 standard stain and paint colors on more than 10 wood species. Glazing, distressing, burnishing, and antiquing add subtle finish variations. Canyon Creek will also mix a finish color to match a paint-store chip.

Stain finishes comprise several steps, usually including stain application, heat curing, one or more sealer coats, and a topcoat. Cabinets are sanded by machine and by hand prior to staining, then sanded again between sealer coats. Companies typically cure stains, sealers, and topcoats with convection heat. The resulting baked-on finish is durable enough to support extended warranties. Bertch Cabinetry uses a blend of alkyd, amino, and vinyl resins in its sealers; the topcoats are alkyd and amino resins formulated into catalyzed conversion varnish. Sheen levels can be modulated from matte to glossy by varying the topcoat formulation, but all sheens should be equally durable.

"Painted" finishes are achieved using colored (opaque) catalyzed conversion varnishes. These dry harder than standard paint. Even when a semicustom manufacturer

matches, say, a Benjamin Moore color, the resulting paint differs from what's available in retail because the cabinetry formulation must be sprayable and yield more sheen. The paint typically is applied as a primer coat topped with one or more additional coats, with sanding and heat-curing in between. Not all painted finishes receive a separately formulated topcoat as stain finishes do.

A painted finish must be applied to a smooth surface, so paint-grade maple is often used. Because this finish sits on the wood surface instead of moving into the wood like a stain, a painted finish can crack when the wood under it moves. Hairline cracks appear at door and face-frame joints, and are not considered defects. However, the finish should not peel or flake. Most manufacturers offer matching paint for touch-ups along with a cabinet order.

To assess a finish, you need to see actual product samples. The finish should be clear; a cloudy appearance is a sign of poor quality. It should be smooth and drip-free, without visible sanding marks. Molding and door edges should be crisp, with no finish buildup. Low- or no-VOC formulations are desirable.





# WHAT'S NOT SEMICUSTOM

The distinction between stock, semicustom, and custom cabinets can be blurry. Some manufacturers, like Merillat, offer lines in more than one category. Here's a look at the alternatives to semicustom.

**"Stock"** refers to cabinet inventory stocked—and sometimes stacked—at a manufacturer or retailer. Options for door style, wood species, finish, molding profile, and hardware are limited to what's there. Materials reflect a budget price point; for example, a stock cabinet door may be ½ in. thick, while a semicustom or custom door measures ¾ in. Cabinet-box size is limited to 3-in.-wide increments from 9 in. to 45 in. Depths for both wall and base cabinets are fixed, and warranties are the shortest on the market—often five years or less. Benefits of stock cabinetry include its entry-level price and fast (immediate or within a few days) delivery. Stock quality may suit a rental unit, starter house, or budget kitchen. Limited choices may inspire DIY creativity and yield excellent value.



**"Custom"** cabinets, originating in a small shop or a large manufacturing facility, are built to client specifications upon receipt of the order. They can incorporate curved doors, complex angles, odd box sizes, and unusual colors. If you want to hand-select or book-match exotic veneers, you can. Options for door style, wood species, finish, crown-molding profile, box selection, accessories, and hardware are enormous. Benefits of custom cabinetry include vast choice, tailored fit and finish, and individualized fabrication. Expect a premium price tag and longer remodel time, since custom lead times run eight weeks to several months. Large manufacturers offer generous (even lifetime) warranties for custom products. Small-shop warranties vary. Custom implies top quality, but it's not a given from every small cabinet shop.





# WHY SO MANY LINES?



MasterBrand Cabinets alone has nine cabinet lines ranging from stock to custom. Its semicustom lines include Homecrest, Schrock, Kemper, Kitchen Craft, Diamond, and Decorá. According to Stephanie Pierce, MasterBrand's design studio manager, each brand is tailored to a slightly different customer.



**For function.** MasterBrand's Diamond line, shown here and at far left, is designed and marketed toward busy homeowners who value flexibility and function.

Let's explore that example: Frameless boxes ought to be  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. thick to provide good purchase for door hardware, whereas a face-frame box can be  $\frac{5}{8}$  in., because door hardware is not attached to the box. So frameless cabinets, in general, must be more expensive. But without face frames, those European-styled cabinets don't use as much hardwood or require as much labor. So it seems that traditional cabinets must be more expensive. But filler strips can mar the clean lines of modern, frameless cabinets, so you'll want to specify custom box dimensions, increasing the cost. You still haven't specified a door and drawer style, a finish, or all the storage upgrades you want.

In short, distinguishing by frameless or traditional construction, dovetail or dowel joinery, or one particular feature or finish is not a meaningful way to compare prices. For every instance where one company's product costs more, there are others where you will find the opposite. Showrooms offering semicustom lines have a list of "retail" prices for every component in a cabinetry manufacturer's line. (Merillat's 2011 book for its Masterpiece line runs 664 pages.) What the showroom charges a customer, however, depends first on its discount calculation—a percentage assigned by the manufacturer—and then on how it adjusts that discount to cover its cost of business. The discount calculation varies based on the dollar volume of that cabinetry line sold by that showroom, among other factors.

The purchaser's price for a kitchen with dozens of components might include upcharges for customized dimensions, premium wood species, certain finishes and hardware, or glass doors (which require a finished cabinet interior). How badly a showroom wants the business can also affect price comparisons between showrooms. With so many factors influencing the final price, you'll have to talk to a designer or dealer to get a legitimate estimate. □

Nena Donovan Levine is a kitchen designer in West Hartford, Conn. Photos courtesy of the manufacturers.



**For style.** MasterBrand's Decorá line, shown here and above, is meant for style-savvy homeowners who want lots of options for personalizing their kitchens.