

If you are planning a kitchen remodel in Los Angeles, the cabinet decision will probably be the single biggest line item in your budget. Cabinets usually eat up 25 to 40 percent of a full kitchen budget, and they drive not only cost but layout, storage, and resale appeal.

The question most homeowners start with is simple: is it cheaper to buy cabinets off the shelf, or to have them made by a cabinet maker? The honest answer is, it depends what you compare and what “cheap” really means to you. Strict dollars on day one tell one story, while durability, functionality, and home value often tell another.

I work with LA homeowners, designers, and cabinet shops regularly, and what follows reflects real numbers and real projects in this market, not a national average that ignores local labor and permitting realities.

What exactly is a cabinet maker?

A lot of people hear “cabinet maker” and picture a generic carpenter with a table saw. The trades overlap, but they are not identical.

A cabinet maker is a craftsperson who specializes in built-in storage: kitchen cabinets, bathroom vanities, media units, closets, and sometimes built-ins like mudroom benches or home office systems. They think in terms of boxes, doors, drawers, hardware, clearances, and finishes. Their daily work revolves around tight tolerances, smooth reveals, and getting a dishwasher panel to line up perfectly with the adjacent doors.

So what does a cabinet maker do in practice?

They typically start with a site visit and measurements, then sketch or draft a layout. They help you choose materials and hardware, build cabinet boxes, doors, and drawer fronts in a shop, pre-fit everything, apply the chosen finish, and finally deliver and install. Many Los Angeles shops also coordinate countertops, pull handles and knobs, specialty inserts, and sometimes lighting.

Some cabinet makers are one or two person operations working out of a small shop. Others are larger companies with CNC machines, spray booths, designers on staff, and installation crews. The smaller shops can be more flexible and personal. The larger operations can often handle big kitchens on a tight schedule.

Cabinet maker vs carpenter vs prefabricated cabinets

It helps to clarify terms before talking numbers.

A carpenter is a broader trade. Carpenters frame walls, hang doors, install trim, build decks, and sometimes install factory cabinets that were ordered elsewhere. A carpenter may be capable of building cabinets, but cabinet construction is not necessarily their day to day focus.

A cabinet maker focuses on cabinetry and millwork. The best ones understand proportion, door styles, hinge and drawer systems, wood behavior, and finishing at a deep level. If you need structural framing, you call a carpenter. If you need a full kitchen of custom cabinets, you call a cabinet maker.

Then we have the product categories you can buy:

Prefabricated or stock cabinets are mass produced, come in fixed sizes and configurations, and are usually sold flat packed or assembled through big box stores or online retailers. Semi custom cabinets are factory made as well, but offer more sizes, door styles, finishes, and modifications. Custom cabinets are built specifically for your kitchen, often by a local cabinet maker or a custom shop.

Most homeowners comparing “buying cabinets” versus “having them made” are really comparing stock or semi custom lines from a store to fully custom work from a local cabinet maker in Los Angeles.

Cost ranges in Los Angeles: stock vs semi custom vs custom

Los Angeles is a high cost market. Labor, rent, and insurance for shops are all expensive, and material prices reflect California codes and supply chains. Any realistic cost comparison has to account for that.

Cabinet Maker Los Angeles

For an average L shaped or U shaped Los Angeles kitchen with roughly 15 to 20 linear feet of cabinets, including uppers and lowers, typical ranges are:

Stock cabinets, usually prefinished boxes in standard sizes, often particleboard or MDF with some plywood: roughly 5,000 to 12,000 dollars for the cabinets themselves. This can be less if you go bottom tier, or more if you add a lot of pullouts and organizers.

Semi custom cabinets from a national or regional line: roughly 12,000 to 25,000 dollars for the cabinets, depending on wood species, finish, and upgrades.

Custom cabinets from a local cabinet maker in Los Angeles: roughly 25,000 to 60,000 dollars for most middle to high quality projects. Very simple small kitchens can land in the high teens. Very large or ultra high end kitchens can reach 80,000 dollars or more.

Those numbers usually exclude countertops, appliances, flooring, and most electrical and plumbing work. They sometimes include basic installation, and sometimes not. Always ask what is included when you receive a quote.

So is it cheaper to buy cabinets than to have them made? On pure upfront cost, yes. Stock cabinets are almost always cheaper than having a Los Angeles cabinet maker build to order. Semi custom often lands somewhere in the middle, but can overlap the low end of custom once you start adding special features.

The better question is: at what point does custom pricing start to make sense compared to high end semi custom, and where are you actually getting more value for what you pay?

Why custom cabinets cost more

People are often surprised at custom quotes and ask, “Why are custom cabinets so expensive?” The short answer is labor, waste reduction, and overhead.

Custom shops in LA pay skilled journeymen rates, often 30 to 45 dollars per hour or more, plus benefits, plus insurance and shop rent. A full kitchen can involve hundreds of man hours when you add up design, drafting, cutting, assembly, sanding, finishing, and installation. Even modest hardware like quality soft close hinges, drawer slides, and pullouts adds up quickly.

Most custom cabinet makers use better materials than bottom tier stock lines. High quality plywood for cabinet boxes, solid wood doors and drawer fronts, quality MDF only where it performs best, and professional grade finishes cost more upfront, but they are also part of why custom cabinets often last 25 to 40 years or more with care.

You are also paying for the privilege of having every inch of your kitchen planned and built specifically for your space and your habits. No filler strips to hide odd gaps, no dead zones you cannot reach, and far more control over the exact mix of drawers, doors, and specialty inserts.

Custom vs stock vs semi custom: where the value shifts

From a practical point of view, most Los Angeles homeowners land in one of three situations when deciding whether to buy cabinets or hire a cabinet maker.

If you are flipping a smaller condo or rental, stock cabinets are usually the cheapest path that still looks decent. White shaker stock cabinets paired with a reasonably durable quartz countertop still sell units all over LA County. If the cabinets need to last only 10 to 15 years, it is hard to beat the value.

If you are renovating a mid market home where you plan to stay at least 5 to 10 years, good quality semi custom often hits the sweet spot. You get more size options, better hardware, and nicer finishes. You can usually solve most layout problems unless the space is very odd or you want fully integrated appliances that require special paneling and planning.

If you are in a higher end neighborhood, have a difficult footprint, or are very particular about details, a local cabinet maker generally delivers the best result. You will probably spend more on cabinets, but in many cases, the custom work aligns better with the value of the home and what buyers expect later.

To look at it another way, consider three simple comparisons.

First, are custom cabinets better than stock cabinets? In terms of fit, durability, and longevity, usually yes. In terms of immediate price, no.

Second, are custom cabinets worth the money? They are worth it when the value of the home and the length of time you plan to live there justify the investment. A 40,000 dollar custom kitchen in a 900,000 dollar Los Angeles home you plan to keep for 10 to 15 years makes a lot more sense than the same kitchen in a 450,000 condo you will sell in two years.

Third, is it cheaper to refinish or replace kitchen cabinets? If your existing cabinets are solid, reasonably well built, and laid out well, refinishing or refacing by a cabinet shop can cost a fraction of full replacement. More on that in a moment.

What affects the cost of a custom cabinet maker in L.A.?

People often ask, "How much should I pay for custom cabinets?" or "How much does a custom cabinet maker cost?" The cost is not just about total square footage. Several factors drive price.

The complexity of design plays a huge role. Full overlay flat panel doors on a frameless box will cost less than inset shaker with beaded frames, glass mullion doors, and intricate crown details. Frameless cabinets, popular in contemporary LA kitchens, use less material on the face, but require very precise box construction and high quality hardware.

Material choice also matters. Walnut, white oak, and rift sawn oak are more expensive than maple or alder. Painted cabinets typically use a paint grade hardwood or MDF for doors and panels. Stained cabinets use higher grade hardwood veneers or solid planks with attractive grain. If you choose specialty veneers or hand applied finishes, costs rise accordingly.

Hardware is a hidden but major line item. Full extension, soft close drawer slides from premium brands cost significantly more than basic side mount slides. Specialty pullouts, trash systems, and organizers can easily add 2,000 to 6,000 dollars to a kitchen.

Then there is finish. Professional spray finishes, particularly catalyzed lacquers or conversion varnishes that hold up to kitchen abuse, require a proper spray booth, skilled labor, and multiple steps. They tend to outlast on site brush

painting by a large margin, but they are baked into your cabinet maker's price.

For a typical Los Angeles custom cabinet project, plan to allocate somewhere between 1,500 and 3,500 dollars per linear foot of cabinetry, depending on how high you go with materials and detail. That is not a universal formula, but it is a reasonable sanity check when reviewing quotes.

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

A common question during the design phase is: what material is best for kitchen cabinets? The answer is rarely one material across the board.

For cabinet boxes, high quality plywood is generally the best balance of strength, weight, and screw holding power. Many LA cabinet makers prefer furniture grade plywood with a hardwood veneer inside and out, sealed properly. Plywood resists sagging better than MDF and holds hardware more securely over time. That said, even plywood will fail if the shop cuts corners on thickness or edge protection.

Are plywood cabinets better than MDF? For boxes, usually yes. For doors and large painted panels, MDF can actually be superior because it moves less, takes paint very smoothly, and is less prone to visible grain telegraphing through paint. In a well built custom kitchen, it is normal to see plywood boxes combined with MDF center panels or full MDF doors for paint grade work.

For exposed wood species, the best wood for custom cabinets depends on your look and budget. Maple is a workhorse for painted or light stain applications. White oak and rift sawn white oak are extremely popular in current high end LA kitchens, offering a warm but refined grain. Walnut brings a rich, darker tone and reads instantly upscale. Cherry is less trendy than it once was but still beautiful.

If cost is a concern, mixing materials can help. For instance, use white oak on the island and perimeter uppers, and paint grade elsewhere. A good cabinet maker will tell you where the splurge matters and where you can save without sacrificing durability.

Timeline: how long custom cabinets really take

Custom work takes time, and that needs to be part of the decision. Stock cabinets can be delivered within days or a few weeks if they are in a local warehouse. Semi custom from a factory line typically takes 4 to 10 weeks from order to delivery.

How long does it take to make custom cabinets? In Los Angeles, for an average kitchen, most shops run on 8 to 16 week lead times from final approval of drawings to installation, depending on workload and complexity. Many shops are small, so their schedules fill quickly.

The process of making custom cabinets usually follows this arc: site measure and design consultation, drafting and revisions, final approval, ordering and receiving materials, cutting and assembly, sanding and finishing, and finally delivery and installation.

Once cabinets arrive on site, how long does a custom kitchen take to install? Simple installs handled by the cabinet maker's team can wrap up in 3 to 7 working days. More intricate kitchens that integrate panel ready appliances, complicated crown or ceiling details, and built in lighting can take two weeks or longer. Countertops typically template after base cabinets are installed, adding another one to three weeks before you have a fully usable kitchen.

If you are on a tight move in schedule, this timeline can make stock or semi custom more attractive even if you prefer the quality of custom.

Design, style, and resale in the Los Angeles market

LA buyers pay close attention to kitchens. Among real estate agents and appraisers I work with, two cabinet related questions come up repeatedly: what is the most popular kitchen cabinet style right now, and what is the best cabinet color for resale value?

For style, simple shaker remains king in most of Los Angeles. It fits transitional, modern farmhouse, and many contemporary interiors. Flat panel doors with subtle reveals are gaining ground, particularly in more modern or midcentury homes in neighborhoods like Silver Lake, Venice, and the Hollywood Hills.

Are white cabinets going out of style? Not yet, but they are evolving. Pure bright white from floor to ceiling feels harsher than it did ten years ago. Many designers now favor warmer off whites, creams, or greige tones, often mixed with natural wood accents on islands or open shelves. From a resale point of view, white or light neutral cabinets still sell better than very dark or very trendy colors.

Custom cabinets can track these trends while still being timeless, because you are not limited to whatever the factory line offers that season. For resale, good quality custom cabinets can be a quiet but significant selling point. Buyers may not immediately know if a kitchen is custom or semi custom, but they notice solid drawer boxes, smooth operation, and thoughtful storage.

Permits, remodel scope, and working within an L.A. Budget

Simply swapping existing cabinets for new ones, without moving walls, plumbing, or gas, is often considered like for like replacement. In many parts of Los Angeles, that level of work may not require a separate building permit just for cabinets, though larger remodels usually involve permits for electrical, plumbing, or structural changes.

Do you need a permit for kitchen cabinets in Los Angeles? If you are strictly removing old cabinets and installing new ones in the same layout, most jurisdictions treat that as finish work. Once you start altering walls, moving sink locations, adding new circuits, or reconfiguring the floorplan, you are in permitted remodel territory. Always check with the city or a local contractor rather than assuming. Fines and delays are not worth the risk.

How much does it cost to remodel kitchen cabinets in Los Angeles when you factor in everything? For a modest “pull and replace” using stock or lower midrange semi custom cabinets, homeowners often spend 20,000 to 40,000 dollars including cabinets, countertops, backsplash, basic electrical and plumbing adjustments, and labor.

For a more substantial reconfiguration with semi custom or custom cabinets, better finishes, new lighting, and permit costs, 60,000 to 120,000 dollars is very common. Higher end homes or major structural changes can push far above that.

This is why choosing between stock, semi custom, and custom cabinets is so important. The difference between a 10,000 dollar stock cabinet package and a 40,000 dollar custom package cascades through the rest of the project.

Refinishing, refacing, and partial solutions

If your existing cabinets are structurally sound and the layout mostly works, the cheapest way to get “new” cabinets is often not to buy new cabinets at all.

Is it cheaper to refinish or replace kitchen cabinets? Typically yes, refinishing or refacing costs significantly less than full replacement, especially with custom.

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Refinishing involves keeping your existing doors, drawer fronts, and boxes and changing color through paint or stain. If you hire a professional finisher or cabinet shop, refinishing a medium sized kitchen in LA might run 5,000 to 15,000 dollars depending on prep, repairs, and the type of finish. DIY can be much cheaper in dollars but expensive in time, and often not as durable.

Cabinet refacing goes one step further. The boxes stay, but you receive new doors, drawer fronts, and sometimes side panels and trim, all applied over the existing boxes. Is cabinet refacing worth it? It can be if your boxes are decent and you dislike the door style, or if you want to upgrade from slab or dated raised panel to a more current look without gutting the room. In Los Angeles, refacing by a reputable shop often runs 10,000 to 25,000 dollars for a full kitchen, depending on size and materials.

If you are eyeing custom but your budget is strained, refacing or partial custom solutions can bridge the gap. Some cabinet makers will build new custom units for difficult areas such as a new island, pantry, or range wall, while refacing or modifying existing cabinets elsewhere.

How custom cabinets are built and installed

Homeowners often feel more comfortable paying custom prices when they understand what they are buying in terms of process.

The process of making custom cabinets usually starts with a detailed site measure. In older LA homes with wavy plaster, odd soffits, or out of square corners, accurate measurements are critical. The cabinet maker then develops shop drawings, often in CAD, that show box sizes, door swings, appliance clearances, and crucial dimensions.

After you approve the drawings and material selections, the shop orders plywood, lumber, hardware, and any specialty components. Boxes are cut and assembled, either by hand or with the help of CNC equipment. Doors

and drawer fronts are made or ordered from a door supplier, then sanded, fitted, and pre hung in the shop to check reveals.

Finishing typically happens on site in the shop's spray room. Stain, primer, and paint or clear coats are built up in layers, sanded between coats, and cured. Good finish work is labor intensive and is one of the benefits of a real cabinet shop compared to field painting.

Do cabinet makers install cabinets, or do you need a separate installer? Most custom shops in Los Angeles either employ their own installers or work closely with a small, consistent crew. Installation is where all that careful measuring, squaring, and shimming pays off. Proper installation is just as important as good box construction. Poor installation can ruin expensive cabinets.

How to find and evaluate a good cabinet maker in L.A.

Your choice of craftsman matters more than the label "custom." A poorly run shop can produce expensive but disappointing cabinets. A skilled small shop can quietly outperform big names.

When you start looking, referrals from contractors, designers, and friends who have recently done kitchens in your area are far better than blind searches. Online directories and reviews help, but nothing replaces walking into a finished kitchen and opening drawers yourself.

When you meet with a potential shop, the questions you ask shape the relationship. Here is a concise list you can bring to an initial meeting.

1. What materials do you use for boxes, backs, and doors, and why?
2. What finish system do you use, and how does it hold up to kitchen use?
3. Can I see examples of your work in person or at least detailed photos of recent Los Angeles projects?
4. Who installs your cabinets, and how is installation scheduled and supervised?
5. What is your typical lead time right now, and how do you handle changes during the process?

Beyond questions, pay attention to how they talk about the work. A good cabinet maker is clear and specific about materials and hardware brands. They will explain the difference between custom and semi custom cabinets honestly. They should be able to discuss frameless vs framed cabinets, soft close systems, and options like inset, overlay, and full overlay doors without hand waving.

How do you know if a cabinet maker is good? Look for tight, consistent reveals in their photos, clean finishes with no obvious orange peel or drips, solid drawer boxes, and well planned interior storage. Ask how long their cabinets typically last and what issues, if any, clients see after 5 to 10 years.

Many cabinet makers in Los Angeles also build bathroom vanities, media centers, and even standalone furniture such as dining tables or built in benches. If you like their style, bundling multiple pieces into one project can sometimes improve pricing and consistency.

Design details, construction choices, and hidden costs

Within the custom realm, there are choices that affect both cost and performance.

Framed vs frameless cabinets are one big example. Framed cabinets have a face frame around the front of the box, onto which doors mount. They are traditional and forgiving of slightly out of square walls. Frameless cabinets, also known as European style, have no face frame. Doors mount directly to the box, giving cleaner lines and often

better access to the interior. Frameless demands very precise construction and high quality hardware. In contemporary Los Angeles kitchens, frameless is extremely common.

Box construction thickness matters. For upper cabinets, 5/8 inch to 3/4 inch plywood sides and shelves hold up much better under load than thinner stock. Cheap particleboard shelves are notorious for sagging under heavy dishes. When you ask, "How thick should custom cabinet wood be?" listen for 3/4 inch material for most structural components of the box, with thinner panels and backs only where appropriate.

Finish choice has both aesthetic and functional consequences. The best finish for kitchen cabinets is typically a professional grade conversion varnish or catalyzed lacquer, sprayed in controlled conditions. It resists moisture and chemicals better than standard wall paint. High quality waterborne finishes have improved a lot and are increasingly common due to stricter environmental rules in California, but they still require proper application to perform well.

Behind the scenes, what is the markup on custom cabinets? That varies widely by shop. Material and hardware may get marked up 10 to 40 percent over wholesale to cover handling and overhead. Labor is priced according to experience and demand. What matters most is not the exact markup number but the total value you see relative to other bids with similar specs.

Some custom cabinet makers in LA offer financing options, either directly or through third party partners. If you are stretching your budget for custom, ask whether they provide payment plans or staged payments. Be cautious with high interest financing packages marketed through home improvement programs, and always read the fine print.

Stock, semi custom, or custom: where does your project land?

At this point, the original question usually resurfaces with more nuance: is it cheaper to buy cabinets or have them made in Los Angeles, once you factor in everything?

On base price alone, stock wins. On long term durability and fit, a well executed custom job wins. Semi custom is the compromise that lets you borrow some advantages from both.

If you plan to live in the home for a long time, prioritize daily function and durability over saving the last 5,000 dollars up front. Custom cabinets, built well, have an average lifespan of 25 to 40 years or more, especially when boxes are plywood and finishes are professionally applied. Stock cabinets, particularly those with particleboard boxes and budget hardware, often start to show wear much sooner.

Custom cabinets can also be modified after installation, within limits. You can usually add interior organizers, change hardware, or even retrofit some drawers into existing lower cabinets. Structural changes, such as altering box sizes or reconfiguring entire runs, are harder, but a local cabinet maker can often tweak or repair things that a factory line cannot.

If you must keep costs down but hate the idea of flimsy cabinets, the cheapest way to get custom cabinets is to be strategic. Simplify the design with flat panel or simple shaker doors, skip intricate molding, limit glass doors, and use standard interior hardware where it will not affect usability. You will save more by reducing complexity than by pushing your cabinet maker to cut corners on materials.

There are also hybrid approaches: use semi custom or stock cabinets for most of the kitchen, and engage a local cabinet maker for one showpiece area such as a custom range hood surround, a feature island, or a built in pantry. That kind of mixed solution often gives a semi custom budget with custom character.

If you are uncertain, start by collecting two or three bids from reputable semi custom lines and two bids from local custom shops for the same basic layout. Compare not just the bottom line, but materials, hardware, timelines, and what is included in installation. The right choice for a hillside Los Feliz home is not always the right choice for a starter condo in Van Nuys.

Whether you buy off the shelf or hire a cabinet maker, the key is to understand where your money is going, ask clear questions, and choose a level of quality that matches both your home and your long term plans in Los Angeles.