

Homeowners in Los Angeles often call me after they have already talked to a “carpenter,” a “cabinet maker,” a “finish carpenter,” and maybe even a “handyman,” and they are more confused than when they started. Everyone seems to promise they can “do the cabinets,” but the price, timeline, and quality expectations can be miles apart.

If you are planning a kitchen remodel, a new bathroom vanity, or built in storage in that tricky 1920s Spanish Revival, understanding the difference between a cabinet maker and a general carpenter will save you money, headaches, and a lot of rework.

This is a practical guide from the perspective of someone who has watched projects in Los Angeles go very right and very wrong. We will look at what each trade actually does, what you should reasonably expect to pay here in L.A., how long custom work really takes, and how to tell if someone is worth trusting with your home.

What is a cabinet maker, really?

A cabinet maker is a woodworker who specializes in built in cabinetry and fine casework. In other words, they live in the world of boxes that must be perfectly square, perfectly aligned, and practical to use every day.

Where a framer thinks in inches, a good cabinet maker thinks in sixty-fourths. Doors that rub, drawers that bind, face frames that are 1/8 inch out of plane - those keep a cabinet maker up at night.

Typical work a cabinet maker handles in Los Angeles:

Cabinetry for kitchens, bathrooms, laundry rooms, pantries, and mudrooms.

Built in entertainment centers and media walls. Closet systems, wardrobes, and linen cabinets. Office built ins, banquettes, and window seats. Sometimes standalone furniture like bookcases, tables, or custom vanities, especially if they are part of a larger cabinetry package.

So if you are asking, “What does a cabinet maker do?” then the simple answer is: they design, fabricate, finish, and often install cabinetry that fits your space precisely, both functionally and visually.

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Many custom shops today also handle countertops in common materials like butcher block, some woods, and occasionally solid surface, but stone and quartz are usually templated and installed by specialized fabricators. If you are wondering whether cabinet makers also do countertops, the answer is: some do, but it is common for the countertop to be a separate trade coordinated with the cabinet installer.

What is a carpenter?

Carpentry is a broader category. A carpenter might frame new walls, build decks, install windows, hang doors, lay subfloor, install baseboards and crown, or set prebuilt cabinets produced by a factory or a local shop.

Most carpenters are not set up to design, engineer, and fabricate true custom cabinetry from sheet goods and hardwood lumber. Some very skilled finish carpenters straddle both worlds, but as a homeowner you cannot assume that "carpenter" automatically means "cabinet maker."

In Los Angeles, a typical carpenter's day might involve:

Removing old cabinets and preparing walls.

Framing a new pantry or moving a doorway. Installing recessed blocking in the wall so heavy cabinets can be anchored safely. Hanging and shim-installing prebuilt or semi custom cabinet boxes. Trimming out the room with base, casing, and crown.

If you hire a carpenter to "build" your kitchen and they do not have a proper cabinet shop behind them, what you often get is field built boxes that may look acceptable at first glance, but lack the precision, hardware compatibility, and durability of professional custom cabinets.

Cabinet maker vs. Carpenter: what is the real difference?

At the core, the difference between a carpenter and a cabinet maker is specialization, tooling, and tolerance.

Cabinet makers:

- Work primarily in a shop with stationary tools like panel saws, wide belt sanders, edge banders, and specialized jigs.
- Design and engineer cabinetry around hardware systems: soft close hinges, undermount drawer slides, pull outs, organizers, and more.
- Build to tight tolerances so doors and drawers align over time, even as the house moves slightly.
- Apply furniture grade finishes that can handle kitchen abuse: grease, moisture, and constant cleaning.

Carpenters:

- Work primarily on site, often outdoors or in rough construction conditions.
- Focus on structure, framing, and larger trim elements.
- Typically install cabinets made by others rather than building from scratch.
- Have a broader skill set across the house, but not the same depth in cabinetry details.

Both are valuable. For a full remodel in L.A., you will likely need both: a cabinet maker for your custom boxes and doors, and a carpenter (or the same company's install team) to prep the space, handle framing changes, and install everything correctly.

Who do you actually need for your project in Los Angeles?

Think about the scope of what you want done, then match the professional to the task.

If you are only replacing old cabinets with new stock or semi custom units from a big box store or a national brand, a seasoned finish carpenter or installer is often enough. They are not designing or building the cabinets, only hanging and leveling.

If you want to:

Change the layout,

Use every inch of a tight L.A. Kitchen, Match existing historic details, Integrate appliances seamlessly, or Get a specific wood species, door profile, or finish,

Then a custom cabinet maker is the right call.

For many projects, the general contractor coordinates both. The GC works with a cabinet shop for fabrication and uses in house carpenters or subcontractors for demo, framing, and install. If you are managing your own project, be very clear who is responsible for each step: design, shop drawings, fabrication, finish, delivery, installation, and punch-list adjustments.

Custom, semi custom, or stock: what is the difference?

When homeowners start pricing kitchens, they quickly run into terms like stock, semi custom, and custom cabinets. These are not just marketing words. They affect cost, quality, and whether you should be working with a cabinet maker or simply ordering boxes.

Stock cabinets are factory made in fixed sizes and finishes. Think of the typical 12, 15, 18, 24 inch wide boxes stacked to make a layout. They are the most affordable, the quickest to get, and are widely available. They are ideal for rentals or budget projects where perfect fit is less critical.

Semi custom cabinets start with a standard line, then allow some adjustments: custom widths to the nearest 1/8 inch, additional finish choices, upgraded plywood boxes instead of particle board, and specialty pieces. They can be a strong middle ground for many L.A. Homes, especially condos with relatively standard walls.

Custom cabinets are designed and built for your specific room. Everything is on the table: box construction, wood species, door style, interior fittings, and finishes. If your kitchen has odd angles, out of plumb walls, or if you want a fully built in, furniture like look, this is where custom shines.

If you are asking, "Is it cheaper to buy cabinets or have them made?" the honest answer is: buying stock or many semi custom lines will be cheaper upfront than true custom cabinets from a local shop. Whether they are cheaper in the long run comes down to quality, fit, and how long you plan to stay.

How much do custom cabinets cost in Los Angeles?

Costs move around with material prices and labor availability, but there are realistic ranges.

For a full custom kitchen cabinet package in Los Angeles, including boxes, doors, drawers, and finish, you are often looking at:

Entry level custom: roughly \$800 to \$1,000 per linear foot of cabinetry.

Mid range custom: roughly \$1,000 to \$1,400 per linear foot. High end custom with specialty finishes or exotic veneers: \$1,500+ per linear foot.

On a typical 10 by 12 L shaped kitchen with an island, that often translates to \$25,000 to \$60,000 for cabinetry alone, depending on design, materials, and finish. That does not include countertops, appliances, or major structural work.

So when clients ask, "How much do custom kitchen cabinets cost in Los Angeles?" or "How much should I pay for custom cabinets?" I usually give them brackets rather than one number, then walk through what drives the price:

Wood species and material choice.

Painted vs stained and clear coated. Frameless vs framed. Drawer count and internal organization. Custom hood, panels for integrated appliances, and decorative elements.

A small kitchen with modest material choices might land closer to \$18,000 to \$25,000. A large, highly detailed kitchen in an upscale L.A. Neighborhood can easily cross \$80,000 before countertops.

For partial work like a bathroom vanity or a laundry room, local cabinet makers often have minimums, commonly \$5,000 to \$8,000 per project, to make it worth resetting the shop, building, and finishing.

Why are custom cabinets so expensive?

Once you see how custom cabinets are made, the pricing starts to make sense.

The process of making custom cabinets usually looks like this:

Design and consultation. Measuring the space, discussing needs, and iterating layout.

Shop drawings. Detailed plans with dimensions, construction details, and hardware callouts. Material ordering. Plywood or other sheet goods, solid wood, hardware, and finishing products. Fabrication. Cutting, machining, assembling boxes, face frames, doors, and drawers. Sanding and finishing. Multiple coats of primer, paint, stain, sealer, and topcoat. Delivery and installation. Leveling, anchoring, aligning, and fine tuning on site. Adjustments and service. Tuning doors and drawers as the house settles or the homeowner adjusts use.

It is highly skilled, labor intensive work with expensive materials and equipment. In L.A., you also factor in shop rent, insurance, licenses, and compliance with environmental rules for finishes.

When someone asks, "What is the markup on custom cabinets?" they are often reacting to sticker shock. Markup depends on the shop, but you are not just paying for raw plywood and hinges. You are paying for craftsmanship, design, warranty, and the risk the shop takes if anything has to be remade or reinstalled at their cost.

Are custom cabinets worth the money?

For many Los Angeles homeowners, yes, they are.

Custom cabinets are usually better built than big box stock, with thicker materials, stronger joinery, and better hardware. A well built custom kitchen can have an average lifespan of 25 to 40 years if maintained, while budget stock cabinets can start failing at 10 to 15 years, sometimes sooner if they see heavy use or moisture.

Are custom cabinets better than stock cabinets? In terms of fit, finish, and longevity, usually yes. But the real question is whether they are worth it for your situation.

They tend to be a good investment [Cabinet Maker Los Angeles Bradco Kitchens](#) if:

You plan to stay in the home for at least 7 to 10 years.

You care about maximizing storage and usability in a small or irregular space. Your home's value supports the upgrade, which is often true in many L.A. Neighborhoods. You want specific design aesthetics that stock lines do not offer.

Do custom cabinets add value to a home? Appraisers and agents in Los Angeles generally view a high quality kitchen as one of the strongest resale drivers. You may not get every dollar back in a sale, but you are more competitive and can help justify top-of-market pricing.

For pure resale, the best cabinet color is typically something restrained: white, off white, light greige, or soft wood tones. Buyers like light and neutral. Are white cabinets going out of style? They cycle in and out with trends, but they remain safe for resale value. Adding warmth through wood, stone, and lighting is often more important than chasing the latest cabinet color trend.

Materials: plywood, MDF, and the best woods for custom cabinets

Homeowners often fixate on wood species when they ask, "What is the best wood for custom cabinets?" and, "What material is best for kitchen cabinets?" For day to day performance, the box material and hardware matter more than exotic faces.

For cabinet boxes, the common comparison is plywood vs MDF. Are plywood cabinets better than MDF? In many kitchen applications, yes.

Good quality cabinet grade plywood has:

Better screw-holding strength.

More resistance to swelling if it gets wet. Lighter weight for the same thickness. Better performance in hanging heavy wall cabinets.

MDF has advantages in specific uses: it machines very smoothly and is excellent for painted door panels and detailed profiles because it does not have grain that telegraphs through paint. Many high end painted shaker doors have an MDF center panel and hardwood rails and stiles.

For face frames and doors, common woods include maple, alder, cherry, white oak, and rift or quarter sawn variations where the grain is very straight and refined. Maple takes paint beautifully; white oak is a favorite in Los Angeles for natural or stained finishes with visible grain.

Thickness matters too. How thick should custom cabinet wood be? Typical high quality boxes are 5/8 inch to 3/4 inch plywood. Drawer boxes might be 1/2 inch to 5/8 inch solid wood with a 1/4 inch bottom. Going thinner to save a few dollars is usually false economy, especially for drawers that will hold pots, dishes, or pantry items.

Framed vs frameless cabinets

You will encounter two main construction styles: framed and frameless. Both can be excellent when done well.

Framed cabinets have a solid wood frame at the front of the box. The doors hinge to the frame. This is traditional in many American homes, looks classic, and is forgiving in older L.A. Houses where walls may be out of square.

Frameless cabinets, often called European style, have no face frame. Doors hinge directly to the cabinet sides. This allows slightly more interior space, especially in drawers, and creates a clean, contemporary look. Many modern Los Angeles kitchens use frameless boxes.

Are framed or frameless cabinets better? It depends on the look you want and the skill of the shop. Frameless demands tighter tolerances and stronger box construction, since the front edges take all the hardware load.

Timelines: how long does it all take?

Once design is approved and the shop has a deposit, fabrication for a full custom kitchen usually takes 6 to 10 weeks in Los Angeles, depending on backlog, complexity, and finish. High gloss finishes, specialty veneers, or elaborate details can push that longer.

"How long does it take to make custom cabinets?" is only half the question. The other half is install. A typical custom kitchen installation might take 3 to 7 working days for cabinets alone, plus additional time for countertops, backsplash, and finishing touches.

Countertops are usually templated after the cabinets are installed and level. Fabrication and installation of stone or quartz then adds another 1 to 3 weeks. So, "How long does a custom kitchen take to install?" from cabinet arrival to a working kitchen is often in the 3 to 5 week range with all trades included.

Refacing, refinishing, or replacing: what is cheaper in L.A.?

Many homeowners ask whether it is cheaper to refinish or replace kitchen cabinets. The answer depends on the condition and quality of what you have.

If your existing cabinets are structurally sound, made from decent materials, and the layout works, refinishing or refacing can be cost effective.

Refinishing means stripping or scuff-sanding the existing finish, then applying new paint or stain. It is labor intensive and can be disruptive, but often costs less than new custom boxes. In Los Angeles, a full kitchen refinish by a professional might run from \$6,000 to \$15,000, depending on kitchen size and finish quality.

Refacing means keeping the boxes but replacing doors, drawer fronts, and visible end panels, then applying new veneer or panels where needed. It offers a bigger visual impact than refinishing alone. Is cabinet refacing worth it? If you want a new style but your boxes are solid, yes, it can be. Costs in L.A. Often range from \$10,000 to \$25,000 for a kitchen, again depending on size and material.

Replacing with full custom costs more but solves every functional and layout issue. For many older L.A. Homes where boxes are poorly built or already failing, replacement is the smarter long term move.

When someone asks, "What is the cheapest way to get custom cabinets?" the honest answer is usually: simplify. Fewer drawers, fewer special pull outs, standard finishes, and a simple door style will keep custom pricing down. Some shops also offer more economical "builder" lines using the same craftsmanship with fewer options.

Permits and code in Los Angeles

A common question: do you need a permit for kitchen cabinets in Los Angeles? For a straightforward cabinet replacement where you are not moving walls, changing plumbing locations, or altering electrical, cabinetry alone typically does not trigger a building permit. However, the moment you start moving gas lines, adding circuits, or opening walls, you are in permitted remodel territory.

Many kitchen projects are permitted for the overall remodel, with cabinets as part of that scope. Your general contractor or architect should guide you here. If someone proposes major changes without mentioning permits in the city of Los Angeles, that is a red flag.

How to find a good cabinet maker in Los Angeles

Finding a skilled, reliable cabinet maker matters more than debating minor material differences. A well executed plywood box with a durable finish will always outperform a theoretical "perfect" design that is built poorly.

Here is a simple checklist of what to look for in a cabinet maker and how to know if they are good:

1. A real portfolio of work, ideally in homes comparable to yours. Ask to see finished kitchens in person or at least high resolution photos that show details, not just wide angles.
2. Clear, itemized proposals. You should see what materials are used for boxes, fronts, and drawers, what brand of hardware, and what finish system.
3. References from recent clients. Specifically ask about communication, schedule, and how the shop handled problems or changes.
4. Shop visit. A legitimate cabinet shop in L.A. Will have real equipment, organized material storage, and work in progress. You do not need to be an expert to spot whether they run a tight operation.
5. Detailed drawings before fabrication. You should sign off on layout, dimensions, and door styles so there are no surprises.

Ask direct questions. "How are your custom cabinets made?" "How thick is your plywood?" "Do you use soft close, full extension slides?" "What is the best finish for kitchen cabinets in your experience, and why?" Their answers will tell you how seriously they take their craft.

Good cabinet makers usually install their own work or use a dedicated install crew. Do cabinet makers install cabinets? Many do, and that is often preferable because they know exactly how their boxes are meant to fit. If they do not, clarify who is responsible for installation, adjustments, and any damage that happens on site.

Some shops also offer financing or work with third party lenders, especially for larger kitchen projects. If budget is tight, it is reasonable to ask, "Do you offer financing for custom cabinets?" Just read terms carefully; promotional financing can carry steep interest if not managed well.

Design details, style, and resale in L.A.

In Los Angeles, the most popular kitchen cabinet style depends on neighborhood and architecture. In modern condos and contemporary homes, flat panel or slab doors, often in frameless boxes, are common. In older Spanish, Craftsman, or mid-century homes, a simple shaker or slim shaker door dominates, sometimes mixed with white oak or walnut accents.

The most expensive kitchen cabinets typically involve:

Exotic veneers or rift / quarter sawn premium woods.

High gloss, hand polished finishes. Custom curves, integrated pulls, and furniture like bases. Extensive internal organization and automation, like servo driven opening systems.

Most L.A. Homeowners do not need that level of complexity. If you care about resale, simple, clean lines and a restrained palette win. As for the "best cabinet color for resale value," real-world experience says light and neutral: whites, creams, light greys, or natural woods that keep the space bright and adaptable.

Measuring and future changes

Before a cabinet maker can even quote accurately, they need measurements. Many shops will handle this themselves, but if you are in early planning, you can do a rough measure: wall to wall, floor to ceiling, window and door locations, and existing appliance sizes. Note any out of square or out of plumb conditions, which are common in L.A. Homes built before the 1970s.

"How do I measure for custom cabinets?" comes up often. For a professional package, let the shop do final measurements. That way they own responsibility for fit. Your job is to provide a clear idea of appliances, sinks, and special items you want accommodated.

Once cabinets are installed, can they be modified? Limited changes are possible. Adjusting shelves, adding rollout trays, or even swapping some doors is common. But "Can custom cabinets be modified after installation?" in a big way, such as changing layout or box sizes, usually means partial or full replacement. Careful planning up front is far cheaper than surgery afterward.

Final thoughts: choosing the right pro for your Los Angeles home

Cabinet maker vs. Carpenter is not an either / or battle. Both play distinct, important roles in a successful remodel.

If you want truly custom cabinets that fit your space, your appliances, and your daily life, you are looking for a cabinet maker with a proven track record in Los Angeles. A good one will guide you through price ranges, explain material tradeoffs, and be honest about what is worth splurging on and where you can save.

If you are working with stock or semi custom lines, focus on finding a careful, detail oriented carpenter or installer who respects level, plumb, and clean lines as much as any cabinet maker.

In a city where kitchen remodels can rival the cost of a small car, the right combination of design, craftsmanship, and realistic expectations will determine whether your cabinets feel like an indulgence or one of the best investments you have made in your home.

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